

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

CLAIRE
THOMPSON

ISLAND
OF *temptation*

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Island of Temptation

ISBN # 9781419909498

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Island of Temptation Copyright© 2007 Claire Thompson

Edited by Mary Moran.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication: April 2007

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

Content Advisory:

S - ENSUOUS

E - ROTIC

X - TREME

Ellora's Cave Publishing offers three levels of Romantica™ reading entertainment: S (S-ensuous), E (E-rotic), and X (X-treme).

The following material contains graphic sexual content meant for mature readers. This story has been rated E-rotic.

S-ensuous love scenes are explicit and leave nothing to the imagination.

E-rotic love scenes are explicit, leave nothing to the imagination, and are high in volume per the overall word count. E-rated titles might contain material that some readers find objectionable—in other words, almost anything goes, sexually. E-rated titles are the most graphic titles we carry in terms of both sexual language and descriptiveness in these works of literature.

X-treme titles differ from E-rated titles only in plot premise and storyline execution. Stories designated with the letter X tend to contain difficult or controversial subject matter not for the faint of heart.

ISLAND OF TEMPTATION

Claire Thompson

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Almond Joy: Cadbury Beverages Delaware Inc.

Jacuzzi: Jacuzzi Inc.

Kool-Aid: Kraft Foods Holdings, Inc.

Mercedes: DaimlerChrysler AG Corporation

Mounds: Cadbury Beverages Delaware Inc.

New York Philharmonic: Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York, Inc., The

Ping-Pong: Parker Brothers Inc.

Police: Roxanne Music Limited Corporation

Chapter One

Donovan McNair took a sip of his gin and tonic as he gazed around the ship's upper deck. The sun's warm kiss on his face was offset by the constant gentle sea breeze. He hadn't yet cracked the novel still nestled in his beach bag. He took another drink and sighed with melancholic pleasure. Perhaps in a bit he would take a swim in the Olympic-sized swimming pool several yards away.

Right at that moment though he was content to people watch, forgetting for the moment the piles of legal briefs and files he'd left behind at his law practice. This was his well-deserved two-week vacation and he was going to enjoy this cruise, even if Marianne had bailed on him at the last minute.

"Have you got a light?" A leggy beauty in a white bikini that left little to the imagination slid onto the deck chair next to his, holding out a cigarette as if it were a key to something wonderful, if only he had a light. He didn't.

"Sorry, I don't smoke," he said, his face creasing in an apologetic smile. She stared at him a moment as if unable to process what he'd said while she waited, her cigarette still held out. He took note of the impossibly blonde hair, the breasts that seemed to defy gravity as they pointed vigorously toward him like overfull water balloons, the tan a dark golden he imagined would fade to leather brown as she aged. She too was giving him the once-over as she assessed what to do about her cigarette.

Sliding out of the seat, she tossed her white-gold hair over her shoulder with a shrug and said, "Thanks anyway," as she moved away, her eye on another single man sitting by the edge of the pool.

Donovan watched her, thinking of Marianne. He'd committed the cardinal sin of getting involved with someone at work, though at twenty-seven, he knew better. Marianne was a paralegal at the large Manhattan law firm where Donovan was an associate. She didn't work in the same department, but they'd met and gotten more than friendly at the company Christmas party the year before. A gorgeous tall brunette with a willowy figure and a sassy attitude, she'd caught his attention and held it by hook or by crook these past thirteen months.

The relationship had always been turbulent—Marianne seemed to thrive on turmoil and angst. Donovan was less passionate, at least that's how Marianne described it. He didn't connect with her on a deep emotional level, she claimed, amidst a storm of tears. He was emotionally shut down, she liked to say. Things had been rocky between them the past few weeks and when he'd failed to send flowers on the anniversary of their first date, she'd announced she wasn't going with him on this Caribbean cruise—he obviously took her for granted and she was through with him.

Of course she'd been through with him three times before and somehow they'd always drifted back together. Donovan had been somewhat surprised to find his heart wasn't broken by her latest defection. He was more irritated with her bailing on a nonrefundable cruise packet for two than bereft at her leaving him. Maybe she was right—maybe he was emotionally immature and unable to connect. At least with her...

"Right here, next to this handsome young man." A female smoke-gravelly voice pierced his reverie. He looked up to see a woman of indeterminate middle age with red hair of a color that didn't exist in nature. Her bulk was stuffed into a bathing suit at least a size too small, rolls of fat billowing at her belly and hips. The man with her sported his own sizable potbelly, nearly covering his bathing suit trunks, in contrast to his spindly legs and arms. He wore black socks with his sandals.

"There's only one chair, Bea. What do you want me to do, kneel at your feet?" The man's voice was reedy, his tone annoyed. Donovan took his cue. "Please, take my seat. I was just leaving." He stood, draining his drink and grabbing his beach bag as the woman glared at her husband.

"Are you sure?" she asked, putting a bejeweled hand on his forearm, the nails scraping his skin. "Arnie, get another chair," she ordered, not looking at her husband. "We wouldn't want to push you out of your seat." He looked down at the woman as he formed a polite denial and was taken aback by the stark pleading in her eyes.

As he met her gaze, she ran a pale tongue over orange-painted lips and thrust her sagging but substantial bosom toward him. Donovan recoiled, pulling his arm from her grip as he forced his face into a polite smile. "No, no," he said firmly. "I was just going for a swim." He grabbed his towel and moved toward pool, feeling suddenly very alone.

Sam Jamison stared out at the water, mesmerized by the colors—the aquamarine, the azure, the deeper royal blues farther out near the horizon, the play of gold shimmering like coins of reflected sun. Later he would get his portable easel and try to capture the play of colors, so different from the scene he'd photographed this morning at dawn with its grays, foamy greens, pinks and pure liquid gold.

He couldn't believe his luck to be on this cruise at all. Tim Fletcher's generosity still floored him. The gallery owner had not only agreed to give Sam a show in his prestigious Chelsea art gallery but he'd insisted Sam use his cruise package when he'd had an unavoidable conflict at the last minute.

"Listen, Sam. Just take it. I can't use it and I got it for a steal anyway. My sister's in the business—I got it for like ten cents on the dollar. And don't worry—I expect repayment in work! Your show is a huge success! I'll probably have sold your complete inventory by the time you get back. No more living on spaghetti and Kool-Aid, my boy. Your shoestring days are over."

Sobering, Tim had drawn his finger along Sam's hand, his eyelids hooding slightly. Sam knew Tim was into him—not just for his artwork but because he was sexually

attracted to him. Sam didn't have a problem with that, in theory. He was bisexual, and along the continuum of sexual orientation, he tended to lean more toward men. He liked to say he made his emotional connection with men but he still enjoyed women for sexual play. However Tim didn't do anything in particular for him in either the emotional or the sexual play department. Tim was the type of guy who worked out diligently at the "men only" gym to create the perfect hard body. He had his teeth capped and bleached pure white, his hair dyed and styled. His clothing was impeccable, his tastes along gay party lines of what was chic. His shoes had probably cost more than Sam's monthly rent.

Sam was in fact surprised Tim was attracted to him at all as Sam was more of a faded jeans and old T-shirt kind of guy. His longish dark blond hair always needed cutting and he only shaved every couple of days when it occurred to him. He didn't attend the opera or buy caviar. He didn't know the difference between a fine Cabernet and a cheap bottle of red table wine and though his body was lean and muscular, he'd never lifted a weight in his life.

He was finally making enough money from his art to rent space in a warehouse district on the Brooklyn waterfront where he could set up a proper studio. It wasn't a trendy neighborhood that had already been discovered, reclaimed, renovated and wildly overpriced like most of New York, but a real industrial neighborhood with old abandoned buildings. The ones just barely up to code were for rent and he'd just signed a six-month lease for the top loft of a two-story building. It was all windows and light—he could paint any time of the day with natural light coming in from somewhere. The landlord had promised to get the broken windows repaired and maybe throw some paint up.

Sam couldn't wait to get started. In fact, he'd almost turned down this chance at a free cruise, so eager was he to get his studio set up. But Tim had convinced him a break might be just the thing as Sam had worked exhaustively to get enough pieces ready for the show's opening. Tim hated to see the cruise package go to waste and when would Sam have such a chance again?

As he stood staring at the ocean someone bumped him lightly in passing. "Excuse me," a deep masculine voice said. Automatically nodding, Sam turned to see a tall man in a white T-shirt and black swimming trunks. For a brief moment they made eye contact and Sam noted the brilliant blue eyes, a lush fringe of lashes framing them. He noticed the way the light played with the man's straight dark brown hair, glinting amber and red where the sun struck it. As his artist's eye took in these details, his body took in the man's broad shoulders and muscular arms straining against the short sleeves of the shirt. As the man passed him, Sam admired his small muscular ass and well-developed tan thighs. He felt his cock stiffen in his jeans as he watched the man lope toward the pool.

Sam, given to daydreams, suddenly saw himself approaching the man from behind, wrapping his arms around the long lean body as he pressed his erection against him. In

the daydream the man turned, his eyes bright with desire as their lips met, as their cocks collided, as their clothes melted away...

* * * * *

It was four o'clock in the morning. Donovan stared at the digital clock next to his bed, trying to orient himself and figure out how to turn off the alarm, which he didn't remember setting. As the fog cleared from his brain, he realized it wasn't the clock. A loud clanging sound could be heard echoing all over the ship.

"This is not a drill. Everyone please convene in your assigned secure area. Take your lifejacket. Get out of your rooms quickly. This is not a drill. Repeat—this is not a drill." Donovan felt a sick jolt in his stomach, as if he were going to throw up the roast beef, baked potato, half a bottle of red wine and large slice of cherry cheesecake he'd had for dinner. What the hell was happening?

He almost lost his balance as the floor of the cabin seemed to careen and tilt beneath his feet. He was wearing only his underwear. "Fuck," he said softly as he scrambled for the life vest tucked in the bottom drawer of the bureau secured against a wall. As the sirens blared, he pulled on jeans and sandals as he lurched toward the door. He grabbed the T-shirt he'd worn the day before and pulled it over his head as he wrenched the cabin door open.

The first day on board, the passengers had all been required to attend a lengthy safety drill. They were lectured about safety procedures in the event of an emergency and given a demonstration on how to use their life vests, how to release the lifeboats and how to lower and use the ladders to get into them. They were shown how to steer and control the boats, advised about the rations contained in them as well as the emergency kit, in the event they were cast adrift at sea.

Donovan had been only marginally more concerned over the demonstrations than over the flight attendant on an airplane discussing the use of his seat as a floatation device. Statistically he knew it was far more likely he would be in a car accident than that anything would happen on this huge ship. He had only vaguely attended to the safety warnings and directions.

Now, as he hurried along with other frightened sleep-tousled passengers toward his assigned security area, Donovan wished he had paid closer attention. A crush of people sweeping past him sent him sprawling into a large fat woman, who was knocked over by his impact. Apologizing, he tried to help her up but she shook him off, shouting, "Get away from me! Get out of my way!" He could hear the panic in her voice and he felt the same panic rising as they all stumbled and ran toward the security area.

The loudspeaker clicked on again, a deep voice announcing everyone should get out of the lower decks and move to the top deck as the fire in the engine room had gone out of control.

Fire!

Crew members were trying to help sobbing and hysterical passengers secure their life vests when the loudspeaker instructed the crew to release the lifeboats and assist passengers into them. As Donovan watched, the world seemed to slow down. Donovan could hear his heartbeat in his ears. The roar of his own blood blocked out much of the screaming and crying of those around him. He watched in an almost detached fashion as huge lifeboat after lifeboat was released into the water and huddled groups of terrified passengers were herded onto them, fifty to a boat.

An explosion below deck rocked the ship suddenly, hurtling people willy-nilly across the deck. The ship was listing heavily now, the engines out, the fire still raging out of control. As he saw a woman and child falling together along the deck, he tried to get to them. He shouted but his voice was lost over the cacophony of screaming people and ship alarm bells.

The ship shifted suddenly, causing Donovan to lose his footing. People were falling and sliding around him. Desperately he grabbed at the railing as a huge wave slapped up onto the deck. The water smashed into him like a solid brick wall, shocking and completely disorienting him. The rail was wrenched from his hands and against his will he rode the wave as it slipped back down, carrying him with it out to sea.

He was submerged for a just a moment before his lifejacket buoyed him above the churning waters. He stared up at the sinking ship. It was listing badly, nearly upended, half of it beneath the roiling waves. There were dozens of lifeboats, all filled with passengers. Crew members on smaller rafts were floating nearby.

Donovan felt himself being pulled out to sea even as he tried frantically to swim toward one of the many lifeboats.

"Ah Jesus," he whispered. "What a way to die."

* * * * *

It had been surreal when the alarm bells had sounded, with the booming loudspeaker shouting it was not a drill. Sam, never quick to wake up, sat on his bed for at least a minute, unable to process what he was hearing.

When it had finally penetrated, he jumped up and dressed quickly, grabbing his bandana, the bottle of unopened water and two chocolate bars he had by his bedside. He pulled on underwear, jeans and a T-shirt, not bothering to tie the laces of his sneakers, pulled hurriedly onto bare feet. He grabbed a light windbreaker, zipping the water bottle and chocolate into the pockets. As he left the cabin, he pulled the lifejacket from its drawer and put it on.

He was hurtled into the crush of terrified humanity as he ran along the lower deck, trying to scramble with the rest of them up stairs not made to handle that sort of foot traffic. He stepped back finally, pressing himself against a wall, letting the women clutching small children and the men with faces twisted into masks of fear stagger and lope forward like a stampeding herd of cattle.

When he finally arrived at the top deck, most of the people were gone. He saw the large lifeboats bobbing in the gray black sea. There were still crew members on board, frantically climbing down ladders, releasing smaller rafts they then leaped upon.

Sam called out, "Hey! I'm still here! I need to get on a lifeboat!" A huge explosion sounded deep in the belly of the ship. The tremors from the blast made Sam lose his footing and he went sprawling along the tilting, careening deck. He landed hard, the breath knocked out of him as he lay, soaked in the spray of the waves smashing up over the tilting bow.

When he could stand, he staggered over to the ladders he'd seen the crew using and started down one, looking on the sides of the ship as he went for a raft. There was one left! Leaning toward it, he unclipped the metal buckles holding it in place. With a heave the raft dropped down into the churning waves. Sam leaped toward it, just missing and landing in the water next to it, grabbing hold for dear life.

With a strength born of desperation, Sam managed to heave himself onto the raft, sprawling on his stomach for a moment until he righted himself. His raft was caught in a strong current, pulling him fast away from the sinking ship. He saw there were large paddles on either side of the raft but he was too dazed and exhausted to try to use them. He knew he was being pulled in the opposite direction of the rest of the passengers, now safely in their lifeboats, soon to be rescued and returned safely to shore.

Another huge explosion shook the ship, fire licking the hull as it slipped slowly into the sea like a great wounded whale. Luckily Sam was far enough from the ship so the waves created by the explosion propelled him farther out to sea rather than sucking him down with the wreckage.

Sam saw something bobbing ahead of him in the current. As the raft closed in on the object, in the light of the rising sun he saw it was a man in a bright orange lifejacket, his head facing downward, his arms floating limply on the water.

Chapter Two

When he first saw him floating, Sam was afraid the man was dead. With a sort of horror he reached out to touch the possible corpse, knowing if there was a chance he had survived, it was Sam's duty to rescue him. Trying to keep his balance as he knelt, Sam gripped the man's arms, aiming to pull him up over the lip of the raft. The man raised his head, his eyes opening as he gripped back with surprising strength. Sam heaved, using his own body weight as leverage to pull the man into the raft. He fell heavily against Sam with a grunt, very much alive.

"You okay?" Sam asked, breathing hard with exertion.

"Yeah, I think so." Sam saw his teeth were chattering, his arms dotted with goose bumps in the cool air of the new dawn. Leaning over the man, recognition sparking in him as Sam took in the cleft chin, the strong jaw, the brilliant blue eyes.

Absurdly, though he'd just brushed death and perhaps narrowly averted this man's as well, Sam's cock rose as he drank in the handsome man's elegant, strong features, still noble despite his pale countenance and chattering teeth, his hair a wet jumble over his forehead.

Instinctively Sam wrapped his arms around him, hoping to impart some of his own heat. The man was rocking back and forth, his arms wrapped tightly around his torso. Sam rocked gently with him, reminded of soothing a fretful baby. They sat huddled for several minutes until the man's shivering subsided and he pulled away.

Sam reluctantly dropped his arms. He realized he wanted to keep holding the man, to be the one to soothe and comfort him. Instead he scooted around the raft so he was facing him. "My name is Sam. Sam Jamison."

"Donovan McNair." Sam waited but he said nothing more. Donovan stared out to sea, squinting as if he were focused on something just over Sam's shoulder. Sam turned around to look but there was nothing there—nothing but an endless sea undulating toward the horizon.

Afraid to hear the answer, Sam asked softly, "Were you traveling with someone? Did you get separated?"

Donovan shook his head. "No. I was supposed to be. My girlfriend, well, my ex-girlfriend now—she was supposed to be on the cruise with me but she broke up with me instead." He tried to smile, his mouth twisting in an approximation of mirth. He looked at Sam, his voice low. "You?"

Sam let out a breath and said, "No. All alone. Someone gave me his ticket. He couldn't use it. Bet he's glad now." He snorted, thinking of Tim, wondering what he would do when he heard the news, wondering how it would affect sales of his artwork.

Tim would make a fortune probably, far more than he would have with a still-living artist. *Jesus*, Sam thought, rubbing his hand over his eyes, *I'm not dead yet!*

Donovan interrupted his thoughts. "Think they'll find us?"

"Who, rescuers?" As Donovan nodded, Sam said, "They'll certainly be combing these waters for any lifeboats and rafts. We should listen for helicopters. Be ready to wave. Wait a minute," he added, reaching into his jeans. "I have this." He pulled out the red bandana he'd stuffed into his pocket on the ship. Half-heartedly he waved it in the air a few times before dropping his hand into his lap.

"Listen, are you okay? Anything broken or whatever?" Sam leaned forward to peer into the man's face. His color was returning to normal but he looked completely wiped out.

"No, I'm okay, except I have a splitting headache. And I'm thirsty. Right now I'd give anything for some water. Not the salty kind."

"Your wish is my command," Sam answered. Reaching into his windbreaker pocket, Sam produced the bottle of water he'd slipped into it before he'd left his cabin. Donovan eagerly accepted the bottle, twisting off the cap and taking a long gulp, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Better pace yourself," Sam advised. "We don't know how long that has to last us."

Donovan lowered the bottle, handing it to Sam. "You're right. I'm sorry. Thanks. And thanks for finding me. For saving me." His voice cracked as he turned his head.

Sam admired Donovan's profile and thought how he would like to draw that face, to capture the fine bone structure, the square cleft chin, the right angle of his jaw. He would like paint his portrait in oils, rich vibrant colors that captured his masculine beauty. He would like to do a series of drawings of Donovan in the nude. They would stop between sessions to share secret stories, to cook together, to make love, to fall asleep in each others' arms...

Sam looked away from the man, shaking his head at his own foolishness. The chance the man was bi or gay was slim to none but, *Jesus*, he was hot. Sam imagined what it would be like to trace his finger along that sensual mouth—to glide the finger down the man's throat as he leaned forward to kiss those luscious lips. As Donovan turned back toward him, Sam felt his face warm, as if Donovan might have been eavesdropping on his lustful thoughts.

Sam took a drink of the water, trying not to guzzle it. God only knew how long they had to make these few ounces last. Sam held out his hand for the bottle cap Donovan was still holding. As their fingers touched, their eyes met—deep brown fixated on crystal blue. Sam was the first to look away. To change the subject raging in his mind, he blurted, "I saw you on the ship. Before..." He trailed off, not saying what both of them were thinking—before the explosion in the engine room, before the ship had heaved and shuddered as it split apart, disappearing beneath the waters like a stone.

"I remember," Donovan answered. "You were standing on the deck, staring out to sea. I was trying to get away from a lecherous old lady." He laughed but then his face

darkened. His voice barely audible, he added, "I wonder if she made it. I wonder if anyone made it."

Sam wondered too but forced himself to sound optimistic as he said, "I saw lots of full lifeboats. Probably most of them have been safely picked up by now."

"But not us," Donovan said, stating the obvious before they both lapsed into an extended silence. Sam scooted around the raft, moving close to Donovan, telling himself it was because the sun was in his eyes. Sitting side by side, they stared out at the horizon. The sky had faded from the rich gold and brilliant orange of sunrise to a bright endless blue melting into the ocean.

They both angled their exhausted bodies down, using the lip of the raft as a pillow. They must have dozed a while because when Sam opened his eyes, the water was lapping peacefully against the edges of the raft as it drifted in the calm currents of the ocean, the sun blazing high in a relentlessly perfect blue sky. He saw Donovan's face was getting burned and knew his must be as well. Donovan's eyes remained closed, his chest lightly rising and falling. Sam licked his dry lips as he admired the sleeping man. What would it be like to kiss his lips, to taste the salt on his skin, to brush the dark hair from his eyes? He glanced down at the appealing lump at Donovan's crotch, covered with denim, the tag of the zipper whispering to be pulled down. Sam's fingers tingled in anticipation.

How would Donovan respond to an advance? Would he be horrified or delighted? Tentative or eager? Sam moved closer, not sure of his own intentions when Donovan's eyes opened. Sam sat back, ashamed of himself for even considering a sexual advance toward a stranger, a man who had just been pulled exhausted and in shock from the sea. A man with an ex-girlfriend at home.

"Getting hot," Sam said as he focused on the bandana he held crumpled in his hand. "We'd better cover our heads and faces as best we can from this sun." Using his teeth to get it started, Sam carefully tore the bandana in half, handing one half to Donovan as he tied the other piece around his head. He let it flop over his face as much as possible. Donovan accepted the bit of cloth, trying to imitate Sam's actions. Sam noticed he was biting his lips, his eyes bright beneath long straight dark brows, knitted together as he tried to control his expression. On an impulse Sam reached out to touch the other man's knee, his gesture one of sympathy. Donovan began to cry, tears spilling over his cheeks that he angrily wiped away.

"Jesus," he muttered, averting his face from Sam, who sensed he was embarrassed. "I can't see anything but water for a million miles. Maybe it would have been better if you'd left me to drift. Better to drown quickly than be burned to death in this sun."

Sam picked up the windbreaker from the floor of the raft where he'd dropped it earlier. As much to distract Donovan as because he suddenly realized they would soon be melting puddles of goo in the pocket of the jacket, Sam pulled out the two chocolate bars, the wrappers damp, the contents sticky and soft inside. "We better eat these before they melt."

Donovan took one of the bars and unwrapped it. "We'll probably regret this later," he said as he took a large bite. "But then again, there may be no later." Sam didn't answer.

* * * * *

Donovan was again dozing lightly, his long legs extended, an arm flung over his face. Sam judged by the sun's slant it must be around four o'clock in the afternoon. In all the hours they'd been adrift, there had been no sight of any aircraft or of any other raft or lifeboat caught in the same currents as they were. It seemed they were all alone in a vast infinity of gently rolling blue green water, the sun dappling the myriad wavelets with golden light.

At first Sam had been hopeful they would in fact stumble onto land in short order. Their ship had gone down in the Caribbean—there were hundreds of tiny islands dotting the waters, many of them unoccupied, some only as big as a few city blocks. Now he was no longer as hopeful, wondering if they'd been pulled on the tide so far out to sea they had missed all the land masses. They might simply float for days or weeks until they died of thirst, their faces blistered, their lips blackening in the hot, relentless sun, their minds breaking down with insanity and despair. Sam shook his head, literally shaking these images from his mind. Through sheer self-will he forced the panic trying to press up through his gut back into dormancy. He looked over at Donovan, who mumbled in his sleep. At least he wouldn't die alone.

Donovan's mouth felt good, embracing Sam's cock like a warm velvet glove. Blue eyes were locked on his as he gazed up adoringly into Sam's face. His lips were supple and warm, teasing the taut flesh of Sam's cock as he lowered himself to take him fully. Sam's hands moved to grab his dark head, feeling the silky hair slide between his fingers as Sam's cock slid between his lips. He moaned softly as the image shifted to a bedroom, the man lying naked and expectant as Sam lay atop him, kissing his strong masculine chest as their cocks rubbed together. Without the need for words, Donovan knew to roll over and kneel up on his hands and knees as Sam lifted himself from the other's body. Gripping his hips, he pressed his cock effortlessly into the tight warmth of the other man's ass, groaning with pleasure as muscle gripped and held his rock-hard shaft...

Sam came awake with a start to the sound of Donovan's excited cry. "Land! Look! The shore!" Donovan began unlocking the oars on either side of the raft. He scrambled into position, gesturing for Sam to sit behind him. "We can make it before sundown if we work together!" Sam nodded, his erotic dream fading as he sat behind Donovan, grabbing an oar so they could each paddle with all their strength.

After about twenty minutes of concerted rowing, the raft landed gently against the sandy shore of a little island, complete with tall slender palm trees swaying in the breeze. Both men were breathing heavily, sweat rolling down their temples and staining their T-shirts. They rested as they took in their surroundings. Slowly Sam stood, taking a moment to get his balance after hours bobbing on the sea. Climbing over the lip of the

raft, he stood on the fine white sand, stretching his limbs. He unbuckled his lifejacket and dropped it to the ground.

"I wonder if it's inhabited," said Donovan nervously. He had remained in the raft. "What if someone attacks us?"

"You mean like natives dressed up in feathers and bones, carrying dart guns?" Sam grinned. "From the looks of this island, I'd say it was unpopulated. Except maybe by birds and turtles. Let's explore in the morning. Meanwhile, let's get this raft farther up on the shore. The tide may be coming in soon."

Donovan heaved himself over the side, groaning as he stood, his jeans stiff with dried salt. He unbuckled his lifejacket, taking in a big bushel of air and expelling it slowly.

Together they dragged the raft up off the cool, wet sand toward the dry powder where tall grass met the shore. The raft didn't pull smoothly, thumping and bumping as if something were stuck beneath it. As they lifted it to see what was catching, they found a long flat rubber container that ran the length of the raft and half its width.

"It's a supply container! Let's see what's in it," Donovan said excitedly. Together they flipped the raft over so the container was on its top. Sam and Donovan knelt on either side of the raft, pulling at the clasps that held the container shut and hopefully watertight.

Inside they found, among other things, a large tarp, a pop-up tent, thermal blankets, a flashlight, various utility knives, some rain ponchos and caps, fishing gear, plates and cutlery, matches, a small tin of instant coffee, a box of twenty high-energy bars and a full two-gallon plastic water jug.

Sam felt a huge weight lifting from him as he took in the contents. He looked over at Donovan, who was grinning widely back at him, the relief evident in his face. Together they tried to release the rubber container from the bottom of the raft but it appeared to be an integral part of it and wouldn't come off. They finally gave up and hauled the upside-down raft up under the palm trees.

Donovan reached for the box of energy bars. Flipping it open, he took one of the bars and peeled back the foil wrapping, taking half the bar into his mouth with one bite. "Jesus, I'm hungry," he mumbled with his mouth full. "This isn't half bad! Kind of hard to chew but I guess beggars can't be choosers." He stuffed the rest of the bar in his mouth and reached for the water jug. He pulled the sealed cap off and tipping back the heavy jug, he took a long swig and made a face. "Tastes like plastic. God knows how long it's been in this thing."

"We'll need to ration the food and water, Donovan. We don't know what we're up against," Sam said quietly.

"Sure, yeah, I know, I know. Sorry. I wasn't thinking clearly." He put down the jug and picked up one of the baseball caps. Pulling off the bandana, he replaced it with the cap. He tossed a second one toward Sam. Sam accepted the cap but merely tucked it into his back pocket.

As they bent again over the supply container, Sam saw something else—a thin blue plastic card, not much larger than a credit card, with a small circle and hole in the center of it. The other side was a mirror. Taped to it was a piece of paper, which Sam carefully pulled off and smoothed open on his lap.

Scanning the page, he said, “This is a signal mirror!” Quoting the page, he read, “Best results are achieved when the air is clear and the sun is well above the horizon. Signal flashes can be seen even when you cannot see the aircraft, boat or other means of rescue. So when signaling and no specific targets are in sight, be sure to continually sweep the horizon to maximize your chances of being seen. A flashlight can be used at night to shine the signal. The pinpoint flash can be seen for up to one hundred miles.”

Donovan picked up the flashlight and pushed the button to turn it on. Nothing happened. He repeated the process and when it still didn’t work, he unscrewed the bottom of the flashlight. The batteries that fell out were corroded, a brownish green residue covering one of them. “So much for that,” he said dispiritedly.

“Don’t worry,” Sam said reassuringly. “We’ll try it first thing in the morning.” The sun had just dropped below the horizon, bathing the island in a golden glow that quickly darkened to purple blue twilight. The air was alive with sound—croaking bullfrogs, insects, the rush of the waves lapping the shore. The heat of the day was easing—it would have been a peaceful paradise except for the fact they had no idea where they were, if they would be found and if they could survive on their own while they waited for rescue.

Sam slipped the mirror into his jeans pocket and said, “Let’s get this tent built and find some kindling for a fire. It’ll keep away any wild animals that might come sniffing around at night.”

Donovan shivered and hugged himself a moment. “I’ll set up the tent. You go collect wood.”

* * * * *

Sam pushed his way through the tall grass, listening hard for some unfriendly wild animal, but nothing stirred save for butterflies and gnats. He moved through a thicket of bamboo and scrub, glad for the protection his jeans afforded him.

The place was rich with vegetation, a good sign. Along with the bamboo there were many flowering plants and ferns. He didn’t recognize most of the flowers but he did recognize the tall swaying sunflowers with big brown centers and bright yellow petals. *Seeds*, he thought. *We can eat the seeds*. Then he smiled at himself, realizing the “old” Sam, the pre-cruise Sam, would have only seen the colors, the rich tawny brown spotted with black and the golden yellow petals, never giving a thought to how these flowers might actually help sustain their lives.

Trying to recall his geography and meteorology, he was reasonably certain trade winds brought moisture and rain to these islands that would create a good environment for a stream or lake. In the morning they would look for a fresh source of ground water.

Meanwhile he bent down, picking up twigs and sticks, moving farther inland to find the right sort of trees for firewood.

He returned to the beach, his arms laden with enough kindling from the brush and bamboo to start a nice blaze with one of the matches. Donovan had managed to get the tent up and was sitting on the cooling sand, letting handfuls of it slide through his fingers. Sam dropped the pile of sticks and began arranging it in a mound.

"I'll handle that," Donovan asserted, moving to help. "You have to get the sticks just so, see, so the air can flow through and make a good blaze." He acted as if this were a closely guarded secret and not something every kid who ever went camping knew, but Sam made no comment. He watched as Donovan broke first one and then a second matchstick as he struck them against the matchbox. He wanted to grab the box from Donovan—the matches were precious.

Instead he said, "You should be more careful with those matches." The third match blazed and Donovan held it out toward the kindling, grunting with satisfaction as it caught.

It was a balmy evening, the temperature only falling a few degrees as the sky turned purple, fading into black. Though they didn't need it for warmth, the fire was comforting and if there were any unfriendly animals roaming about, hopefully it would keep them at bay. They each ate an energy bar and drank one cup of water. With food in his belly, Sam sat watching the small fire crackle and blaze. As his gaze shifted to the man sitting across from him, Sam found the dream he'd had earlier suddenly resurfacing in his mind. He flushed slightly and looked away.

Donovan whispered, "Do you think anyone will find us?"

Sam could hear the fear beneath the carefully controlled tone. Again panic tried to press its way up through his gut. Sam took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Somehow having another person to keep calm for made it easier. He mastered his own fear, at least for the moment, and reached over, lightly touching Donovan's shoulder. "We're incredibly lucky, you know that?" he said, trying to smile. "Here we are, survivors of a shipwreck, neither of us much the worse for wear, on an island it appears will sustain us while we wait to be found. And yes, I think we *will* be rescued. We have our signal mirror and soon these waters will be crawling with rescue workers trying to find all the missing passengers. I wouldn't be surprised if we were rescued tomorrow."

Donovan said nothing as he stared into the fire, his expression bleak. After a while he stood and said, "I guess we should try to get some rest." Sam nodded, rising as well. After relieving themselves a distance apart in the bushes, they returned to the tent.

Donovan had placed the thermal blankets over the plastic ponchos. Sam went in first, lying down on one side of the makeshift bed. Donovan followed, stretching out with a sigh. There was barely room for the two of them, but at least the enclosed space gave the illusion of safety. They were both filthy, smelling of sea salt and sweat. Sam was too exhausted to care. From Donovan's extended yawn and sigh, he assumed the same was true for him.

Donovan turned away from Sam. "Well. Good night then."

"Good night," Sam answered, trying to erase the sexy dream he'd had earlier from his memory as he turned his own body away from Donovan's. Soon Sam heard Donovan's gentle snore. He rolled onto his back, turning his head to look at Donovan's sleeping form. Even if Donovan was one hundred percent straight, Sam was deeply grateful he wasn't alone on this island. He closed his eyes, the sound of the waves gently lapping against the sand.

* * * * *

Sam awoke suddenly, his body tensing. For a moment he couldn't place where he was. As he came fully awake, he lay still, listening to the sound of Donovan's breathing. It was dark, the air in the tent close from the two unwashed masculine bodies filling it. Sam felt arms around him. He felt someone's warm body pressed against his, someone's knees touching the back of his. He could feel Donovan's warm chest against his back, his heart thumping in a slow, even rhythm. Startled and surprised, Sam shifted and Donovan fell away from him onto his back, his head to the side, his lips slightly parted. Of course, Sam realized with a sigh, he was asleep. Probably dreaming of his girlfriend.

Reaching up, Sam opened the flap of the tent to let in the fresh air and the light from the many stars sprinkling the sky. Resisting his strong desire to touch the sizable erection visible beneath the sleeping man's jeans, he turned away, focusing instead on the blaze of stars overhead.

Chapter Three

Sam opened his eyes to a silvery golden dawn. Donovan was still sleeping next to him, lying on his back, his T-shirt scrunched to reveal narrow hips and a flat belly above his jeans. For a moment he imagined leaning over his body, gliding his tongue along the dark line of hair disappearing into Donovan's pants. Instead Sam slipped out of the tent and stood in the cool powdery sand. Every muscle in his body ached and the skin on his nose and cheeks felt tender and tight. He took in a deep breath of fresh salty air and realized he was desperately glad to be alive.

As he stared out at the vast endless stretch of salt water, Sam swallowed, his mouth sour and dry. The line from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* drifted into his head – "Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink..." Without a fresh source of water, it would only be a matter of days before they died of thirst. They'd already drunk half a gallon of the tepid water between them, and still their thirst hadn't been slaked.

Sam looked back at the little tent. How dare Donovan sleep while their very lives hung in the balance? Sam fought down a sudden irrational impulse to thrust the tent flap open and drag the sleeping man from within, demanding he wake and help Sam find water before it was too late!

"Jesus, Jamison, get a fucking grip." Taking the water jug from the supply container, he pushed through the brush and tall grasses, going farther inland than he had the night before. As he came upon some large black rocks, he cocked his head, listening carefully. Behind a symphony of birdcalls, could it be? Yes! The sound of running water.

Hurrying toward the sound, he began to scramble upward over the volcanic rock. *Please, oh please, oh please, let it be fresh, let it be fresh!* As he came to the top of the rock, he saw a ring of palm trees, hung heavy with coconuts. They stood like sentinels around a small pool. Over more rocks on the far side there was a sparkling, splashing waterfall. It appeared to be fed from a stream trickling down the side of the highest elevation on the small island – not precisely a mountain but taller than a mere hill.

Sam approached slowly, still managing to startle a large white heron sunning itself on a nearby rock. With awkward grace it rose from its perch and flapped away. The bird already forgotten, Sam knelt by the water. It smelled fresh, no hint of salt. Sam dunked his head in, shaking his hair like a puppy as he came up. Cupping his hands, he brought the water to his cracked lips and drank deeply. He had never tasted anything so pure or perfect. Dumping the tepid water from the jug, Sam refilled it with the fresh cool water and screwed the cap closed.

He walked farther into the water—it didn't seem to be much more than five feet deep at its center. The bottom was a mixture of sand and pebbles. He felt little fish grazing his legs and leaned down, trying unsuccessfully to catch one with his hands.

Fresh water, fish, coconuts, sunflower seeds—this island was abundant with sustenance. His burnt skin and aching muscles forgotten, Sam plunged into the water with his salt-laden clothing still on, swimming with the energy of joy and relief.

* * * * *

Donovan's mouth was open and sand had gotten in it. He was sweating as he sat up stiffly, the remnants of a bad dream still lingering. As he eased himself out of the tent, he looked around for Sam, who was nowhere in sight.

Sam... Donovan realized he was more than a little in awe of him. They were about the same age, he figured, but there was something about Sam Jamison that commanded a quiet authority. He wasn't at all pushy—in fact he was almost deferential the few times Donovan's own fear and insecurity had pushed him into acting macho and stupid. But it was the deference of someone who knew his power, who was so confident in himself he could rule with a whisper instead of a shout.

Donovan opened his jeans and relieved himself in the sand. He looked around again for Sam, a sudden disquiet falling over him. What if something had happened to Sam? Donovan knew he couldn't make it alone. Even if he were able to survive in the wilderness by himself, the loneliness would kill him. "Sam!" he called out, his voice rising with panic. "Sam!"

Grabbing the baseball cap, he pulled it onto his head, the sun already hot on his tender, reddened skin. He moved through the foliage, his ears pricked for sounds of Sam. He heard the bubbling song of the waterfall before he saw it. Clamoring up the black rocks, he came into view of the small pool and saw Sam's dark blond head bobbing in the water. Relief washed over him as he let out breath he hadn't realized he was holding. Sam saw him at the same time and waved.

"Donovan! It's fresh! Fresh water!"

Donovan grinned widely, wading into the pool in his salt-streaked grubby clothing. Sam's broad shoulders glistened under the morning sun as he stood in the shallow pool. His chest was smooth, the muscles long and lean. Donovan, who had always appreciated beauty in whatever form it took, couldn't help but admire Sam's strong physique, the muscles etched beneath supple skin, rippling as he moved. The pool was crystal clear, revealing the rest of Sam's body, wavering in the refracted light of the water. Donovan realized he was staring and turned away.

"Dunk your head," Sam cried, laughing. "It's fantastic!" Donovan obeyed, refusing to think about his body's sudden reaction to the naked man standing just a few yards away. He knelt, dipping back his head and then submerging it entirely, the sensation pure heaven.

Moving back toward the bank of the pool, he pulled his T-shirt over his head. He noticed Sam's pile of clothing and shrugging to himself why not, he too shucked everything off, relishing the feel of the water sluicing over his aching body.

Donovan watched Sam awhile as he dove beneath the water and rose again like some kind of blond sea god, his back muscles bunching and lengthening as he glided through the water.

Normally Donovan wouldn't have given his own nudity a second thought. At the gym most of the men walked around the locker room naked after their showers, indifferent to one another. Donovan, whose body was strong and lean, had never felt embarrassed before. Yet now he found himself shy, envying Sam's easy comfort as he swam naked, so close Donovan could reach out and touch him if he wished.

Sam, who had been completely underwater, burst upward and splashed Donovan, laughing as Donovan leaped back in surprise. Sam took off over the water, swimming in powerful strokes. "Why, you little bastard!" Donovan laughed as he dove after Sam, quickly overtaking him with his longer legs and determination.

As he caught up to him, Donovan reached out, grabbing Sam's leg and pulling him under. Like boys they splashed and played, swimming around each other and diving beneath the water only to burst forth with a splash, shaking water into each other's faces. The sheer relief at finding fresh water, at being alive, seemed to overtake them both at once. They leaned toward one another, face to face, chest to chest, their legs entwining as they struggled for balance.

Donovan felt Sam's strong arms wrapping around his shoulders as their bodies touched. He could feel the press of Sam's hard cock against his thigh. Confused, Donovan felt his own cock rising, his heart thumping, his breath catching in his throat. What was going on! He pulled back abruptly, his gesture rougher than he intended as he pushed against Sam's chest and stumbled back.

Sam looked at him a long moment, those large dark eyes seeming to read past his rebuff, to know of Donovan's secret and sudden arousal when their bodies had touched. He turned sharply away, swimming back toward the bank and his clothing, eager to cover his body along with his confusion.

Sam swam after him, stepping out of the water a moment after Donovan. Donovan could hear him pulling on his clothing as Donovan did the same. His wet jeans felt stiff and uncomfortable but Donovan didn't want to be naked a moment longer in front of Sam.

"Look, I'm really sorry," Sam said to Donovan's back. "I didn't mean to—it just happened. Please don't read anything into it." Donovan stood still, not sure how to respond. "I think I'm just afraid." Donovan heard Sam's voice crack and turned to look at him. Sam's expression was pleading. "I mean, I do think we'll be rescued, but who can really say when, you know? I think the relief of finding fresh water, of knowing at least we won't die of thirst while we wait for a rescue party—it lowered our defenses." Sam sat down by the water, pushing his thick wet hair away from his face. It hung

wetly down his neck. A lock flopped back over his forehead but he didn't seem to notice. He went on. "Just having someone here with me, someone like you, I can't tell you how lucky I feel. But the last thing I want is to compromise you in any way. I apologize if I've upset or offended you."

Donovan nodded abruptly as he glanced at Sam's face and quickly away. He was aware he was letting Sam take the weight, but felt unable to respond with more than a grunt. Finally he managed, "Forget it," as he walked back toward their encampment, ignoring the pang of guilt Sam's hurt expression had engendered.

They ate a meager breakfast of energy bars and water, neither saying much. Donovan kept glancing at Sam, trying to read his feelings in his expression, but Sam's face was carefully neutral. Donovan tried to assume the same seeming indifference. As Sam had said, whatever had happened between them was surely no more than two human beings reaching out to one another in their excitement and relief to find themselves still alive. Better just to let it go.

Later that morning they moved out onto the white sands of the narrow shoreline. Sam raised the signal mirror. Holding it up toward the sky, he positioned the card until he captured a glint of sunlight. He moved his arm in a wide sweeping arc. He was shirtless in the tropical heat, his tan chest glistening with a light sweat. Slowly he repeated the process again and again. Donovan sat nearby watching him as he thought about what had happened by the waterfall.

It wasn't Sam's erection against his leg that had startled him as much as his own response. Was it only because of the situation, as Sam had said? The relief at being alive, at finding fresh water, at not being alone...was that all it had been? Was that all Donovan wanted it to be?

Donovan watched Sam as he patiently swept the sky with the little mirror. There was no denying Sam was a very good-looking man, with his large dark brown eyes, his blond hair falling over his forehead and curling around his ears, his wide easy smile. Donovan guessed he was probably about five feet ten, several inches shorter than Donovan himself, but every bit as strong, his body well-muscled with not an ounce of fat. His appeal was absolute, even to a straight man, as Donovan had always fancied himself to be.

Finally Sam tired, offering the signal mirror to Donovan, who stood and took it, avoiding the touch of the other man's fingers as he averted his face. He too swept the sky with the rectangle of glass and plastic, wondering if he was doing it right. Sam sat farther back under the shade of a coconut tree. If they'd been expecting a plane to suddenly fly into view and touch down to speed them to safety, they were disappointed. Donovan realized a part of him had harbored just such a ridiculous expectation.

Finally he sank down near Sam with a sigh, pulling off his T-shirt to feel the sea breeze against his heated body. "Remember," Sam said, as if reading his mind. "The

directions said the signal could be reaching someone a hundred miles away. We have to have hope.” Donovan didn’t answer. Sam added, “How about we’ll do this after every meal. Three times a day we’ll send out our signal. The rest of the time we need to spend collecting food and preparing ourselves in the event of a longer stay. If nothing else, it will keep our minds occupied.”

Donovan nodded, aware they needed to focus on survival though his mind remained elsewhere. He couldn’t get the image, the feeling, of Sam’s naked body pressed against his own as they stood face-to-face in the pool out of his mind. Donovan touched his own thigh, recalling Sam’s hard cock pressed there. Why hadn’t Sam said anything all morning about what had happened? Why was he so calm and cool about everything? Who did he think he was anyway? Donovan glared at Sam, who was gazing out toward the translucent turquoise sea. “Sam,” he said before he could stop himself, “are you gay?”

Sam continued to look out over the ocean, his lips curving slowly into a small smile. “I’m pretty happy, if that’s what you mean. Glad to be alive.”

“No, you know what I mean!” Donovan began, his tone indignant.

Sam laughed and turned toward Donovan. “I’ve never really liked to define myself by my sexual orientation. I don’t really know what it means. But I understand what you’re asking. You’re asking, do I like men? Do I find men sexually appealing?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s what I’m asking,” Donovan said, aware it was none of his business yet unable to help himself.

Sam eyed him for a moment and then shrugged. “Well, the short answer is yes. You want the long answer too?” He smiled, his teeth white against his sunburned face, his eyes gentle as they met Donovan’s.

Donovan swallowed, not sure how much he wanted to know. Curiosity won out over trepidation and slowly he nodded. Sam looked back out to sea as Donovan studied his profile, the nose slightly crooked, the forehead high, his hair blowing gently in the sea breeze. “I guess I like *people*. I’m attracted to men but also to women. I appreciate the curve of a breast, the feminine gasp of pleasure at the moment of orgasm, the sweet heat of enveloping warmth around my cock.” Donovan felt himself blushing at Sam’s poetic but quite graphic words.

“But my connection, my emotional, even my spiritual connection, seems to be with men. Not that I don’t love them physically as well.” He smiled again, his eyes sweeping over Donovan’s bare torso a moment. Donovan felt a confusion of feelings he wasn’t ready to deal with.

“I love the strength of men—the hard muscle, the scruff of their beard, the tenderness beneath the swagger. I connect with men in a way I never have with a woman. And the sex—sweet Jesus—nothing compares.” Sam looked at Donovan head-on, as if daring him in some way.

Donovan felt panic dueling with arousal. Panic won. "Okay, that's enough! I mean, okay. You don't need to go into detail." He stood abruptly, scattering sand over Sam's legs.

"I'm sorry," Sam said softly, looking up. "I didn't mean to upset you. I thought you were really asking."

Donovan turned away, his face hot, his heart racing as he tried to ignore the erection in his pants. "Excuse me," he mumbled. "I need some air."

* * * * *

The days passed, one blending into the other as they built a makeshift lean-to with the tarp and stakes fashioned from bamboo stalks. Whatever sexual innuendo had sparked between them in the pool and afterward, they both were careful to keep it at bay, avoiding any situation that might be misconstrued. As a result, they were awkward with one another from time to time, but neither seemed to know what to do about it.

Instead they focused on the day-to-day business of survival. Though they seemed surrounded by food, actually getting at it was sometimes another story. It had been relatively easy to knock the coconuts from the tree and peel the thick green husk that protected the fruit beneath it. But getting the hard brown shell open had been more difficult. Several minutes of hard whacking with a piece of stone had only cracked the surface of the newly peeled shell. Discouraged, they'd left the coconut to dry in the sun. Happily, once the shell had dried sufficiently, they were able to crack it in half with a sharp rock.

Sam tasted the watery milk as it sloshed out—not bad, though nothing like the sweet thick paste he thought of as coconut milk, which he sometimes used in Indian cooking. The hard white coconut meat was satisfying to chew, once they managed to cut it from the shell.

They'd found other fruit as well, hidden in the leaves of a copse of trees on the far side of the island. Little smooth gray balls were nestled in among the leaves, resembling Ping-Pong balls. Reaching up, Donovan had pulled one of the fruits from its perch and smelled it. The fuzzy skin was yielding to his fingernail, like a kiwi. Beneath the skin lay dark orange fruit. It smelled wonderful—something like an orange and lime combined, with a hint of banana.

"Think it's edible?" he'd asked Sam, who took the exposed fruit and sniffed it.

"How could something that smells so good be poison?" Sam said, grinning. Pointing to the ground around the trees, he observed the empty skins of the fruit scattered about. "Looks like someone besides us likes this fruit and has lived to tell the tale." The fruit was delicious and both agreed as the tangy citrus pulp exploded into their mouths, they had never tasted anything as sweet.

Most important of all, they'd found bait for fishing, thus assured of protein while they waited to be rescued. Donovan had found snails near the inland pool. Tilting the

shell into his hand, he pressed a plastic spoon into it and scooped out a gelatinous mess of mollusk into a cup. He repeated the process several times before joining Sam at the water's edge where the fishing rod was ready, its hook gleaming in the dappled sunlight filtering through the coconut fronds.

In short order they had caught eight very small fish, too small for eating but excellent for bait. With these they managed to catch two decent-sized fish, their scales glimmering pink and green in the slanting sun. Though neither really knew what he was doing with the knives provided in the emergency kit, they did the best they could, cutting off the heads and tails, slitting the pale translucent flesh and scooping out the dark goo inside.

They'd had some trouble getting the fish to stay whole on the sticks they'd skewered them upon and ended up losing a part of one fish into the fire, but overall they'd managed to cook the fish, its smell promising life as their mouths watered in anticipation.

When he had time to think it over, Sam regretted having been so candid with Donovan about his sexual orientation. He should have realized Donovan hadn't really wanted to know. He was looking for reassurance Sam was straight and had been startled and confused at Sam's honest but clearly unsettling response.

Yet no matter how Donovan seemed determined to avoid or deny it, Sam had been there too. He was a witness to Donovan's erection, feeling his cock press hard as iron against Sam for one delicious moment when they'd found themselves face-to-face, body-to-body in the water. Though he never brought up what had happened—or nearly happened—between them that day, Sam had caught Donovan several times staring surreptitiously at him. Sam thought he had seen a kind of longing in his blue-eyed gaze. He was reasonably sure Donovan felt something for him, something beyond mere friendship, even if he himself didn't yet acknowledge or define it.

Though unwilling to press Donovan, Sam found himself daydreaming constantly of coming up behind Donovan, spinning him around and pulling him down for a kiss—a long, lingering kiss that would remove all doubt as to his intentions. He would pull those faded jeans from Donovan's hard body and sink to his knees, taking Donovan's erect shaft deep into his throat until he cried for mercy, begged for release...

Sam tried to analyze his feelings. Normally a man like Donovan, while physically very attractive, wasn't Sam's type. Donovan had talked about his law practice, his obsession with his career, his sixty-hour workweek and his killer instincts in the courtroom. Sam's passions had always been aroused by a different sort of men—artists and musicians who rarely had a nickel to their name but who could transport one with their artistic vision and grace. Idly he twisted the gold ring he wore on his left index finger. It was made of three strands of gold braided together. Sam had made it for himself at a jewelry class when he was only eighteen. For years he'd dreamed of one day giving it to someone—to "the one" if he ever found that person. He certainly wouldn't have chosen someone like Donovan!

"You're a snob is what you are," Donovan had laughed one evening when Sam had tried to describe what moved him in people. He'd had to admit perhaps he was, though he certainly wouldn't have thought of himself that way before. He found himself liking Donovan more and more as the days passed into weeks. He realized it was unfair to categorize and dismiss someone because of their profession—as unfair as doing so because of their sexual orientation.

Donovan worked hard, as hard or harder than Sam. He never complained or broke down and Sam knew many a lesser man would have by now. He was funny too, and self-deprecating about his failed relationships with women. *Figures the good ones are always straight*, Sam grinned to himself.

After a day of fishing, collecting wood, shoring up their shelter, washing their few items of clothing in the pool, scouting the island for fruits and edible vegetation and scouring the skies and horizon for any sign of a plane or ship as they swept the air with the signal mirror, they would collapse on the shore beneath the shade of a tree, staring out at the endless turquoise perfection of the ocean that imprisoned them.

From time to time Sam tried gently to steer the conversation back to what had happened between them in the pool. If nothing else, he wanted to clear the air between them, to make sure Donovan understood he had no designs upon him. Though if he were honest, he did, oh yes, he did...

But Donovan wouldn't discuss it, changing the subject or simply moving away with the excuse of a task to be done. Eventually Sam recognized this was probably for the best—who needed the complication of some bi-curious novice latching on to him when their first focus had to be on staying alive? As good-looking as Donovan was, he was probably a lousy lover. He'd as much as admitted he was a failure in the romance department. Why should Sam waste his time and energy on someone like that? Someone he might have admired physically back in civilization but would never have dreamed of dating, not in a thousand years.

Surely it was only a matter of time—a few more days, a week at most, before rescuers found them. How many islands could there be? Surely they wouldn't have stopped looking so soon! Once they were rescued, they could go their separate ways and return to their separate lives. It was better they kept things on a platonic level. Yes, Sam assured himself, it was the sensible, safe thing to do.

* * * * *

Each day they faithfully waved the signal mirror in the air, to no avail. Donovan had taken to making a mark on the trunk of one of the coconut trees for each passing day. Two weeks passed and though it was clear they could survive in reasonable comfort for a while longer, the prospect of rescue dimmed. They'd learned to bank the fire each night so it wouldn't go completely out and thus still had most of their precious matches intact. The thought they might one day run out of matches, run out of hope, run out of time was an unspoken but constant fear lingering just below the surface of

their daily struggle. Each man had so far been silent about his fears. Donovan barely allowed himself to dwell on it, even in his thoughts. The prospect of spending the rest of his life marooned on this bit of land was too terrifying to contemplate.

One night as they sat on the water's edge, letting tiny waves ripple over their feet, Sam turned to Donovan. "You're looking awfully scruffy, you know that? When they come to rescue us, they're going to think you're Robinson Crusoe!" Lightly he touched Donovan's jaw, darkened by two weeks of growth. As his fingers grazed the whiskers, his eyes met Donovan's and for some reason tonight Donovan didn't turn away. Sam's finger had left a trail of electricity along his cheek. Without realizing it, he lifted his hand to touch the skin Sam had touched. Sam's eyes were dark, the pupils dilated, a hunger behind them that at once thrilled and terrified Donovan.

Donovan forced himself to look away from Sam's mesmerizing sensual stare. He hadn't been held by another person in so long. Hadn't felt the press of warm lips, the comfort of another's body against his own. Donovan swallowed, not sure what was happening to him as the carefully constructed defenses of the past two weeks seemed to wash away like sand with the outgoing tide.

In a tone he hoped was light or at least neutral, he said, "You don't look any better, Rip Van Winkle." He longed to touch Sam's cheek in kind, to feel the stubble, to make contact, to convey with his fingers what he didn't yet have words for. God, what was happening to him?

Though he would have vehemently denied it if confronted, as the days had turned to weeks, he found himself becoming obsessed with Sam, watching him, finding ways to touch him, to brush his arm, to move too close in the dark of night when Sam's body was still in repose, his breathing deep and even. He even began to imagine how he might respond if Sam actually made a move on him. But Sam hadn't made any move at all—he seemed overly careful to avoid any situation that might "compromise" Donovan. Though at first he'd appreciated Sam's consideration, lately he'd found himself almost irritated by it. Donovan had to smile to himself as he realized he'd just sort of assumed every gay guy would of course want to hit on every man he saw. That was stupid, he knew, as stupid as assuming every straight man wanted to bed every woman he saw.

Ruefully Donovan was forced to acknowledge he probably wasn't Sam's type. Shit—he had made a mess of things with the women in his life, why not with the one man in it as well? Better they remained friends.

Donovan realized Sam was watching him as he so often did with a quiet bemused expression, as if he were listening in on Donovan's thoughts. Trying to distract himself as much as Sam, he offered, "We could shave, I suppose."

"How? You holding out about your electric shaver?"

Donovan laughed. "No, seriously, we could use the utility knife. It's a razor knife. We could open it and use the blades. We could use coconut milk as a lubricant."

Sam nodded, thinking it over. "It's funny. I mean, it doesn't really matter if we grow beards down to our knees, I guess. But something about it makes me uneasy." He paused as if trying to articulate his thoughts more clearly. "It's the idea of time passing. Of reverting to something primitive. Of losing our—" he paused again, seeking the word.

Donovan provided it. "Civilization. It's about remaining civilized. Not succumbing to our environment."

"Yes!" Sam nodded, eagerly retrieving the utility knife from their cache. Sam leaned against the trunk of a tree. As Donovan held the mirror for him, Sam rubbed some coconut milk over his cheeks and scraped the blade carefully over them. It took a long time but eventually his face was reasonably smooth.

"You look like a new man," Donovan exclaimed approvingly. He tried to control the thrill in his gut as he admired the strong, smooth planes of Sam's handsome face. "My turn." Donovan sat back on the sand, sitting crosslegged as Sam held the mirror for him. He applied the remaining milk, drawing the blade down one cheek. "Ow!" He dropped the blade as blood beaded red against the foamy white of the coconut milk.

Using the hem of his much-stained T-shirt, Sam leaned forward, pressing the cotton against the cut. The gesture brought them very close together, their chests touching. "It's okay," Donovan said, leaning back before the intimacy of the moment overwhelmed him. He felt dizzy but surely it was only because of the sight of his own blood staining Sam's shirt. "I don't think I'm so good at this."

"We should have used a new blade," Sam said, dropping one from the open handle of the utility knife into his palm.

"Yeah," Donovan said, "After all, it's not like we have to save them for anything. We're going to be off this island probably in the next day or two." He waited for Sam's confirmation but it wasn't forthcoming. He didn't press the issue.

Sam knelt in front of Donovan with the razor blade in his hand. "How about I'll do it for you? Easier than trying to squint into the mirror." Donovan nodded, shifting on the sand until he was leaning back against the tree trunk. He trusted Sam implicitly, he realized as he closed his eyes. He felt the cold blade drawing gently over his flesh. Donovan's beard was thicker and coarser than Sam's and it took longer to shave him smooth. Sam took special care with Donovan's cleft chin and neck. As he worked, he ran the fingers of his other hand lightly over the skin, saying in his soft voice, "I want to make sure I don't miss a spot." Donovan kept his eyes closed, barely admitting to himself how good Sam's touch felt, his strong, sure fingers gliding over Donovan's flesh, leaving trails of warm desire in their wake.

"There you are. Smooth as a baby." Donovan opened his eyes, disappointed the shave was over. Sam was holding out the mirror. "Check it out." Donovan took the offered mirror and looked at himself. He was startled by his dark tan, paler where he'd just been shaved but still ruddy compared to his old "city" face, when he'd rarely seen the sun, except through office and courtroom windows. He examined his face a

moment longer, the shadows beneath his eyes, the cheeks gaunt from their enforced diet, the blue eyes troubled.

"I think I've aged ten years these past two weeks," he said, his voice subdued.

Sam touched his shoulder, his voice husky with suppressed emotion. "I know what you mean, Donovan. I guess we've been through a hell of a lot, you and I. I'm just glad you've been here to help me get through it."

Donovan almost leaned forward at that moment. He almost took Sam's face in his hands. He almost kissed his supple, sensual mouth. Instead he did what he always seemed to be doing these days. He turned away.

Chapter Four

The two men were stretched out on the raft, legs thrust out, their hands cradling their heads. A cool breeze ruffled the brush, welcome after the heat of the day. Sam felt a splash of water on his face and then another. It was raining! In seconds the heavens seemed to have opened, a sheet of water soaking them to the skin before they could get to shelter. The tarp under which they'd been sleeping offered little protection as wind whipped the rain in a frenzy. They scrambled to the pop-up tent, huddling inside it as the rain pounded around them.

After about twenty minutes it stopped as suddenly as it had started. The setting sun made the wet foliage around them steam and sparkle. Slowly the two men emerged from the tent, both soaked to the skin.

"We have to get dry," Donovan said as he stripped off his T-shirt. The blankets they kept beneath the tarp were soaked. Sam pulled them out, taking them through the brush to some flat rocks farther inland. When he returned, he saw Donovan had taken off his jeans and hung his clothing over the edge of the tarp, weighing them down with rocks so they could dry in the evening breeze. His wet underwear clung to his cock and balls. Sam couldn't help but stare.

Donovan flushed but didn't try to cover himself. Instead he said softly, "Aren't you going to hang your things?"

Sam stripped off his shirt and slid out of his pants. Donovan took his wet things for him and hung them next to his own. They stood staring at one another. Sam could feel his heart thudding in his chest. He could feel his cock straining in his bikini underwear, the tip pressing up against his belly. He turned away, embarrassed at his own arousal, anger welling up as he wondered what game Donovan was playing.

Each time he reminded himself Donovan was straight as an arrow with zero interest in Sam except as a partner in survival, Donovan would do something—a gesture, a glance, a touch—that said something different. Sometimes Sam could almost feel the electricity snaking between them, only to have it snuffed out if he tried to follow its path.

Donovan moved closer, reaching out to touch Sam's shoulder. "No, don't turn away. Please." Sam stood frozen, his heart catching in his throat as Donovan smiled, his expression a mixture of desire and hesitation. Sam felt as if he were falling into one of his daydreams as Donovan bent to kiss him, his full lips warm as they made contact with Sam's. Trembling, he kissed him back with no idea of what would happen next.

Donovan couldn't believe what he was doing. He had wanted to do it for days—even longer if he were honest with himself. Sam was so cool, so self-contained. What if

he admitted his fledgling, confused desires and Sam rebuffed him? He'd tried to show Sam indirectly, touching his hand a moment longer than necessary, "accidentally" brushing against him in the night, but Sam never responded.

Though he knew he was good-looking, Donovan had never felt truly comfortable with himself. The youngest and smallest of a family of robust, strapping athletic boys, he had never been quite good enough or strong enough. Even when he graduated with honors and a law degree, it was made subtly known he had been expected, like his brothers before him, to go into his father's landscaping business. They were unimpressed with his "egghead" achievements.

With women he'd been mostly passive, letting them make the first move and the last one as well, as they broke up with him after a few months or years. When he took the time to ponder it, Donovan wondered if he was missing some essential gene, something that enabled one to care deeply for another person. Though he liked to think he was different from his cold, emotionally withdrawn father and his superficial, shallow brothers, secretly he harbored a fear he was more like them than he dared to admit.

These past two weeks on this deserted island with the handsome stranger who had saved his life had literally turned his world upside down. Things he'd taken for granted had been ripped away from him. Together they'd been forced to forge a life, to find food and make shelter, each moment a small miracle as they made it through another day. Though Donovan still hoped they would be rescued, a part of him had thrived as he found himself able to rise to each task before them.

Had he been observing himself from outside the situation, the Donovan of two weeks before would have said he was now acting off his fear and loneliness. With an attorney's logical mind, he would have told himself any person would be drawn to the only person left in his world. He would have assured himself his attraction to Sam didn't mean he was gay or even curious. It didn't mean anything at all.

These past days with endless hours to contemplate his life, his fate, his future, his desires, his dreams—had stripped away much of the old logical veneer he used to pride himself on applying to all situations. He and Sam didn't know if they'd ever make it off this tiny bit of land—at once a paradise and a prison. He did know he respected and admired the quiet self-assured Sam, but beyond that, he *desired* him. He wanted to find out what was behind those large dark eyes, what really went on in Sam's head and heart. He longed to know if he had a place there.

He could feel Sam tremble as he moved closer, their bare chests touching. Donovan closed his eyes, barely able to believe he was kissing a man! He could feel his cock bending and rising in his underwear, his balls tightening with lust. Sam pulled away as Donovan instinctively moved forward, his mouth still eager for Sam's kiss. He opened his eyes, a sigh of dismay escaping his lips.

Sam's eyes were bright, his expression full of pain. "Don't do this, Donovan," he said tightly. "Whatever you're doing, stop it."

"What? You don't want to..." Donovan trailed off, flames of embarrassment licking his face as he turned away. His miscalculation hit him in the gut like a fist. Sam had no interest in him – Sam didn't want him.

"Jesus, you know that's not it!" Sam's voice was sharp, pain echoing in his words. Donovan turned back toward him, confused. "Of course I want to! I've wanted nothing *but* since I first saw you on the ship! Don't you see – if you start this, I can't go back. If you break down the fragile defense I've managed to maintain, I don't think I can build it up again. Once you're done 'experimenting' or whatever the hell it is you're doing, and you're ready to go back to being mister straight man, I'm not going to be able to just turn it off. I'm not wired like that. For me it's all or nothing. Do you understand? I can't do this. There's too much at stake between us. We have to live together, just us. There's nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide."

Donovan was confused but at the same time felt hope rising like a lark inside him. His voice pleading, he said, "But I don't want to hide! I've wanted to kiss you forever. I have to find out if what I feel is real. I know you feel it too." Donovan glanced at Sam's underwear to make his point – the erection still visible despite his protestations.

"Of course I feel it! Damn it, that's the point! For you this is a game, for me it's real, all too real. If you kiss me again, I'm not going to be able to stop. I'm going to take you all the way, Donovan. I only play for keeps."

Donovan stared at the man standing nearly naked before him. They were the only people in the world at that moment. His decision would shape the course of their lives – at least until they were rescued. If they were rescued. He touched his lips, the heat of Sam's mouth still imprinted there. He wanted another kiss. He wanted more than that. For the first time in his life, Donovan *ached* for the experience held just out of his reach.

Moving toward Sam, he whispered, "Kiss me."

With those two words, Sam's barely contained reserve fell away. He focused a moment on Donovan's masculine chest, the nipples red against the black curling chest hair. He longed to take advantage of what he feared was only loneliness and misplaced lust. He looked up into Donovan's eyes, taking his measure one last time before he abandoned himself to his desires. Donovan's expression was hungry, his lips parted, his azure eyes flickering with anticipation as he held Sam's gaze.

Even as he moved closer, even as he took Donovan's face in his hands and pulled him down to claim his mouth, Sam feared he would regret this. Yet the stark need of the moment overwhelmed him as their lips touched. Unable to contain himself any longer, he actually moaned against Donovan's mouth, his fingers gliding up into Donovan's silky dark hair as he held him fast.

The kiss was not gentle. It was not a tentative exploration or the delicate touch of new lovers. The tide of lust held back so long burst forth as tongue met tongue, winding and curving together in wet heat as masculine chests met, as flat bellies were held apart

by the erect cocks nestling vertically side by side, barely contained in the cotton underwear each man still wore. They sank down in slow motion to wet sand, each up on his knees as if in prayer, the object of his worship held in his arms.

Sam held Donovan fast, determined to take his pleasure at Donovan's sweet mouth, exploring its warmth with his tongue, nibbling the full lower lip, gliding his tongue along strong white teeth, his fingers twisting in Donovan's thick hair, his cock grinding against his belly.

Slow down, slow down... he tried to tell himself, knowing he was moving too fast, knowing he was going to scare the man away before they'd even begun. Forcing himself to back off, he pulled away, steeling himself for Donovan's possible rejection even now.

Donovan was breathing hard, his chest rising and falling, his eyes bright in the darkening purple of twilight. "What happens now?" he asked softly.

Donovan stood trembling as Sam knelt in front of him. Pulling down Donovan's underwear to his ankles, Sam leaned forward, gently cupping Donovan's tightening balls in his hands.

Donovan was breathing hard, part terrified, part desperate for Sam's touch. He closed his eyes as he felt Sam's fingers curling around his erect shaft. Was this really happening? Was he going to permit a man to perform this intimate act? Did this mean he was gay? Sam's fingers moved along Donovan's cock, sending ripples of pleasure through him. When Sam's lips closed over the head, Donovan moaned, his voice low and breathy. The feeling was electric, more intense than he remembered with a woman.

Marianne had sucked his cock from time to time, after making it clear she expected quid pro quo from him. She'd always seemed slightly hesitant, her nose wrinkling with a barely muted distaste as she closed her eyes and forced herself to "perform oral sex" as she clinically described it. He was rarely able to orgasm from her inexpert, tentative attentions, finally plunging himself into her sex for release, pretending his passion had rendered him unable to wait a moment longer to be inside her.

As Sam lowered his mouth, the lips locked tight around Donovan's shaft, the sensation was indescribable. With his other hand, he gently massaged Donovan's balls with delicate pressure, enhancing the velvet-hot kiss of his tongue and lips. Without realizing what he was doing, Donovan reached out to touch Sam's head, to grip his hair, still damp from the sudden rain. Sam responded, moving down still farther over Donovan's cock until he'd taken it to the hilt. Donovan could feel the head of his cock nestled at the back of Sam's hot, yielding throat. It felt like heaven.

Sam moved back slowly, maintaining the friction with his lips, massaging Donovan's cock with his tongue, lightly grazing the taut skin with his teeth. Releasing Donovan's cock completely with his lips, he massaged the glistening shaft with his hand, moving it up and down with unbearably pleasurable friction, his other hand still cupping Donovan's balls. A climax began to mount like a wave hurtling through his

body. He knew he was going to come and apparently Sam knew it too because he lowered his head again, sucking and licking almost ferociously, the rhythm driving Donovan nearly mad with lust.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god..." Donovan couldn't say anything else and soon he couldn't even say that—words obliterated, thoughts smashed, fears and trepidation dissolved under the delicious onslaught of his orgasm. He felt his body spasming, his hips thrusting hard against Sam as he arched uncontrollably toward him, thrusting his cock deep into Sam's throat. Sam held him fast around the hips, taking every drop of his seed, gently milking his cock until Donovan was utterly spent.

With a deep sigh of absolute surrender, Donovan leaned heavily against Sam for a moment as he recovered himself. A sound in the distance caused him to open his eyes. It took him a moment to focus in the darkness of the evening. What he saw made him stand up and shout, "A plane! Christ, Sam! A plane!"

Together they stumbled toward the fire, Donovan pulling up his underwear as he ran. Though the fire was banked, they hadn't yet placed fresh wood and kindling on it for the night. The wood in the fire pit was wet from the earlier rain. "Get dry wood!" Sam shouted as he hurried to retrieve the box of matches. With trembling fingers he pushed open the box and struck a match along its side. The first match broke against the box as he cursed and forced himself to calm down.

Donovan raced toward their stash of wood kept beneath a coconut tree. Kicking aside the wet top pieces, he grabbed a handful and ran back to Sam, dropping the wood into the pit. The twigs and dry branches caught fire once they'd dropped several more matches onto the pile. A little flame blazed up as they waved their hands over it to feed the fire more oxygen.

The plane was nearly overhead and without taking the time to discuss their next move, both men ran closer to the shore, wildly waving their arms as they screamed out, "We're here! Over here! Help! Help!" Desperately they danced over the sand in their underwear, crying out with all their might. Sam glanced back at the fire, admonishing himself it wasn't bigger, angry they hadn't made a huge blazing bonfire every single night for just such a chance as this.

The plane rumbled overhead—a small plane flying relatively low. There was a chance, if the pilot looked down he would see them, see the tiny flicker of fire, see the two men silhouetted against the white sand and darkening sky. "Help! Down here! We're here! Help! Rescue us! Help! Down here!"

For a moment it seemed the plane might be changing its course, turning slightly as if circling over them to see what the ruckus was. Sam felt his heart somersault his chest at the thought of their imminent rescue. Donovan must have come to the same conclusion because he redoubled his efforts, dancing and leaping like a maniac as he shouted to the passing plane.

Yet the plane did not change its course. It did not swoop back to see what was down on the tiny island. Sam and Donovan continued to shout and wave as the plane flew past them, growing smaller in the blackening sky until even the sound of the engines faded completely.

Sam stood stunned, his throat sore, his chest heaving as he tried to catch his breath. Donovan stood nearby, his expression dazed, his eyes wide with disbelief. As Sam watched, Donovan seemed to crumple as if his bones had suddenly dissolved inside his body. He simply fell to the ground, his body folding like an accordion as his face hit the sand.

Sam rushed over to him, alarmed. "Donovan! Donovan! What is it? Are you okay?" Kneeling beside him, he felt Donovan's back. He was still breathing. He pulled at his shoulders but Donovan lay inert, his body dead weight. "What is it? Come on, you're scaring me." Sam ran his hands over Donovan's back, fighting a rising fear perhaps Donovan had suffered a heart attack.

Beneath his fingers he felt Donovan's shoulders begin to shudder and convulse, his breath ragged in his throat. As a sob escaped the prostrate man, Sam realized he was crying. Gently he pushed Donovan over so he was lying flat on his back.

Sam tried to wipe away the sand that clung to Donovan's wet cheeks and mouth as he cried. He felt his heart break for them both as he sat down next to Donovan, lifting him so he could cradle him in his arms. Tears streamed down his own cheeks as Donovan cried in his arms. He cried until there were no tears left.

Finally exhausted, Donovan lay with his eyes closed, as still as death. Sam wanted to cover his body, to move him to the tent or the lean-to, but he didn't want to disturb him. Let him have at least a few more minutes of escape in his dreams. And so Sam sat, staring up at the dark sky, his mind numb as he stroked Donovan's cheek.

* * * * *

Dawn found them sprawled on the sand, the fire completely out, their limbs stiff, their bodies gritty with sand. Sam opened his eyes and shivered in the cool breeze. Donovan lay near him, curled into a fetal ball, his dark hair falling over his face. "Donovan," Sam said softly. "Wake up."

As Donovan sat up, his face puffy, his eyes still red, Sam said, "I'm going to build the fire again and boil some water for coffee." The tin of instant coffee they had found in the emergency rations still contained most of its powder. Neither man was a coffee drinker, though they'd each had a cup or two over the weeks just to break the monotony of water and coconut milk.

Sam walked toward the lean-to, pulling his now dry, stiff blue jeans from the top of the tarp where Donovan had placed them the night before. He took Donovan's jeans as well, walking back toward him. Silently he handed Donovan his pants and turned away as Donovan seemed to be waiting for him to go.

Sam pulled on his sneakers, not bothering to lace them. As he got the fire going, he wondered where they would go from here. He felt a deep depression settling over him, more profound even than when they'd floated all day in the raft before finding land. At least then he'd had hope. At least then he'd believed their rescue was imminent.

Donovan came up behind him, echoing his fears. "No one's going to find us. We're going to die here. They've stopped the search. That wasn't a search plane. No one is looking for us. We'll never get off this island." His voice was low, the words spoken in a monotone that alarmed Sam more than if he'd been emphatic or angry.

"Stop it," he said, his voice sharper than he'd intended. "Go get the blankets and fill the jug, will you? Let's focus on what we can do." As Donovan stood staring blankly into the fire, Sam repeated, "Go on! Go get some water so we can have our coffee."

Donovan stared at Sam as if he didn't recognize him. With a sigh, Sam retrieved the jug himself as well his T-shirt. Glancing with concern back at Donovan, he saw him sitting still as a statue, his face an expressionless mask as he gazed at the sea.

Moving as fast as he could through the brush and up the rocks, Sam filled the water jug. Wading into the water, he scooped up handfuls and let them wash over his head and face, attempting to remove the grit from a night spent in the sand. He dipped his T-shirt in the water, noting among the many stains the faded blood stain at its hem. What would happen now between the two of them?

The intimacy of that moment when he'd daubed the blood from Donovan's cheek had been the real beginning—the moment when the fear in Donovan's eyes had been replaced or at least augmented by something else. Was his fledgling desire snuffed out now by this latest disaster?

Sam had barely been able to contain himself as he'd kissed Donovan's impossibly sweet mouth. With a sort of stunned gratitude he'd knelt before the man he'd so often dreamed of claiming. Though he'd half expected him to, Donovan hadn't resisted him, hadn't push him away with disgust or anger as Sam had dared to take Donovan's arrow-straight shaft in his hands. Donovan's cock was large—long and thick, smooth as satin, hard as wood. Sam's mouth literally watered at the memory.

His heart cracked at the thought of Donovan slumped like a rag doll by the fire pit. Hurriedly he squeezed the excess water from his T-shirt. Grabbing the blankets he'd set out to dry the night before, he hurried back down the rocks toward their encampment beneath the coconut trees.

When he got to fire pit, prepared to offer Donovan his wet T-shirt with which to wash his face and hands, Donovan was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter Five

It felt good to float. At first he'd tried to swim straight out to sea but a strong side current kept tugging him off course. After a while he'd given up, letting the current drag him along parallel to the accursed island. What did it matter where he drifted?

Donovan lay on his back, feeling the warmth of the newly risen sun against his face. He had pulled on the jeans Sam had dropped next to him but hadn't bothered to retrieve his T-shirt. His sandals remained near the tarp. He would have no further need of them. He was going to swim until he could swim no more. Beyond that he had no plans.

Glancing toward the receding shore, Donovan felt a momentary pang at the thought he wouldn't see Sam again. Whatever had happened last night between them—and he wasn't ready to think about that—he had come to love the kind, quiet man. Would Sam miss him? Of course he would be lonely without another person to talk to but he would be fine. Perhaps some day a ship would pass near enough for Sam to signal and he would escape their prison at last.

But Donovan wouldn't be there to witness it. He couldn't bear the thought of another moment on the tiny bit of rock and sand. The thought of another mouthful of hard coconut meat, another meal of bland crumbling fish, another night spent sleeping on blankets under a tree, filled him with a kind of horror. He knew now he had been holding himself tight as an over-wound clock while he waited for a rescue he had been sure was only days away. When the plane had passed by unaware, indifferent and then gone...something had broken inside. The carefully coiled defenses had sprung free, leaving him raw with despair.

Again he glanced toward the shore, their pathetic encampment still visible. *Oh Sam. I will miss you. I'm sorry, but I just couldn't do it. I just can't bear the thought of another day.*

* * * * *

"Donovan! Donovan! Where are you?" Sam checked inside the tent and then scanned the area, his eyes darting nervously over the sand. "Donovan!" he cried as he moved back into the brush, heading past the rocks that led to the pool, calling as he went. Maybe Donovan had only gone to get some ping-pong fruit, as they'd taken to calling the fruit they'd discovered on the far side of the tiny island.

Donovan wasn't there. Sam tore back toward the pool, clamoring over the rocks, holding his breath as he ran through the cluster of coconut trees. No Donovan. He hurried back toward the encampment—maybe they'd just missed each other. "Donovan! Donovan! Jesus, where are you!" Sam stood a moment, trying to catch his

breath. Donovan seemed to have vanished. Yet the island was so small! If he wasn't on land...

"No," Sam said softly. Then he shouted, "No! No! Donovan, you can't be such an idiot! No!"

He stared out into the ocean, his eyes scanning the unbroken turquoise vista. He began to run along the perimeter of the island, his eyes fixated on the water, his heart pounding with fear.

There he was! A dark head bobbing in the middle distance. He was far out but not too far to reach. *Oh Donovan! How could you leave me?*

Kicking off his sneakers, Sam plunged into the water, running through it until it was deep enough to swim. With powerful strokes rendered even stronger by the spurt of adrenaline urging him on, Sam swam toward the dark head. Donovan seemed to be floating but his face was turned upward, a good sign surely. *Please, god, let him be alive. Let him be okay.* Sam plowed through the water, tears blinding him as he gained on Donovan, who was drifting along with the same current that propelled Sam toward him.

"Donovan! Donovan! What the hell are you doing?" Sam gasped when he was finally close enough to be heard. "Donovan!"

Slowly Donovan looked toward him, his expression blank. Sam continued to swim as hard as he could, relief washing through him as he neared the floating man. He tread the water as he demanded breathlessly, "What the fuck are you doing, man! Have you lost your mind? You could be pulled out to sea! You know we agreed never to swim alone in the ocean. How could you be so stupid?"

"Sam," Donovan said, as if he hadn't heard him. "Let's stay out here. Let's let the water take us. It's better this way. It's for the best."

Sam stared at him with disbelief. "No!" he cried. "You don't mean that! How can you even think that for a moment! Donovan! That was one plane! Don't give up! Please, come back to shore with me! Please, don't leave me alone. I need you, Donovan! Please, don't abandon me. Come back with me. I'm begging you."

Donovan shrugged but allowed Sam to catch hold of his arm as he began to swim back to shore. Sam was exhausted but didn't dare rest as the current had shifted. It was pulling them out sea, the island now barely visible when he turned toward it. Breathing hard, he gasped, "Come on, Donovan! Swim! I can't pull you! Come on!" Sam began to cry, desperation shattering the last vestiges of his reserve. "I love you, damn it! Please."

At these words, the mask seemed to slip from Donovan's face. He stared at Sam as if seeing him for the first time. His blue eyes mirrored the brilliant blue of the water as life seemed to reignite in them. "Sam," he said softly, the single word thick with emotion. And then to Sam's enormous relief, he began to swim. Together they pushed toward the shore, toward the little piece of land they had no choice but to call home.

* * * * *

"Guess you're two for two," Donovan said, turning to smile ruefully at Sam.

"Pardon?" They lay side by side in only their underwear, letting the sun dry them on one of the flat rocks near the pool. Once they'd made it back to shore, they had rested in the warm sand as they waited to catch their breath, waited for their hearts to slow to normal. On rubbery legs they'd climbed to the pool and plunged in, washing the salt water from their exhausted bodies.

"You've saved my life twice now." Sam was quiet, staring up at the tall coconut trees swaying in the breeze. Donovan looked at him—his deeply tanned face, his dark blond hair streaked with gold from the sun, his lips red and soft, reminding Donovan of their touch against his mouth, around his cock...

"Sam, I don't know what happened. It's like something broke inside of me when that plane passed over us without stopping. All my hopes were shattered at that moment. I guess I just, I don't know, gave up. The hopelessness of our situation was too much to bear." He took a deep shuddering breath, trying to control the emotion welling inside him. Tentatively he reached out to touch the top of Sam's hand. Sam didn't pull away. Heartened, he closed his fingers over Sam's.

Sam turned to look at him. His brown eyes were warm, giving Donovan the courage to continue. "It's kind of like I shut down. I left myself, if that makes any sense. Nothing seemed to matter anymore. I just wanted it over. But when you swam out to me. When you said what you said..." He trailed off, unable to continue. Sam had said he loved him, but it may have only been a ploy to lure him back. To be left alone would have been a hell Donovan couldn't now believe he had been willing to consign Sam to.

Sitting up abruptly, he said in a low, shamed voice, "God, I'm sorry, Sam. I'm so, so sorry for what I almost did to you. It was probably the most selfish thing I've ever done in my life."

Sam sat up too, reaching out to touch Donovan's cheek. "Shh, stop that. It's like you said. You were gone. Your spirit had drifted away through desperation and fear. But you're back now." He paused, musing. "It's weird actually. I saw the moment you returned to yourself. Your eyes—they had been flat, the life, the sentience, somehow not there. But then it was as if the light returned. You were you again. That's when you started to swim. You saved your own life, Donovan. You made the choice to keep on fighting."

Donovan shook his head. Sam was being Sam, and Donovan felt grateful as he so often had for Sam's grace in handling Donovan's betrayal. Donovan had to face the fact he'd completely broken down when the plane hadn't seen them. He'd fallen apart, collapsing in tears, beside himself with grief and rage. Then numbness had settled over him like a shroud. Without a thought for Sam, he'd decided to take the easy way out.

He was supposed to be the man! The straight man, the macho man. Yet it was the gay guy, the homosexual, who had been strong and brave, keeping his head while Donovan went off the deep end. Though Donovan had always fancied himself tolerant of others' lifestyles and orientations, he realized now he'd been harboring bigoted sexist

ideas about gay men, on some level assuming Sam would succumb to girlish hysterics when in fact *he* had been the one to lose control.

He looked at Sam – his strong, hard body, his muscular legs, his handsome face, the large, kind eyes smiling gently at him without reproach. That was where Sam’s true strength lay – in his calm acceptance of people as they were and his ability to take what life hurled at him with aplomb and grace. “No,” Donovan answered finally. “Don’t let me off the hook, Sam. I don’t deserve it. All I can say is this. Going forward, I don’t want to hide anymore. I don’t want to deny my feelings. I don’t want to shun yours. I don’t want to give up or back down when things get tough. What you said out there...” Again he didn’t quite dare to repeat the tender words. Swallowing, he went on. “I mean, I feel it too. I don’t know if it’s only because we’re stuck here or not. I don’t care. If you’re willing to start over with me, I promise not to let you down again. I promise, Sam. We’re in this together until the end.”

Sam took his hand, squeezing it gently. Donovan felt a jolt of arousal course through his loins as his cock stiffened in his briefs. He couldn’t help but glance down at Sam’s sizable package, barely concealed by his bikini underwear. This man had said he loved him! Instead of being repulsed as he surely would have been before the shipwreck, Donovan felt thrilled by the words, eager to exploit them as he recalled Sam’s hot, perfect mouth on his cock the night before. He leaned toward Sam, closing his eyes, his lips parting for a kiss.

But no warm lips met his. No hand came up to caress his face. No strong arms wrapped around him. Donovan opened his eyes, confused and embarrassed. Sam said softly, “I think we need to slow down, Donovan. I think maybe I moved too fast last night with you. And because of the plane, we didn’t have a chance to process it. Let’s just take it easy today, okay? Let’s catch some fish and use the signal mirror. I don’t know about you, but I think I’m going to sleep for a while. I’m pretty wiped out.”

“Yeah. Okay, sure. You’re right,” Donovan said, turning his head away. It seemed like relationships were just as tough between two guys as between a man and a woman, he thought with chagrin.

* * * * *

Sam stretched out under the tarp, his eyes closed. He was dressed again in jeans and his faded, stained T-shirt, his hand flung over his face. Donovan was too restless to sleep. He walked inland, moving through the foliage, startling a few small birds. He returned to the pool, soothed by the sound of the waterfall. In a moment he would wave the signal mirror out in the noonday sun, though he secretly believed it was useless without a clear target to aim for. Commercial jets had passed high overhead from time to time, but the island itself was probably barely visible from such an altitude, much less one pathetic man waving his arms about.

He thought about their earlier conversation. Though he still didn’t honestly know if his feelings for Sam were genuine or driven by their enforced celibacy and loneliness,

he had been humiliated by Sam's rebuff. It was Sam who had professed his love! It was Sam who had knelt and taken Donovan's cock in his mouth! As the image of the blond head bobbing over him surfaced in his mind, Donovan felt his balls tingle with need. No one had ever kissed him like that. No woman, even a particularly skilled and eager girlfriend he'd had in college, had sent him into such a spiral of pure ecstasy. Was it only Sam's oral skill or was something else at play?

Donovan would have once assumed of course Sam would be good at giving head—weren't all gays good at it by definition? Now he realized that was a stupid and sexist idea, and no more valid than saying all straight guys were good at oral sex with women. He knew from his own experience and Marianne's complaints he had been less than a stellar performer in that regard.

So what was different? The desperation of their situation? Donovan mulled this over for a while and finally rejected it. It was something else that had turned the experience from merely pleasurable to sublime. It was the look in Sam's face—the lust, the passion suffused with tenderness and longing. It was—love. Sam was truly in love with him. With Donovan! Marianne had said she loved him and she probably did as far as she was capable, at least for a time. His other girlfriends had loved him too, but the passion, the intensity, had never been there, not for either partner.

As Donovan stared into the rushing water cascading in silver and white froth over the black rock, he realized the fault lay with him. He had chosen women who were safe. Who wouldn't challenge him emotionally, who were as withdrawn and reserved as he was when it came to matters of the heart. It was safer that way.

What he was experiencing now with Sam was dangerous, infinitely more so than with any past relationship. Not only because it was a homosexual experience but because love was involved. Real love—the kind that can destroy or save, depending on circumstance.

Donovan smiled as he thought of the lyrics to an old Police song about a castaway on an island—*"love can mend your life or love can break your heart"*. A heron distracted him, rising from a perch behind the waterfall. Curious, Donovan got up and moved to that side of the pool, peering at the ledge. There appeared to be a nest there. Leaning behind the stream of splashing water, he reached toward the nest, catching sight of the three white eggs nestled there.

Eggs! Donovan's mouth began to water as he recalled scrambled eggs and bacon, buttery rye toast on the side, a large glass of fresh orange juice and his Sunday paper. His stomach rumbled, the unsatisfying breakfast of their last energy bar and some ping-pong fruit barely remembered. Eggs! He peered into the nest with greedy eyes. He would surprise Sam with a feast!

Tentatively he reached out, balancing against the slippery rocks as his fingers touched the delicate shell of the nearest egg. It was warm to the touch. Gently he cradled it in his fingers, lifting it from the nest of twigs and feathers. He hesitated at the thought of the mother's return to a plundered nest, but at the same time he had to swallow to keep from choking on the anticipatory saliva welling in his mouth.

Wouldn't Sam be thrilled if he brought back eggs for them to eat! He would wake Sam by placing the cooked eggs, peeled and cut in half, by Sam's side as he slept. He imagined Sam waking up as the smell of the eggs wafted toward him. With his artist's eye he would note the white bowl cupping the vivid dark yellow, round as the sun at its center. Donovan started to gather the other two eggs when the flap of wings and an angry bird squawk sounded behind him.

Turning slowly so he wouldn't lose his perch, Sam saw the mother heron hovering nearby, her long neck graceful as a swan's, her beady eye fixed with reproach upon him. These were her babies. A meager meal for two men was this bird's life work. Was it fair of him to take them simply because he could? Donovan shook his head at these novel thoughts. Before the shipwreck, he knew he wouldn't have hesitated for a moment. Survival of the fittest, he would have intoned, never giving a thought to how his actions would affect those around him.

As the bird moved closer, delicately poised on a ledge only several yards from her nest, Donovan lightly dropped the egg back into the soft bed of feathers and leaves that lined the nest. With a sigh he climbed down from behind the waterfall, his eye fixed on the large bird. She didn't move until he was safely away. From the other side of the pool he stopped to watch as she finally flew toward her nest, settling herself with a ruffle of her feathers over her charges with what he imagined was a satisfied expression.

Donovan climbed down the rocks toward their encampment. Sam was still asleep beneath the tarp, now lying on his side. Donovan was struck for a moment at how thin he looked, his shoulder blades protruding between the muscles. His own pants bagged at his hips. Of course they were losing weight with their enforced diet. Yet they had enough food and the right kinds to survive.

He wanted to wake Sam, to share the story of the heron and her eggs but Sam seemed to be in a deep sleep. He'd put Sam through enough hell for one day, he thought sadly. He would let him sleep. Quietly Donovan moved to the tent, removing the signal mirror from a little flap on the inner wall where they stored it. He walked down to the shore, forcing himself to have hope, knowing it was all that kept them sane.

When he returned to the encampment Sam was sitting up, stretching his arms into the air with a satisfied sigh. "I slept like a rock!" he said, smiling. "Man, was I wiped out!"

Donovan sank down next to Sam. His body ached from exertion and fatigue. He realized he was bone-weary. His sleep the night before on the sand had not been restful and the long arduous swim had exhausted him. Sam gently pressed Donovan's shoulder. "Get some rest. It's been a hell of a day. I'll go collect kindling and open another coconut. We can fish later when you wake up."

"When we get off this island, I don't ever want to see another coconut, you hear me? No Almond Joy, no Mounds, no macaroon, no pina coladas!" Donovan exclaimed.

Sam laughed, pushing back his hair from his face with both hands. Resisting an impulse to reach up and pull him down into his arms, Donovan turned his head, closing his eyes, forcing himself for the moment to be content with only his dreams.

Donovan awoke, the edges of a half dream blurring. He smelled fish cooking over the fire. He sat up, surprised he'd slept most of the day away. It was late afternoon and the island was bathed in the golden glow it seemed to take on each day at this hour, before it darkened to shades of purple and lush deep blue. He scrambled out from beneath the tarp, his limbs stiff, his bladder full. After relieving himself, he walked over to where Sam was cooking fish in a pot of coconut milk.

Sam looked up. "You were out cold so I decided to let you sleep. I got a *really* huge one, but I let it go." He grinned and Donovan laughed. Between them Donovan was by far the better fisherman for whatever reason. He always caught more and bigger fish than Sam managed. As he sat crosslegged by the fire, Sam handed him a tin cup. "I made something new. It's coffee coconut milk. See what you think."

Donovan took the offered drink and sipped it. The combination was not at all to his taste but Sam looked so eager as he watched him sample it and so he said, "Hey, it's not half bad." Sam grinned and nodded. "It wasn't hard to make. I just made some coffee and then let it cool and mixed it into the milk. Voila! Maybe I can patent it when we get back."

"Yeah," Donovan said, "good luck with that." They both laughed and Sam turned his attention back to the fish. They ate in companionable silence and then walked together to the pool to rinse their pot and plates.

That evening they made a large bonfire on the shore. They used most of their wood supply but assured each other they would stockpile again the next day. Donovan brought out one of the blankets and they sat down near the fire, scanning the horizon and the sky for any sign of a ship or plane.

As the night deepened, the stars sparkled and twinkled light years away. "Just think," Sam said quietly, "those stars may already be dead—their light reaching us hundreds, even thousands of years later."

"So in a way we're looking back in time, I suppose," Donovan replied. "Do you ever wonder, if you'd refused your friend's offer for a free ticket, what you'd be doing now? If you could go back in time and do it again..."

Sam hugged his knees, rocking slightly as he stared out at the water dappled with light reflected from the stars. "I've thought about it, sure. But what if I had refused? I would never have met you, would I?" He looked at Donovan and smiled. "I don't really like to think of things in terms of 'what if'. It's a fruitless exercise. Things are what they are. And who knows, if I'd stayed back in Brooklyn, maybe I'd have been hit by a bus."

"I should have known you'd have the philosophical answer," Donovan retorted wryly.

"Well, okay then. How about you? I guess you wish you'd never set foot on that cruise ship!"

Donovan lay back against the blanket, locking his hands beneath his head. "The quick answer is no way should I have been on that ship! I also think about Marianne. If we hadn't broken up—if she'd been on board with me. Imagine losing someone—your wife or child—while you survived. I can't think of anything more horrible, can you?" As Sam shook his head in agreement, Donovan went on. "I think about my law practice, about the big case I was preparing for. I wonder who took it over. How are they getting on without me? At first I couldn't get it out of my head. Someone else was going to get the credit for all my hard work. But I realize now it doesn't matter. Whatever work I'd done, they can use it. Whatever preparation I still needed to do, there are fifty other attorneys ready and eager to take my place. I have no attachments—even if Marianne and I got back together at some point, I realize now we were never in love. Neither of us understood the concept, not really. My mother is dead. I'm not at all close with my father or my brothers. I don't have many friends. Work was my life and I've come to realize that life was a rather dull life—shades of gray, no real intensity of experience, no passion."

"So your quick answer doesn't necessarily equal your long answer."

Donovan laughed. "Yeah, I guess that's what I'm saying." He pressed his lips together, too shy to admit to the feelings he had for Sam, not entirely sure of them himself. Instead he said, "So what about you? I bet you miss your painting, your art."

"Yeah. I do miss it. I dream about it. I dream I'm in my new studio, the light slanting across the canvas, my paints ready. Sometimes I dream I'm painting here, an easel set up on the rocks by the waterfall. I would love to try to capture the rich colors of this paradise—the pale pink of the seashells, the vivid blacks and yellows of the birds' feathers, the amazing gold and silver of the dawn, the rich purples and blues of nightfall, the glorious splashing crimson and coral of sunset." He lapsed into silence, staring up at the heavens, lost in thought. He'd lost more than Donovan—who realized now with stark clarity he'd never really had much to lose.

"Did you have a—a lover? Someone you left behind?"

Sam, still looking at the stars, shook his head. "No. There was someone but I was pretty much done with him. He liked to see me when it suited him. At first I was very serious about us, but he never was, I realize now. He wanted to 'play the field'—those were his words. His name is Kevin. He's a cellist with the New York Philharmonic. When they went on tour last year, he wouldn't let me go with him. Said it would cramp his style. I knew he was all wrong for me. I think in retrospect it was more lust than love. He was the sexiest man I'd ever met and I've always been seduced by musicians."

"I can play the piano—badly," Donovan offered, grinning. Sam's hand touched Donovan's thigh. He lay still, afraid to move, afraid Sam would pull his hand away.

“You’ll have to show me someday,” Sam said softly. Donovan smiled at this nod to a future—a future off this island. He felt his cock harden as Sam’s hand moved slowly up his thigh toward his crotch.

As if by pre-design they rolled toward one another, their lips meeting as their hips met, cocks pressing against one another through denim. They forgot to watch for the light of a plane or ship seeking to rescue them. Locked in an embrace, lit by the rosy glow of the fire, for now they would rescue each other.

Chapter Six

The tension was nearly unbearable as Sam's tongue ran down the crevice where Donovan's thigh met his groin. Donovan lay naked on the blanket, his worn, frayed clothing tossed in a heap. Sam, shirtless though still in his jeans, knelt up over Donovan, backlit by the dying bonfire flickering in the gentle night breeze. Sam's tongue traced trails of desire beneath Donovan's balls, making him shiver with pleasure and anticipation. His cock was straining upward, its tip glistening with a drop of pre-cum.

Do it! he wanted to shout, nearly unable to bear the teasing a moment longer. So far Sam's lips had not touched Donovan's hard shaft, which lay fully erect against his belly. When they had rolled together, their lips meeting, Donovan had felt as if his heart would burst from his chest. His cock, the memory of Sam's mouth still imprinted upon it, sprang to attention as he drew Sam close.

As they kissed, they had pulled each other's T-shirts from their bodies. Sam's fingers had found and opened the metal button at the top of Donovan's jeans. He had slid the zipper past the rising erection, pulling the denim along with his underwear down Donovan's thighs. Donovan had stilled during this process, his eyes closing as if this might make him somehow less complicit in the act.

To his surprise, for the first time Donovan did not silently anguish over his desires, his sexuality, his orientation or his intentions. When Sam had him completely naked, Donovan opened his eyes, staring up into Sam's face. Sam was kneeling up over him, his blond hair glowing in the light of the fire. Sam's expression was intense, almost fierce, the lust smoldering in his dark eyes.

Donovan felt a soupcon of fear trickle through his loins—what was Sam going to expect of him? What did he expect of himself? Sam stroked his cheek at that moment, once again seeming privy to his secret thoughts. The gesture was tender, calming Donovan's anxiety. Again they embraced and Donovan let the moment take him, reveling in Sam's hands now moving over his chest, sliding down his sides, pulling him closer, cupping his bare ass as their cocks met.

"Donovan," Sam asked, his voice ragged with need. "Are you sure?"

Donovan, his mouth close to Sam's ear, whispered, "Yes."

Sam knelt up again, positioning himself over Donovan's thighs. Donovan closed his eyes, expecting to feel Sam's hot mouth on his cock, a repeat of the night before. Instead Sam began to kiss Donovan's flat belly, moving slowly upward toward his chest. Lightly he bit Donovan's nipples, the sensation erotic as they sprang to attention amidst his curling chest hair.

Donovan waited for the kisses to slide down again, for Sam's lips to wrap around his manhood and take him deep into his throat. He arched up, moaning in anticipation.

Sam lifted himself higher, settling lightly over Donovan's bare stomach, his legs on either side of him. He lifted Donovan's arms over his head. Donovan opened his eyes, confused, almost angry, he was being denied what he knew Sam wanted to give.

"Shh," Sam said, anticipating his protests. "For now you belong to me, Donovan. Let me guide you. Let me do with you as I will. Your job is to accept what I give at the pace I choose to give it, understand?" He spoke with a quiet authority Donovan felt compelled to obey. Donovan met his intense gaze, feeling something shift inside of him as he acknowledged on a gut level Sam's sensual control. Sam straddled Donovan's chest, hugging his sides with strong thighs as he leaned forward, gripping Donovan's wrists, held high over his head against the blanket. Sam bent forward, lightly kissing Donovan's lower lip. Donovan began to respond, to try to kiss him back but Sam pulled away, his brown eyes dancing, hooded with lust.

Still holding him pinned to the blanket, Sam kissed Donovan's underarm, moving his nose against the soft hair. Donovan shuddered, finding the intimate gesture curiously arousing. Sam slid his tongue down Donovan's bare side, his long hair trailing along Donovan's flesh.

Donovan could have resisted—he could have wrested his wrists from Sam's firm grip. He could have demanded Sam's more direct attentions. Instead he found himself sinking back into the blanket, desire pinning him to the sand, curiosity keeping him still.

Sam let him go as he slid lower, now straddling Donovan's thighs as he began to lick and tease Donovan's balls, still not yet touching his bobbing cock. Donovan's arms remained high above his head, his eyes closed, his heart beating a steady tattoo in his chest.

With a flick of his warm tongue, Sam grazed the head of Donovan's cock. Donovan moaned, nearly desperate with need. Sam sat back, his mouth curved in a smile that was almost cruel, his control over Donovan absolute for the moment. "What do you want?"

Donovan didn't reply, his eyes still closed, his cock lifting toward Sam in obvious invitation. He felt Sam's fingers curl around his balls as he cupped them in his palm. Applying light pressure, he repeated, "I said, what do you want, Donovan?"

Donovan opened his eyes, embarrassed. "I—I don't know what you mean."

The pressure tightened around his balls, an erotic discomfort that at once confused and excited Donovan. "Of course you do. I want you to ask me for it. Ask for what you want, sexy boy. I'm aching to give it to you."

Donovan took a deep breath, so aroused he could barely speak. "Suck it. Please. Do what you did last night. Do it again. *Do it.*" He emphasized his words as he half sat, reaching for Sam's head to force him down over his sex.

Sam laughed softly. "With pleasure," he whispered, allowing Donovan to push his head down. Pleasure exploded through Donovan's loins as lips and tongue at last met his heated, taut flesh. The sensation was even more delicious, more intense, than his

memories—played over and over since the night before. He groaned, arching up against Sam's willing mouth. Sam suckled and kissed, massaged and teased until Donovan felt his balls tighten, his back arch, his lips part in a long, low moan.

Just as he prepared to release his creamy seed into Sam's hot mouth, lips and tongue were withdrawn, hands falling away as Sam sat back, his eyes fixed on Donovan's face. "What?" Donovan managed to gasp. "Don't stop! I was so close. Please, don't stop!"

"What's your hurry?" Sam asked, his smile lazy, his cheeks flushed. "Going somewhere?" Donovan sighed as his impending orgasm receded, giving himself up to his lover as he lay back, his cock gleaming under the light of a rising moon. "That's right," Sam said, lightly stroking Donovan's aching cock. "Here's what I want you to do. Lie perfectly still. No matter what I do to you, don't move a muscle. Can you do that for me, Donovan?"

Donovan nodded, entranced. Never in his life had he been with someone who took control—who called the shots sexually. With women he'd always felt under pressure to perform, to please, to make the grade, to do the deed. He realized with the bit of his mind still able to focus that sex while pleasurable, had always been something of a chore, of a job to get through, hopefully without getting fired in the process.

With Sam he was asked nothing except to accept, to receive, to experience, the pleasure. As Sam's tongue began to trace circles around his cock, licking his balls as gentle fingers probed his nether entrance, Donovan lifted his hips, savoring the thrill of this forbidden moment.

"I said don't move," Sam admonished, fingers and tongue withdrawn. Donovan stilled, desperate for Sam's caress to continue. It took great self-control not to let his body pulse and shiver with each sensual, thrilling touch. Donovan trembled with the barely suppressed need to writhe and arch toward the offered pleasure. At last the hot mouth was lowered over his cock, the lips creating a light sensual suction as Sam took the shaft fully into his mouth and throat.

The sensation was indescribable as a wet finger slipped into his virgin asshole while Sam's hand cupped his balls, his lips and tongue weaving a sizzling spell over Donovan's cock. Despite Sam's whispered reminders to be still, Donovan could no longer obey. Shuddering up against his lover, his hands holding Sam's head firmly in place, Donovan gasped as his body convulsed in an orgasm that seemed to last for several minutes.

With a last cry Donovan stiffened and then relaxed, dropping Sam's head, his body utterly limp with expended pleasure. Dimly he was aware of Sam as he sidled up next to him, draping his arm over him.

Donovan tried to speak, to express his joy, his amazement, the intensity of the experience, but all he could do was mumble, unable to find the strength even to form words. Softly Sam stroked Donovan's hair from his face. "Shh, you don't have to speak. Just rest. Take as long as you like. I'm here. I have you in my arms."

Donovan lay flat on his back, his chest still rising and falling, his heart still thudding in his chest. Lying on his side, Sam draped himself over the larger man, resting his head on Donovan's masculine chest. Donovan could feel Sam's cock, hard as an iron bar through his jeans. Was he expecting Donovan to "service" him in kind? Surely not! Donovan wasn't gay...was he?

Sam's words came back to him... *I've never really liked to define myself by my sexual orientation. I don't really know what it means...* Were the words "gay" and "straight" just ways to pigeonhole people, to force a definition based on social mores rather than natural desires? What constituted love, sexual or otherwise, for another person?

Donovan had seen Sam naked and far from being repulsed, had been very attracted to his graceful strength and form. He'd enjoyed the loving expertise of Sam's homoerotic skill and wanted more. He liked Sam—he even loved Sam on any number of levels. Sam had saved his life not once but twice. Sam had shown him love, affection, tolerance and patience. Sam was handsome, sexy, generous and good-hearted. He was smart and artistic but truly modest.

They were bound together, two lost souls on a lost island. Donovan had to face the possibility they may never be found. It could be days, weeks, months, even years before anyone else discovered this forsaken bit of paradise. Meanwhile, this loving man lay with his head resting against Donovan's chest, asking nothing though his body made his desire clear.

Why shouldn't Donovan please him in kind? So what if he hadn't a clue what to do? There was always a first time for everything. He knew what he himself liked—wasn't it the right, the natural, thing to do to return the favor?

Donovan stroked Sam's head, moving his hand down over Sam's bare back. "Mmmm," Sam nuzzled against Donovan, lightly pressing his erection against Donovan's thigh.

Emboldened, Donovan said softly, "Will you take off your jeans and underwear?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Yes."

Sam wriggled next to him, pulling off his clothing and kicking it away. He snuggled again, his cock almost hurting Donovan it was so hard against his leg. Because Sam lay so still against him, asking nothing, demanding nothing, Donovan didn't feel the pressure he might have had Sam been more insistent. Donovan turned on to his side, gently rolling Sam to his back.

His mouth was dry, his pulse throbbing at his throat as he tried to swallow. Sam lay compliant on his back, his eyes closed, a peaceful smile on his face. His cock betrayed his calm demeanor, rigid at a forty-five-degree angle above his body. With a trembling hand Donovan reached out to touch it.

The skin was smooth and soft, a long vein pulsing along its side. Donovan licked his lips and swallowed again, aroused in spite himself, thrilled at what he was doing. He stared at Sam's cock, thick and hard above the soft dark blond pubic hair curling

around his balls. Donovan stroked the shaft, moving his hand down to touch the balls, so delicate beneath his fingers.

Sam sighed but otherwise remained still, his eyes closed, the little smile still playing at his lips. Quietly Donovan knelt up beside his lover, bending his head close to Sam's cock as he fondled it with both hands. Sam moaned, his lips parting as Donovan stroked his shaft. Donovan felt the thrill of power as Sam's cock hardened still farther in his grip. Slowly he began to move his hand up and down, pumping Sam's cock the way he pumped his own when he masturbated.

Sam's breathing became labored and Donovan grinned with delight as Sam's hips rose to meet his hand. He caressed Sam's balls with his other hand, his own cock rising with interest despite his recent, very intense orgasm. "Oh Donovan. Yes," Sam said, his voice husky.

Feeling his heart begin to hammer, slowly Donovan dared to lower his face until his mouth was level with the head of Sam's cock. Lightly he licked around the head, the spongy flesh yielding against his tongue. *Jesus, I can't believe I'm doing this*, a part of him thought while another part whispered back, *What took you so long?*

With no idea if he was doing it right, Donovan tried to lower his mouth over Sam's large, hard penis. He had barely taken more than the head as he wondered how people did this! How had Sam taken his cock so far back Donovan had felt the head of his shaft hit the back of Sam's throat? How would he ever learn to do that?

Taking a deep breath, he lowered his head, letting Sam's cock move back into his mouth. As the tip touched his soft palette, he began to gag and pulled back, startled and embarrassed.

"Take it slow," he heard Sam whisper. "You're doing fine. Better than fine. Just relax and take your time." Donovan tried to obey, slowly lowering his head to again take the large cock into his mouth. When he thought about what he was doing, he began to gag, jerking back with a spluttering cough.

"God, I'm sorry. I can't do this!" He sat back on his haunches feeling stupid, inept and very strange. He wanted to please Sam, to serve him in the sexy way in which he had been served but he felt himself tensing. He hadn't realized it would be so difficult. Maybe a person was born with the ability to give head. Maybe that's what made someone gay or straight.

"It's okay," Sam said, lifting himself on one elbow, his cock still hard as steel. "Really. I know how it is—you start to worry about tensing up and then you tense up because you're worrying about it." He grinned. "Man, you should have seen me my first time. I couldn't get more than the head past my lips without freaking out. I had no idea what I was doing. I squeezed the poor guy's balls so hard I think I made him sterile!"

Donovan laughed weakly, finding it hard to believe Sam had once been a novice like himself. It heartened him, though he still felt bad at having failed to give Sam the pleasure he himself had received.

"I guess I need some lessons," Donovan said, lying down next to Sam. The fire had all but gone out but neither man seemed to notice. The moon was nearly full and had risen high in the sky, bathing the beach in a silvery glow.

"What we've already shared has been wonderful," Sam answered. "I ask nothing more. I know you've had a lot to process these past days. We'll go as slow as you need. We'll even stop here if you wish. I leave it to you." He closed his eyes, the small peaceful smile again at his lips. Donovan felt a surge of affection for this quiet, unusual man. Unlike the men he knew, including, he had to admit ruefully, himself, Sam didn't seem fixated on his own "needs". He seemed genuinely content to focus on his lover's pleasure without regard for his own.

Donovan found himself suddenly longing to give Sam the pleasure he didn't yet have the skill or courage to give him with his mouth. He sat up again, leaning over Sam, who remained still, his eyes closed. Tentatively he reached out, stroking Sam's slightly flagging cock with his fingers. He felt a jolt of power course through him as Sam's cock hardened instantly at his touch. Slowly he began to move his hand up and down as he had before, more confident in his abilities as he pulled against the flesh, his other hand stroking Sam's balls.

Sam responded with a series of sighs and moans, his hips lifting slightly as he angled himself toward Donovan. Donovan licked his palm and fingers and again gripped Sam's cock, easing the friction with his saliva. Sam moaned and whispered, "Yes, oh god, yes. So good, so perfect." Donovan increased the tempo, his eyes fixed on the hard shaft, now a blur as his hand pumped, his own cock straining to erection with each gasp from Sam's lips.

Donovan felt Sam's body stiffen the instant before he ejaculated in a series of spasmodic jerks, a cry punctuating each spurt. Sam's semen lay pearly white on his tan belly under the silvery moon. Donovan stared at it, fascinated. Hesitantly he reached out to touch it, soft and wet beneath his fingers. Sam opened his eyes, watching Donovan. Slowly Donovan lifted his finger to his lips and licked it. It tasted musky but not bitter. It reminded him of oysters.

"You sure you haven't done that before?" Sam asked, his mouth widening in a satiated grin.

Donovan couldn't help the pride that swelled over him as he gazed down at Sam. "Well sure, about a million times to myself," he laughed.

Sam laughed too, pulling himself into a sitting position, crossing his legs, completely at ease with his nudity. Idly he wiped what remained of the ejaculate on his stomach, rubbing his fingers in the sand afterward. He was looking at their bonfire, nearly out though the embers stilled glowed red, making the moist air above them shimmer with heat. "We didn't do too good a job on our lookout tonight. I guess we were kind of distracted." He smiled shyly toward Donovan, who smiled back.

"Well, we made the blaze. That's about all we could do in the dark, I guess," Donovan answered. "The main thing is to have hope, not to give up." He knew the

irony of his saying these words, given only that morning he'd decided to end it all by drifting off to sea. Surely he wouldn't really have succumbed to his despair that easily? He honestly couldn't say. More likely he would have drifted so far out even if he'd wanted to swim back to shore, he'd have been unable to do so, his stamina sapped by the relentless tug of the sea. If Sam hadn't had the sense to realize what he'd done or the presence of mind to rescue him, Donovan might be drifting still or lifeless in the arms of the ocean.

A sea breeze sent a sudden chill through the air. As if on cue they both pulled on their clothing, though neither one made a move toward their encampment.

Donovan looked up at the moon so white against the black sky. If it weren't for Sam, he might have never seen the moon again, never felt the tang of the salty air in his face, never experienced the amazing thing that was happening between them. "Sam, thank you for today."

"Thank *you*. It was heaven on earth."

"No, no, I don't mean that. Well, I do, but not just that. I mean, thank you for everything. For calling me back to myself when I was near despair. For saving me, for accepting me, for understanding my weaknesses and fears. It was so selfish of me to think of ending my life, of leaving you here alone."

"Donovan, the important thing is you *are* still here with me. And together we will make what life we can until they find us." He squeezed Donovan's hand. "And they will find us, Donovan. I promise you, they *will*."

Donovan nodded, a strange thought suddenly wending its way into his mind. *Not too soon. Don't let them find us too soon.*

Sam lay awake long after Donovan had fallen asleep beside him beneath the tarp. The heat of their kisses, the intense pleasure of drawing Donovan's orgasm from him, the unexpected intensity of his own release at Donovan's inexperienced but eager hands...it had all been wonderful, yet Sam found himself unsettled, anxious.

Though he hadn't shared his fears with Donovan, he was in fact afraid. Sam knew he couldn't say for sure his feelings for Donovan weren't primarily affected by their situation—the last two people in the world, at least in their world, at least for now. His natural sexual and emotional inclination was toward men, and the bond they shared as castaways was enough to tilt his feelings toward love, he supposed.

But what about Donovan? He looked over at the sleeping man, a man who had never before even entertained a homosexual thought, much less acted on any impulse. Sam was nearly certain his affections while genuine, were almost entirely a result of their situation. When they were rescued, and Sam still believed it was only a matter of time, what would Donovan decide then? Would the sweet tenderness offered tonight be reframed in his mind? Would the woman possibly waiting to welcome him home as the dramatic news of their rescue traveled before them make him discount any love that might be now blossoming between them?

Sam sighed, rolling quietly from the blanket and getting to his feet in the darkness. The moon had set, the sun soon to rise. He walked down to the shore in bare feet, the powdery sand cool and soft beneath his feet. He sat near the water, wrapping his arms around his knees. "What am I doing?" he said aloud. This sort of anxious introspection was not Sam's style, at least it didn't used to be. He took life as it came, accepting it on its terms. He'd always admired the poem, an abbreviated version of which had been usurped by twelve-step groups, and actually written by some German fellow whose name escaped him at the moment but whose words lingered in his head —

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change
The courage to change the things I can
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

Forcing the tumult in his mind to still, Sam closed his eyes, focusing on the words. He knew he was falling in love with Donovan—knew he had been since the first moment he'd seen him. Whatever peculiar fate had brought them together would continue on its path, despite Sam's desire to control things.

He'd never dared dream things would come this far. Obviously Donovan wasn't as straight as he had always thought, and while that worked to Sam's favor now, he knew once they returned to civilization things might well look and feel quite different for them both. "Grant me the serenity..." Sam whispered to the sea. Yes. He would take life one day at a time, nurturing Donovan's fledgling desires, trying to keep his own boyish feelings of elation in check, prepare himself for Donovan's natural hesitation or withdrawal. Now, at this moment, he was happy and it was enough.

Quietly he slipped back beneath the tarp, lying down beside Donovan. He drifted into sleep at last, his hand resting lightly on Donovan's chest. Beneath his fingers was the steady beat of another man's heart.

Chapter Seven

"You did the right thing," Sam agreed as he peered down into the heron's nest. The three little eggs remained intact, their mother for the moment gone though probably not too far. For an instant Sam imagined the hot gooey yolk of an egg served over easy, sopped up with fresh crusty bread. His mouth watered and his shrunken belly gurgled. He forced the image away.

"I wonder when they'll hatch." He touched one with his finger, tracing the curve of the warm oval with wonderment. It was so delicate—he knew if he pressed too hard, the shell would crack, spilling out the precious contents, ending a little bird's chance at life.

Was what Donovan and he had between them as delicate, as precious? Could he control the rising exuberance he felt each time he recalled Donovan's hot kiss or the salty-sweet taste of his rock-hard cock? He wanted to run down the beach screaming, "I love Donovan! I love Donovan McNair!" It was crazy—Sam was not a demonstrative person, it simply wasn't his nature. He'd been in love before, but he'd never felt this boyish eager desire to shout it to the world. The world...this was their entire world now. Only the fish and the birds would hear of his new love. And Donovan.

They hadn't talked this morning about last night, but there was definitely something different between them. Fingers lingered as items were passed. Glances were hot, ripe with sensual possibility. Several times Sam caught himself about to say, "I love you," but each time he stopped himself. He didn't want to press the shell, to crack it, to ruin things by moving too fast with his new little chick...

He looked over at Donovan, now sprawled out beneath the shade of a coconut tree on the blanket they'd brought with them from the encampment. They were both tired from collecting kindling and fishing, and even Donovan's luck hadn't been very good that morning—it had taken several hours just to get enough fish for two meals. They still had more wood to collect, having used most of their stash for the bonfire the night before. Amazing how much time it took each day just to provide basic food and shelter for themselves. He would never again take for granted the ease of a modern lifestyle if they got back. *When* they got back, he admonished himself.

Squatting on the rock, he stuck his hands into the rushing waterfall, letting them fill with water. He drank what he'd managed to cup, repeated the process and then splashed some water on his face. The sky was overcast though it was still warm. So far they'd been incredibly lucky regarding the weather, with only light showers during the late afternoon, except for the one deluge. But was the rainy season coming? Would they be able to continue to provide themselves with adequate shelter?

He climbed down to sit next to Donovan and leaned back against the narrow tree trunk. As he brought up his knees a hole in the denim at his right knee tore even more, so his entire knee was exposed. He surveyed his jeans—full of little tears, frayed at the hems and faded nearly to white from the salt and sun. Donovan's had fared little better. Their T-shirts, his once red, Donovan's once white, were pale pink and gray respectively, and covered with stains, despite their efforts to wash them from time to time.

Donovan opened his eyes at the sound of denim ripping. Shaking his head, he smiled up at Sam who said, "Like a pillow?" He stretched out his legs, patting his thigh. Donovan scooted over, resting his head on Sam's offered leg. Sam stroked his cheek, tucking his dark hair behind an ear. Donovan closed his eyes and smiled, passively accepting Sam's touch. Sam traced the hollow beneath his cheekbone and moved his fingers down over Donovan's mouth. Donovan's lips parted, his dark pink tongue licking the tip of Sam's finger. He caught the finger lightly with his teeth and then sucked it, pulling it into his mouth. He let it go, opening his eyes. "I want to learn," he said, his very blue eyes glittering.

"To learn?" Sam asked, his pulse quickening. He knew what Donovan was asking. He wanted to hear him say it.

"Yes," Donovan nodded, rolling toward Sam so his face was level with Sam's crotch, his nose nearly touching his fly.

Sam stroked Donovan's head and said softly. "What is it you want to learn?"

Speaking in nearly a whisper, his face suffused with a charming blush, Donovan said, "To kiss you. To suck your cock like you do mine. Teach me."

Donovan sat up as Sam stood, opening his jeans and sliding out of them, along with his underwear. He didn't need a second invitation. Donovan stared with wide eyes at Sam's manhood, rising under his gaze. He licked his lips. Sam felt lust coursing through his blood. He resisted his impulse to impale Donovan's mouth with his cock. Instead he said, "The key is to relax. You don't need to focus on mechanics. Your focus should be on pleasing your partner. The rest will simply flow."

"Easy for you to say," Donovan grinned, touching his own cock now straining in his jeans.

"Maybe. But I've doing it a lot longer than you." Sam laughed. "All things worth attaining take work. Now take off those jeans. I want to see you naked." Sam felt power surge through him like a drug as Donovan obeyed, stripping bare, his strong tan body beautiful, his cock lengthening and engorging even as his cheeks turned red beneath the tan.

"I'll lie down. It's easier that way for you to practice." He lay himself down on one side of the blanket while Donovan crouched next to him. Donovan was biting his lip. "Hey," Sam said softly. "Let's just have fun. I don't require an 'expert', I assure you. I just want *you*."

Donovan smiled, albeit nervously. Gingerly he touched Sam's cock, hard just from being near his naked lover. "It's not made of china," Sam encouraged, touching Donovan's muscular thigh. "Just do what you want." Donovan's hand wrapped around the base of Sam's shaft, the pressure delicious. Sam moaned and closed his eyes. He felt Donovan's hot mouth cup the head, his tongue swirling in a circle around it.

Donovan lowered his head, taking about half the shaft into his mouth. He bobbed up and down a few times, taking it deeper. Spluttering and gagging, he reared back. "Shit," he said, "I can't do it."

"Sure you can. Try again. Take your time." Donovan obeyed, again gripping the shaft at its base as he took the head into his mouth. As he moved down over it, he gagged again and withdrew, his expression pained.

"Fuck," he said. "Now it's even worse."

"Hey," Sam said gently, moving into a sitting position. "It's 'cause you're focused on it now. Your gag reflex is heightened because you're worried about performing instead of just having fun, giving pleasure." Sam paused a moment, watching his worried lover. "I have an idea. It's an exercise and you have to obey me exactly for it to work, okay?"

"I don't know," Donovan said hesitantly. "Could be I just don't have the knack for this, you know. Not being born gay and all. I'm missing the gay gene, you know, the one that makes a man able to give head." He grinned and Sam laughed, relieved to see he was maintaining his sense of humor.

"Trust me," Sam said.

Donovan sobered a moment, answering, "I do. With my life."

Sam stood and leaned against the tree trunk. "Kneel up in front of me," he said. As Donovan moved into position, he continued. "Here's your first assignment. I want you to leave your arms at your sides. Now take just the head into your mouth. Don't move forward, don't try to take any more in. Just the head."

Donovan obeyed, his lips wrapping around the head of Sam's cock. Sam resisted the returning impulse to grab the back of Donovan's head and thrust himself down his throat. Instead he said, "Play with your cock. Take it in your hand and keep it hard." He watched as Donovan took his thick, long cock, stroking it. For a moment Sam was mesmerized by the sexy action but he forced himself to concentrate.

As Donovan aroused himself, he started to move forward on Sam's shaft with his mouth as Sam had anticipated he would. "No. Don't move. You stay exactly there until I tell you, got it?" Donovan stilled, his eyes opening to look up at Sam, his lips still wrapped around the head of Sam's cock. Sam felt a surge of tenderness overlay the hot lust. Swallowing, he said, "Okay, move forward just a little. Just an inch or so." Donovan obeyed, his hand still on his cock.

"Good. Keep touching yourself. Otherwise don't move." Donovan moaned quietly against Sam's cock, his hand moving sensually up and down his own shaft. Gently Sam touched the back of his head, applying the lightest pressure. "Okay, a little more. Just a

little." As Donovan slid down along Sam's cock, he stopped him. "No, no. Not too far. Pull back a bit. Yes. That's it. Stay like that."

Donovan's eyes were closed, his chest beginning to heave as he masturbated himself. Again Sam applied light pressure to the back of his head, indicating Donovan should move forward. He did so, gliding forward until Sam felt the head of his cock touch the soft pallet at the back of Donovan's mouth. Instead of gagging, Donovan was moaning, his hand flying over his cock in a blur as he took Sam even farther into his throat, the muscles completely relaxed, the gag reflex tricked into inaction.

Slowly Sam began to move his pelvis, pressing forward and pulling back so his cock moved inside Donovan's willing mouth. He put his hands on either side of Donovan's head, guiding himself in and out. Donovan's tongue began to dance along his cock, his lips gripping sweetly. Sam closed his eyes, forgetting about the lesson, forgetting he was the teacher and Donovan the pupil.

He felt Donovan's hand come up to cup his balls, squeezing lightly as his mouth continued to move up and down Sam's shaft, the pressure almost unendurably exquisite. "Oh god, oh god," Sam heard himself gasp. Grabbing the back of Donovan's head, he thrust himself against him, unable to restrain himself. He felt himself coming in hot spurts down Donovan's throat. Donovan coughed and sputtered, pulling back at last. Sam let him go, his heart pounding, his legs nearly buckling beneath him.

Donovan sat back, wiping his mouth, his own cock still bobbing fully erect below his belly. "Guess I got the gay gene after all," he said, grinning widely.

"Guess so," Sam answered, enjoying the look of immense pride on Donovan's face. "Now make yourself come for me, sexy man."

* * * * *

Five more days passed. They were nearing three weeks stranded on the island. The strenuous monotony of finding and collecting food and wood filled much of their time. The rest was spent resting and talking about their lives. They focused on the past, their childhoods, their first loves, their memories of school, the pain of growing up. Neither spoke of the future any longer. Neither talked of when the rescuers would come.

For Donovan, the unspoken fear and the exhausting business of survival were made livable by the thrill of their continued sexual exploration. He had been delighted with Sam's "exercise" and now had no trouble relaxing his throat and taking Sam's sizable offering with ease. Like an eager puppy, he wanted to have sex with Sam at every possible opportunity. He didn't know if the intensity of the experience was due to its forbidden nature or because they were stranded and alone, and he didn't care. He had come to crave the constant pleasure of orgasm as well as the powerful aphrodisiac of pleasing his partner. He knew Sam was in love with him. He had strong feelings toward Sam as well, though he was afraid to define them, not sure how these feelings defined *him*.

Instead he focused on the pleasure and the thrill of their play. He found he wanted more. He wanted to experience all there was to offer at the hands of his sexy male lover. One afternoon as he sat on the beach, watching Sam use the signal mirror as they scanned the horizon more from habit than expectation, Donovan found the courage to say, "I want more, Sam. I want to try something new."

Sam lowered his arm, turning toward Donovan. "Like adding coffee grounds to the fish and boiling it in seawater? I don't think it would be very tasty, to tell you the truth."

"Ha-ha. You know what I mean. With you. Sexually."

"Something new..." Sam said slowly. "What might that be, young man?" His voice was teasing.

"Come on. You know. You know what I mean. I want to..." Donovan paused, not sure how to put it without coming right out and saying it. It was funny, he could suck cock with the best of them now, but sometimes he found actually putting words to what they were doing embarrassing.

"Go on, Donovan. I want to hear you say it."

Sam liked to do that. To make him articulate what he wanted. Donovan understood it was a power thing—an alpha male thing. Though Donovan didn't consider himself at all submissive, it turned him on, he had to admit. He liked the fact Sam was his alpha male. Not that Sam lorded it over him or dominated him in a way that made him uncomfortable or made him feel feminized—it wasn't like that. It was more a surrender. A sensual surrender to a very sexy man who knew what he wanted and knew how to take it in a way that thrilled Donovan. Nothing he'd ever experienced with a woman could compare.

"I want you to—to," he lowered his voice, barely audible as he finished the sentence, "fuck me."

"Ah." Sam nodded, his eyes flashing, the tip of his tongue appearing between his lips. "You're sure that's what you want? You don't want to fuck me?"

"Sam," Donovan covered his face with his hand, feeling like a teenager, barely able to catch his breath. "I think I want that too. I don't know. I'm scared but I want it. I just know I want more. I want to experience all of it."

He felt Sam touch his shoulder, the fingers giving him a gentle squeeze. "Don't be scared. Remember, it's me. I would never harm you. Never hurt you. I'm sorry I was teasing you, playing tough guy. I should have been more sensitive. I would love to go to the next level with you, Donovan. Anal sex can be very intense and deeply pleasurable. But you have to be careful—it's not like sex with a woman, whose body is designed to accept a man's cock."

"Oh," Donovan said nervously, "Maybe we shouldn't..."

Sam laughed. "No, no. You're not going to get out of it that easily." Playfully he punched Donovan's shoulder. Donovan grinned weakly. He *did* want this! But at the same time he was afraid. He would trust Sam. He knew he could trust him to be gentle.

His cock began to harden as Sam continued. "Men have been having sex for centuries without the benefit of personal lubricant, I assure you. And since we don't have condoms to hassle with, it's much less of an issue."

Donovan nodded, wondering for a moment if it was safe to have unprotected anal sex with a gay man. He laughed to himself at the absurdity of worrying about such a thing in the face of their situation. Plus during their long talks, Sam had talked about safe sex and its importance. He was probably less of a risk than Donovan, who, being a typical macho male, had categorically refused to use condoms back in his prior life.

"How about let's take a dip in the pool first?" Sam suggested.

Donovan agreed and together they moved toward the waterfall, stopping along the way to grab a blanket. They shucked their clothing by the pool, neither in the least self-conscious now as they waded into the cool water. Each washed his body, taking care to be especially clean for this latest adventure. Donovan's gut was tight with nervous anticipation, his cock tingling at the thought of what they were about to do.

Their bodies drying in the warm air, they lay down side by side on the blanket under the swaying coconut trees, the sunlight filtering through the fronds and dappling their nude bodies. They leaned toward one another for a kiss. As it always seemed to happen when their lips met, Donovan forgot to be nervous or afraid. He let the headiness overtake his senses as Sam's lips found his, as their tongues entwined and their bodies moved together, a press of muscle and skin.

Sam rotated himself after a time, so his mouth was poised at Donovan's cock, his own cock hard and straight near Donovan's lips. Donovan sighed against Sam's cock as he felt Sam's lips enfold his member. He did the same to Sam, reveling in his musky clean scent as he took Sam's hardness eagerly into his mouth. They suckled and kissed one another until each was moaning and gasping against the other. Sam pulled away, his voice husky and low as he said, "Get on your hands and knees. Go on."

Donovan obeyed, forcing himself back from the edge of climax. His heart began to flutter as he rested his forehead on the blanket, aware Sam, crouched behind him, was looking at his splayed ass cheeks and the puckered hole at its cleft. He was glad he could hide his face. Yet despite his embarrassment, his cock remained rigid, his balls tight with yearning.

"Just relax," Sam crooned softly, leaning up over Donovan's back. He felt Sam's hands reaching around for his cock and balls, catching them in a gentle caress. Donovan groaned with pleasure as Sam massaged his cock, again feeling the rise of a near climax. "Hold on," Sam laughed softly. "Not yet." The hands were withdrawn and he felt Sam positioning himself behind him.

He jumped when he felt the head of Sam's cock touching his asshole. "Shh," Sam said softly. "Don't worry. This won't happen until you're ready. If that isn't today, that's okay too. We're just experimenting now. Taking our time with our pleasure." Again the head of his cock touched Donovan's ass and this time he didn't pull away. Sam pressed very gently, a nudge against the tight little hole before again withdrawing.

Donovan felt something harder and smaller touching him and realized it was Sam's finger, wet with his saliva, delicately probing the nether entrance.

Donovan tensed despite himself and the finger was also withdrawn. He felt Sam's hands smoothing over his ass and lower back and he relaxed a little. The hands felt good on his body. Sam reached down between his legs, cupping his swaying balls as his other hand again moved toward Donovan's little hole. Gently he probed again, whispering, "Stay still. You know you want this. You know you need this." Donovan sighed. It was true. He did want this. He did need it. He longed for it. Feeling daring, he pressed back against the hard finger, which slipped into his ass as Donovan shuddered.

Slowly the finger rotated inside of him, as gentle as a kiss. It was again withdrawn and again Donovan felt the touch of Sam's spongy cock head at his entrance. It was wet with saliva as he pressed again while spreading Donovan's cheeks with his hands. "Relax. You're doing beautifully, you sexy boy. You are so hot right now, you have no idea." Sam's voice was edged with lust, soft with yearning.

Donovan willed himself to relax. Sam pressed harder, the head entering Donovan's ass. "Ouch!" Donovan yelled, trying to pull away, but Sam held him fast by the hips.

"Don't pull away. You've done it! That was the hard part! Just stay still while your body adjusts. Play with your cock. But don't come. You hear me? Don't come 'til I say so."

Donovan nodded, taking his erection in one hand as he balanced himself with his forehead. He began to rub himself as Sam moved forward, his strong fingers gripping Donovan's hip as he eased himself into Donovan's ass. Donovan grunted as he felt the thick member pressing into him, filling him. After the initial pain of entrance, now he only felt full. On top of that he felt deeply sensual, barely able to believe another man had his cock buried inside of him, and not just any man but Sam, the sexiest man he'd ever encountered.

Sam began to move slowly, finally pressing so deep his balls touched Donovan's ass and then withdrawing almost to the point of pulling out. "Jesus, you're tight," Sam moaned, his voice dripping with lust. As he began to move faster, Donovan had to struggle to accommodate the huge cock thrusting inside of him. Some of the thrusts were too hard, actually painful and he felt himself tense, which only made the situation worse.

Then he felt Sam's hands pushing his from his cock, as one hand wrapped firmly around it while the other cupped his balls. Donovan groaned with pleasure as all trace of tension finally evaporated, taking the pain with it. Expertly Sam milked Donovan's cock while he pummeled his ass. Sam was breathing hard behind him and Donovan knew he was near to orgasm. Sam's fingers flew over Donovan's cock as he moved faster and faster inside of him. With one savage thrust Sam spent himself, jerking hard against Donovan as he orgasmed, calling Donovan's name as he did so. Still Sam continued to stroke Donovan's cock. "Come for me," Sam said urgently, and Donovan's body obeyed, his own jism shooting over the blanket as they fell together in a tangled, sweating heap.

Donovan felt Sam's heart thumping against his back. "I love you," Sam whispered.

That night they sat side by side, the bonfire blazing at their backs, their eyes trained on the horizon. Donovan had felt a curious sort of pride all day at his newly deflowered status. He recalled his first time with a woman, a girl really. He'd felt proud then too, though with far less justification. They had both been seventeen and each utterly inexperienced. They'd been dating, if one really dated in high school, for their entire senior year and Donovan had felt it was high time they "consummated their love" as he used to say back then.

He had pressed his girlfriend Mandy, offering veiled threats of finding someone more serious if she didn't capitulate. He was ashamed now at his bullying tactics, though they were couched in terms of love and driven by hormonal lust quite beyond his control at the time. The experience had been long but unsatisfying. It took over an hour to penetrate as Mandy kept screaming it hurt each time he tried to enter her. He had licked her to orgasm prior to their attempt, and as one orgasm was all she wanted or required, he'd inadvertently stacked the deck against himself from the beginning.

Finally out of sheer determination, he had forced his way inside of her while she whined and whimpered beneath him. Even with the annoying condom dulling the sensation, the feeling had been heavenly—her warm, velvet tunnel enveloping him as he moved carefully inside of her. He'd kissed her face, whispering how much he loved her as she lay rigid with her eyes closed. After a few thrusts he'd ejaculated into the condom and she'd jerked away so suddenly his cock fell out of her pussy with the condom still left inside.

"Oh Jesus, Mary, Mother of God!" the suddenly religious Mandy had wailed when she realized what had happened. "Now you've got me pregnant, you bastard, Donovan McNair!" Whatever crumb of romance there had remained to that moment evaporated under the heat of her wrath. They broke up shortly after. Thank God, he hadn't gotten her with child. After that, he only dated women who used birth control.

"It's funny," Sam said, after Donovan related his woeful tale. "We must know more about each other than just about anyone on earth. We pretty much wouldn't have to talk for the next ten years and we'd still know more about each other than most friends."

"Yeah," Donovan agreed with a chuckle. "Though if you tell anyone about Mandy I'll have to clock you." He looked over at Sam, waiting for his retort. Instead Sam leapt to his feet.

"Look! Look at that! See the lights! Look!" Donovan stood as well, straining to see what Sam was pointing toward.

"It looks like a ship of some kind. It's moving too. Slowly, but I think it's headed this way!" Donovan felt dizzy as he peered out over the dark blue ocean, fixated on the twinkling lights of the ship. They watched in silence for several minutes. There was no question about it—it was headed their way.

Perhaps an hour passed, both men staring out toward the ship, willing it on its path toward them. They had poured all their collected wood onto the fire, fanning it with coconut fronds to build as large a blaze as they could muster. Neither dared voice his hope. As Sam, using the signal mirror, tried to catch the light of the fire, Donovan waved his half of the bandana, beckoning the ship.

Finally it was close enough to see some detail under the light of the moon. It appeared to be a freighter of some kind, a cargo ship painted gunmetal gray. It was huge, too large to come ashore, but if they could catch someone's attention, surely they had a smaller boat they could send out for rescue. Donovan felt hope surging up in him.

As the ship came even closer, moving parallel to the island though still a good distance out to sea, both men began to shout, calling out, "We're here! We're here! Help! Over here!" Even as they cried out, both men knew their puny voices couldn't possibly be carrying over the water, yet they couldn't seem to help themselves. They jumped and waved, calling until they were hoarse.

Inexorably the freighter moved by, slowly passing by the tiny island until at last it had moved out of sight. Both men were silent, stunned and exhausted. Donovan felt his knees buckling and let himself collapse to the sand. Sam had plopped down a few yards away, his head hidden in his hands.

Bitterness rose in Donovan as he watched Sam's shoulders heave with silent sobs. "Fucking assholes!" he cried into the air, his voice hoarse and weak from shouting. It was worse to see his beloved friend crying than anything that had happened so far. Sam was his rock. Sam was the one who kept them sane. If he was falling apart, what was left?

Dragging himself over to the sobbing man, Donovan wrapped his arms around Sam's shoulders. "Don't cry. Please don't cry. It'll be okay. Maybe they'll come back. They'll send someone. You'll see." He spoke in a whisper, hoping his words conveyed a conviction he did not feel. Dropping his head to Sam's shoulder, he held him tight.

When the sun burst up over the horizon a few hours later, the two men still sat huddled together, staring silently out at the vast loneliness of the sea.

Chapter Eight

The new day promised another relentlessly blue sky. Neither Sam nor Donovan had much of an appetite but they coaxed each other to eat a few pieces of ping-pong fruit, washing it down with water. They'd finally dragged themselves back to the encampment, each lying beneath the tarp in an approximation of sleep until the sun was high enough to give up the charade.

Neither felt inclined to forage for wood or to fish, though they had nothing left but coconuts and fruit, and only a few twigs for tonight's fire. Donovan came to stand beside Sam, who was sitting crosslegged, aimlessly dragging a twig over the ground. "Let's go do the signal mirror. Come on. We can't give up."

"You go. I'll be along in a while." Donovan gave him a long look then shrugged and moved away down the sand toward the shore.

Sam felt numb. He knew he was letting Donovan down but somehow he couldn't seem to rally himself. Whatever tenuous grip he'd kept on his belief they would be rescued seemed to have slipped away as the freighter moved inexorably past them. He realized no ship could get any closer—the water near the island must be too shallow. And smaller crafts would have no reason to be out this far. Unless some kind of low-cruising plane flew overhead and looked down at precisely the right moment, they might end up spending months or even years stranded and alone.

You're not alone. The words drifted unbidden into his mind. That was true at least—he wasn't all alone. If he had been, he knew he would have succumbed by now to terror and despair, despondency sapping him of the will to keep up the fight to survive.

He was not alone. He had Donovan. Sam smiled sadly as he gazed down toward the shore where the tall dark-haired man in tattered clothing was waving his arm in a slow even arc, the sun glinting off the mirror at intervals. Ironical Donovan was the one taking charge when up 'til now Sam had been the cheerleader for the two of them.

Maybe that's how it was with real partners, he thought. When one couldn't quite handle what life dealt, the other stepped in to take up the slack. *Partners*. Did he dare use the term with its implied permanence? When he'd said he loved Donovan, Donovan hadn't answered in kind. Not that Sam required him to voice it, but there it was. Perhaps he had only turned to Sam as a diversion while he waited to return to his real life. Sam, like a lovesick fool, had fallen head over heels for a man who was just using him to pass the time.

"Stop it," he said aloud, forcing himself to get up. Brushing the back of his jeans, he realized how they hung off him, slipping almost off his hips they were so loose. Even the ring on his finger was getting loose. He took it off and slipped it over his thumb.

"Things are what they are. No point in making yourself crazy, Jamison." He walked down toward Donovan, to tell him he would collect some wood for later.

So they'd missed a chance. There would be others surely.

* * * * *

Warrant Officer Tom Francis glanced at his watch—fourteen hundred hours. He checked the coordinates again on the flight consol and peered through his binoculars out the window of the Coast Guard helicopter dispatched from San Juan. "I think I see it." As the other three crew members peered down, he confirmed, "Yep, these are the coordinates radioed in by the Greek cargo vessel. That's gotta be it. Pilot, let's make a landing and see who's hiding on that bit of uncharted paradise."

"The ship said they were pretty sure there was a bonfire on the shore. They caught a few flashes of light as well, perhaps a signal mirror. But they couldn't move close enough to confirm—the water wasn't deep enough and they were on a schedule," Ensign Brady said.

"So they called the United States Coast Guard to the rescue. *Semper Paratus*."

A few minutes later the pilot executed a perfect landing on the bit of sandy beach, the wind from the helicopter's propellers swaying the tall slender coconut trees. While the pilot remained aboard, the other three men climbed out to survey the site, rescue gear in tow. Ensign Brady walked over to what appeared to be a burned down bonfire. He kicked at the charred wood with his foot. "This is recent. There's someone here all right."

* * * * *

"What the hell is that?" Donovan and Sam stopped dead in their tracks as the loudest sound probably ever heard on the tiny island erupted over the beach.

As they listened, Donovan was the first to register the sound. "A chopper. It's a chopper. They've found us. Sam, they've come for us!"

Dropping the hard-won fish, the two men scrambled over the rock and crashed their way through the brush. They stopped short as they saw the three robust-looking men in Coast Guard uniforms standing near the remains of last night's bonfire.

Sam felt as if the air had been sucked from his lungs. He stood stunned, forgetting to breathe. Donovan fell slowly to his knees, whispering, "Thank god, thank god. Thank you, god."

* * * * *

"I'm okay, Mom. Yeah, I'm okay. Really. I love you too, Mom. Mom, stop crying. Please." Sam smiled at the receiver, his heart overflowing to hear his mother's voice. He

was lying in a hospital bed in San Juan where Donovan and he had been flown for observation.

"Remarkable," the doctor kept saying as he examined them each in turn. "Other than sunburn and a bit of malnutrition you're both in excellent health. You need to put a little meat on your bones but a few weeks of good old American fast food should put you to rights." He laughed, winking at them, his several chins jiggling with mirth.

Donovan lay in the hospital bed nearby. Sam wanted to climb in with him and put his arms around him, but of course he did not. Donovan hadn't said much since the rescue, letting Sam do most of the talking as they were quizzed and questioned by the Coast Guard crew. He seemed to be dazed by the attention, which was certainly understandable. He'd taken a phone call from his father, but he'd mumbled into the phone at the same time a nurse was taking Sam's vital signs so Sam hadn't heard much of the conversation.

They'd been separated while each was taken for x-rays and blood work. Each had taken a long, hot shower. The feeling of hot water with plenty of soap and shampoo had been incredible. Sam would have stayed in the shower for hours but he knew Donovan was waiting his turn. They'd even been visited by a barber who gave each of them a trim. Sam kept his hair longish, the streaked blond hair tucked behind his ears. Donovan got a short cut suitable for the corporate world.

"You're celebrities," a dark pretty nurse with black hair had explained when Sam marveled aloud at their royal treatment. "Not every day we get castaways from a deserted island!"

"We'll keep you overnight for observation," the doctor said. "What you really need is rest right now. That and a few square meals. You are really quite lucky. You obviously picked the right island to get marooned on, with fresh water and all. Too bad you couldn't have ended up with some pretty girls to keep you company, huh?" He grinned conspiratorially.

Sam tried to smile. He glanced again at Donovan, whose face was turned to the wall. Probably he was asleep. Sam yawned with an exaggerated gesture and said, "Thanks so much for your attention and expertise, Doctor. I think I'll take your advice and get some rest."

The doctor looked at his watch and nodded. "I'll check back this evening after rounds. The nurse will bring you some dinner in a while."

Sam nodded his thanks. At the door the doctor turned back. "Say, you got a wife or sweetheart coming to collect you?"

Sam shook his head. Donovan didn't respond.

"Donovan, you asleep?" It was well after midnight, though the bright light shining in from the hallway illuminated the room. The nurse had left the door ajar after the last annoying check of vital signs.

"No."

"This is weird, right? We've been gone less than a month but it feels like a lifetime."

"Yeah. I know what you mean."

What about us? Sam was longing to ask, both eager and afraid to hear what Donovan might say. So far they'd had little chance to interact alone. After weeks of complete privacy, they'd been surrounded by people—the Coast Guards, the reporters waiting to accost them when they'd landed and been taken to the hospital, the nurses, doctors and technicians milling around them, poking, prodding and questioning them.

Now they were finally alone and Sam found himself afraid to say what was on his mind, what was in his heart. To his surprise it was Donovan who said, "What happens to us now, Sam?"

"I don't know," Sam answered softly. "What do you want to happen?"

Donovan's voice cracked. "I don't know, I just don't know. What we had was amazing on the island. But now—back in the real world. I have a career, a rather high-profile career actually as an attorney in Manhattan. I have a girlfriend—well, had a girlfriend. You know, everyone knows me a certain way. I don't know how you would fit in my life, I mean, I'm really sorry but—"

"Stop." Sam's voice came out harsher than he'd intended. He couldn't bear to hear another word. Trying to keep the tide of emotion threatening to wash him away at bay, he took a deep breath, forcing his voice to sound light. "Listen, Donovan. We both need time to decompress—to rediscover our lives, to pick up the pieces. Things between you and me will work out how they're supposed to."

"Yeah, yeah, that's right," Donovan said, the relief palpable in his voice. Sam placed a hand on his chest as if that would stop his heart from breaking.

* * * * *

Sam and Donovan were sitting in the back of a small private plane being flown to New York courtesy of Ramon Jimenez, a Puerto Rican millionaire who'd been intrigued by the front-page news of the dramatic rescue of survivors of the Caribbean cruise shipwreck the month before. He sat next to the pilot, turning back toward them, demanding every detail of their lives while marooned on the island. They tried to comply, aware this was the price they were expected to pay for his incredible generosity.

When they'd been released from the hospital after an overnight stay, each dressed in the khaki pants, button-down shirts and ill-fitting jackets provided by the hospital, they'd been assailed by a new mob of reporters and camera crews, eager to get the scoop on their dramatic story. Amidst flashing bulbs and microphones shoved into their faces, they'd tried to answer the questions hurled at them, both overwhelmed at the attention.

Finally they'd made their way to the bank where Donovan had arranged to have funds wired. It was a little difficult retrieving the money at first, since neither man had

any identification. Donovan was able to contact the jubilant staff at his office, who faxed a copy of his driver's license on file with the personnel department as well as his bank account information. As they had explained who they were to the bank manager, an eavesdropping customer holding a copy of that morning's *San Juan Journal* had offered the services of his private plane to speed them home to their loving families, as he put it.

When the plane touched down several hours later in Teterborough, New Jersey, Senor Jimenez warmly shook both their hands. He reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a leather case. From it he extracted two business cards. "I own a publishing company, among other things. When you're ready to write your book, drop me a line."

Sam and Donovan glanced at one another with a small smile. Sam wondered what Senor Jimenez would think if he knew half of what really went on in their private paradise. The pilot opened the door for them, lowering the folding stairs. After profusely thanking their host, the two men climbed down. Donovan had made arrangements to be met by his boss. There was a car parked nearby and a man and woman emerged, both waving wildly as they began running toward the little plane.

As the couple approached, on an impulse Sam slipped the gold ring from his thumb and grabbed Donovan's hand. "Here. To remember me by."

Donovan took the ring, slipping it into his pocket as the woman called out, "Donovan! Oh Donovan! You're alive!" A moment later the woman had hurled herself into Donovan's arms. "Oh my baby, my baby, you look half-starved! I thought you were dead, oh I thought you were lost from me forever!" She burst into dramatic tears as Donovan held her, awkwardly stroking her hair. After a few moments, she stepped back, daubing her eyes with a tissue she'd apparently had at the ready.

It was Donovan's boss' turn to grab him in a bear hug. He let him go only to slap him heartily on the back. "McNair, good to see you, guy! I was about ready to have your desk emptied. You weren't bringing in many billable hours." The man guffawed, clearly amused with his joke. He was tall and portly, with curling silver hair and the large-veined nose of a heavy drinker.

"Jack, Marianne, this is Sam. Sam Jamison." Turning to Sam, Donovan said, "Jack Forman is a partner at my firm, and of course you know about Marianne."

Marianne beamed at this tribute as she turned her attention to Sam. "I was supposed to be on that cruise too, you know!" She flipped her long dark hair with a dramatic toss of her head. "It might have been me on that island with Donovan, if I'd gone on the cruise." She turned back to Donovan, her expression tender. "But fate has brought us back together, darling." She put her hand proprietarily on Donovan's arm as Sam stood silently by.

Forman harrumphed a little and said, "Well, let's not keep these two boys standing here. They must be exhausted. Donovan, I had your secretary go to your place and air it out, pending your arrival. We'll just take you straight home. You don't need to worry

about work 'til you're good and rested." He turned toward Sam. "How about you, son? Where can we give you a lift? You live in Manhattan?"

"Brooklyn. And no thanks. I—I've got a ride."

Donovan turned toward him. "Who—" he started to ask but Sam cut him off.

"My friend Tim is coming for me. In fact he might be waiting in the terminal." Turning to Donovan, he said, "546 Waterfront Road, Brooklyn. Jamison. I'm in the book. Look me up sometime, okay?"

"Oh Sam," Donovan's eyes filled suddenly with tears and he moved to embrace Sam. Sam, aware this would send him over the edge, stepped back, holding out his hand instead. Donovan, his expression embarrassed, shook the offered hand. He reached into his pocket and pulled out some money. "Take this. You'll need it to get home." Donovan knew no one was waiting in the terminal. Sam wanted to refuse, to throw it at him, to say he didn't want his damn money—he wanted him! But instead he accepted the bills, nodding woodenly as he mumbled his thanks.

"I'll call you, Sam," Donovan called back as the three of them walked toward their car.

* * * * *

"Sam Jamison, as I live and breathe! I saw the papers! You've been on the news, you're even more famous now than when you were dead!" Tim Fletcher, the gallery owner who had given him the infamous cruise ticket, was the only person Sam knew with a car who might be inclined to drive out to Jersey to collect him. Plus he'd left his apartment keys with Tim so he could get his mail.

In retrospect, Sam was glad of the money Donovan had pressed on him as he hadn't a dime on him. He was able to buy a sandwich in the terminal and make use of the pay phone. Tim wasn't listed but luckily he was at his Chelsea gallery when Sam tried the number. Tim had rambled on about fate and never forgiving himself for sending Sam into the jaws of death, as he kept dramatically repeating.

"Of course I'll come get you. I'll close the gallery! I'll be there in an hour. Oh and Sam, wait'll you see the money that's coming to you! Your work was already selling well, as you know. But man, when it got publicized you were in a shipwreck! Possibly dead! Missing at sea! Wow, the sales just went through the fucking roof! I sold every piece, even after I'd doubled and tripled the prices on what I had left. You're a hit, Jamison. And now returned from a Caribbean tropical island! Shit, you could smear finger paints on a paper towel and I'd be able to sell it."

Sam didn't ask just who had publicized his disappearance. Whatever else he was, Tim was a businessman to the core. "Listen, Tim, can we catch up on all this once you get here? I'd love to get home."

"Of course, god, I'm sorry! I'm just so thrilled to hear from you. Get a magazine or something. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Sam sat down in a chair facing the window that looked out onto the runway. He took a bite of the prepackaged roast beef sandwich with wilted lettuce and mayonnaise. Despite the utter misery hanging over him like a wet fog, it was the most delicious thing he'd ever tasted in his life. He washed it down with cola and willed himself to think of nothing – nothing at all.

* * * * *

Sitting next to Marianne in the back of Jack Forman's Mercedes, Donovan reached into his pocket. He felt Sam's ring and on an impulse slipped it onto his finger. He kept his hand in his pocket as Marianne nestled close to him, dropping her head on his shoulder. "You're so thin, Donovan! And so tan! I barely recognized you, except for those blue, blue eyes." She gazed up at him through thick lashes. She really was quite lovely – Donovan had forgotten how lovely. "I'm sorry I broke up with you, Donny," she said in a little girl voice. "I hope you forgive me."

Donovan winced. He couldn't stand that nickname and she knew it – or should have known it. She was beautiful, yes, but Donovan found as he looked at her he couldn't quite recall what had drawn them together. Was it really only physical? Had he been that shallow? What did Sam think of her suddenly appearing to meet them?

Sam. As Marianne prattled on about the office and what he'd missed while he was gone, with Forman interrupting every few sentences or so to add his two cents, Donovan barely heard them. The look in Sam's eyes when he'd watched Marianne crying in his arms had nearly sent Donovan over the edge. For a fraction of a second he'd imagined himself pushing her away and crying out, "No! Sam is the one I love. Yes, I'm in love with a man!"

Of course reason had prevailed. He was a Manhattan attorney, for god's sake. He had clients – he was being groomed for a partnership. He and Marianne had been together a long time – though admittedly the relationship had been less than smooth, and if Donovan were honest, less than loving, especially the last few months before their latest break up.

But that didn't mean Donovan was gay! He'd never even thought about other men before in a sexual context, at least not in any kind of serious way. What had happened between Sam and him was a result of their bizarre situation – stranded together, frightened and alone, on the edge of despair. In fact it was only when Donovan began to lose hope they would be found that he was able or willing to subject himself to Sam's homosexual overtures.

Liar. Donovan felt ashamed for even thinking of Sam in terms of making "homosexual overtures". He could posture all he liked to his friends and colleagues, but Donovan knew in his heart their involvement had been mutual. Sam had not pressed Donovan in any way. In fact Donovan had made the first moves, kissing Sam and asking, no, *begging*, for more.

So why, since the moment they'd seen the Coast Guards standing on their beach, had Donovan felt something shut down inside himself? He knew he still loved Sam but it was as if he'd consigned him to a sealed-off compartment in his heart. Now that he was back in the real world, what they'd shared on the island seemed to take on a dreamy, surreal quality.

Probably Sam felt the same way, Donovan tried to console himself. Donovan wasn't his type, he'd admitted as much. Sam preferred musicians and artists—guys like himself who barely had a pot to piss in, whose lives were dictated by their art and passion, instead of billable hours and office politics and the race to be the one with the most power and possessions at the end of the day. Shit, he hadn't even let Donovan give him a hug, after all they'd been through together! No, a handshake was all Sam could muster, that and his casual "call me sometime".

546 Waterfront Road, Brooklyn... Donovan hadn't realized he'd memorized the address. He hadn't given Sam his address but Sam probably remembered the name of his law firm. He would be easy to track down, if Sam were so inclined. *Maybe I will call him,* Donovan thought. *Not right away—I'm sure he needs time to get settled and all. He might even regret having told me his address. He's probably riding home right now with Tim, laughing about the straight guy he "corrupted" on the island.* Again Donovan felt ashamed of his unkind thoughts. Sam was not like that. Sam was loyal to his bones, Donovan was certain. He would never make fun of Donovan, never betray Donovan's ridiculous first attempts to suck his cock or his nervous anxiety as Sam had tried to penetrate him.

Donovan felt the ring on his finger with his thumb. Why had Sam given it to him? Donovan sighed. Jack was holding forth now about Donovan's big case—the one they'd had to take to trial without him. He tried to listen, he tried to care but somehow his thoughts kept drifting back to the island. He wondered if the heron's eggs had hatched yet. In a way, he wished he could have stayed at least to see that. Sam would have liked that—to watch the little chicks pecking their way out of their shells, concentrating all their tiny energies on breaking free of their constraints so they could fly...

Not like me. I'm climbing back in the shell of my own accord, hiding here in the safety of this familiar life.

"Donovan. Donovan, are you listening to a word I've said?"

Donovan realized his boss had been speaking for some time without him hearing a thing. "What? Oh I'm sorry. I was distracted for a moment. Excuse me. Just repeat the last thing?"

"I said, Dougherty's been handling the case and he's been trying, but between you and me, I think he's in a little over his head. His prep work is good but he doesn't have your style in the courtroom. He doesn't engage the jury the way you do. I'm really glad to have you back, McNair."

"Thank you, sir. It's good to be back."

Chapter Nine

Light played across the room, buttery yellows melting in through the east windows, tinged with the gold and pink of a new dawn. Sam looked around the old loft, well pleased. It was lucky he'd put three months' rent down before he'd gone on the cruise—the landlord might have re-leased the place in his absence. Instead he'd actually fixed the broken window panes as promised as well as painting the walls a bright fresh white.

There was enough space here, including a small bathroom, for Sam to actually move in completely. He would give up his cramped, expensive apartment, get a little refrigerator and move his microwave and futon bed into the corner of the spacious loft. He could design a screen to separate his living from his studio space. No point in paying two rents! Except...

Sam stood watching dust motes dance in the play of light, his mind drifting. Except he'd told Donovan the address of his old apartment. If he tried to look him up and Sam had moved...

Though Sam had gone through the motions with Tim, he'd had a hard time focusing as Tim had rambled on. He stuck his hand into the pocket of his favorite pair of black jeans, glad he hadn't taken them on the cruise. In the pocket was a five-figure check Sam still couldn't believe was made out to him. Tim had handed him the check once they'd arrived at Sam's apartment, plus a detailed accounting of each piece sold, its price and Tim's percentage. He recalled the conversation with the gallery owner as they'd driven from New Jersey to Brooklyn.

"Sam, you're an overnight success."

"Yeah, after ten years of barely being able to buy peanut butter and tuna at the end of the week, I guess that's a good thing," Sam had answered wryly.

"You know," Tim said, "I've got some connections with the New York publishing houses. I know a few editors who would be crazy to get their hands on the rights to your book."

"My book?" Images of an art book filled with beautiful glossy reproductions of his paintings slid into Sam's mind. Surely it was too soon?

"Yeah, you know, of the whole shipwreck thing. You could make a fortune. Then there's the lawsuit against the cruise line of course. Didn't I read the guy you were stranded with is an attorney? He's probably already got the suit filed." Tim laughed, his eyes glittering with avarice.

"File a lawsuit for what? It was no one's fault. There was no injustice done. We just caught a bad break. We're risking our lives now on this highway. Are you going to sue the state of New Jersey if you get into a car wreck?"

He had gazed out at the traffic whizzing by. The air in the car was stuffy, almost suffocating. He rolled down the window and took a breath of the carbon monoxide-filled air, suddenly longing for the salty sea breeze of their island.

Closing the window and turning to Tim, he had added, "People keep mentioning a book. To tell you the truth, I haven't thought much about it. Maybe someday I might write something down. I'm not really ready for something like that at this point." The thought of exposing Donovan and himself to the callous scrutiny of jaded readers was more than he could stomach. Even leaving out the details of their involvement, he found himself curiously reluctant to share his story.

Something in his voice must have cautioned Tim because at once his tone had become more subdued. "Hey—sorry, man. I imagine right now you want to put the whole horrible affair behind you." He put his hand over Sam's, leaving it there until Sam had gently pulled his away, tucking an errant tendril of hair behind his ear.

"I'm here for you, Sam. In *any* way you need." Tim had stared meaningfully into Sam's eyes until Sam had turned away, embarrassed at the raw desire he saw there.

Still, Tim had really been very kind, offering to shop for him, to take him to dinner, even to run a bath for him. It was only a little after seven o'clock when they'd arrived in Brooklyn. After a stop at a convenience store where Sam picked up a few essentials, he found himself in front of his apartment building. It looked older and more rundown than he'd remembered—the grays and faded reds of the cracking brick a stark contrast to the vibrant, tropical colors of the island he'd left behind.

Sam felt an overwhelming need to be alone. Turning to Tim, trying to keep the urgency out of his voice, he said, "I really can't thank you enough, Tim, for keeping the gallery show going, for collecting my mail while I was gone, for coming out to get me, for everything." He paused, trying to find a way to be gracious without leaving room for negotiation. "I just need a little time right now. I'd like to take a long hot shower and sleep in my own bed. How about I call you in the morning and we'll have breakfast? I'll come by the gallery and we can catch up then, okay?"

He had taken a long shower, standing under the spray until the hot water ran out. Then he'd climbed into bed with a glass of wine and a book. After reading the same page three times, he snapped the book closed and poured another glass of wine. He couldn't seem to get comfortable—it was as if he were visiting the set of a movie. Though he recognized the things around him—his futon couch that served as a bed, the fine cherry-wood bureau that had belonged to his grandmother, the old card table covered with tubes of paint, thinner and brushes set near the easel by the single window, a canvas with a half-finished painting waiting to be revisited—somehow the room seemed foreign to him.

The space felt so cramped, the room close and dank after nearly a month of sleeping in the open air, the stars twinkling in a black velvet sky, the sound of the waves lulling him to sleep, the warmth of the man lying next to him...

Sam felt tears leaking from the corners of his eyes as he lay back against the pillows. Waves of sorrow seemed to engulf him, catching him unaware as he began to sob, shoulders heaving, his cries anguished. He had cried as if his heart were breaking, until there was nothing left but hiccups. Wiping his face and blowing his nose, he reached again for the wine, glad no one was there to witness his pathetic display.

Sam drank a third glass of wine. The alcohol made him woozy, finally dropping a net of sleep over him. He slept fitfully, awakening for good at about three o'clock, his sheets twisted around his legs, his head stuffed with dreams so real it took several moments to realize where he was and that Donovan was not beside him.

Throwing on his clothes, he pushed his fingers through his hair and splashed cold water on his face. Grabbing an apple he'd bought the night before, he lifted the keys that hung on the hook by the door.

Now Sam stood in his loft as dawn's rosy fingers crept over the sills. The space was peaceful and airy. He closed his eyes, lifting his face toward the eastern sky. Perhaps he would paint today.

* * * * *

Donovan moaned with pleasure despite himself. He was sprawled out on the queen-size bed in his spacious bedroom. Marianne, her bare, shapely ass sticking up as she crouched between his legs, his cock in her mouth, was doing her best to please him. He knew even as he let her precede him into his apartment she would be planning to stay, eager to make love to the man she had dumped the month before. He was interesting now with his temporary celebrity status. He was intriguing, at least for the time being.

Feeling as if he were playing a part in a poorly written play, he sat, trying to remember his lines while she bustled around his well-equipped kitchen, pulling steaks from the freezer, opening a bottle of red wine and bringing him a glass with a flourish. She'd begun to prattle on about the headlines in the paper—*Prominent Manhattan Attorney and Local Artist Rescued from Robinson Crusoe-like Existence*. She'd shown him the paper, promising to have the page laminated "so we can show the grandkids".

Robinson Crusoe. Sam had used those words when he'd touched Donovan's scruffy cheek, his finger creating electric currents of desire along Donovan's face... Donovan took a long drink of the wine Marianne had handed him. He'd barely spoken since they'd been reunited but she didn't seem to notice or mind. She apparently had enough to say for the two of them. Maybe she was just giving him space—time to sort out his thoughts. Donovan grinned inwardly, knowing that wasn't the case. Marianne didn't know how to give someone space—she would waste no time insinuating her way back into every corner of Donovan's life, if he let her.

He also knew after a while—a week, a month, maybe longer this time, but it would definitely come—she would begin to express her dissatisfaction with Donovan’s reserved nature. She would begin to complain he didn’t say he loved her enough, he didn’t want to have sex with her often enough or when he did, it was all about *him*. Finally the moment would come when the fateful words would be uttered as they had been so many times before—“You’re just shut down emotionally. Unable to connect on a meaningful level with a woman...”

Perhaps she was right. Perhaps a woman was the last thing he needed.

Yet her wet lips closing over his shaft allowed him for at least a moment to shut off his thoughts, to simply *feel* her cool fingers gripping his cock, her tongue licking along the underside like a kitten lapping cream. When he opened his eyes, she was gazing up at him, self-consciously coy, as if she were licking a lollipop for his entertainment.

“Donovan, I’ve missed you so,” she said in a breathy voice as she bobbed over his cock. She rubbed and sucked him a while longer, her movements becoming a little jerky and rushed, as if she wished he would hurry up and come. He found himself thrown out of the moment of pleasure he’d managed to achieve, wondering why he’d allowed himself to be used in this way when what he really wanted was to be alone with his thoughts.

Though the experience on the island had changed him in so many ways, here he was falling into the old pattern of behavior, passively going with the flow by permitting Marianne to suck his cock, aware this was the preamble to intercourse. She would climb over him, straddling his hips as she lowered herself seductively over him, swishing her hair over his chest as she began her primal dance.

“Donny, what’s the matter, honey? Don’cha like what I’m doing?” Donovan glanced down to see his cock softening in her hands, her eyes reproachful though she smiled seductively.

“I think I’m just tired really. It’s not about—”

“I know, it’s not about me. It never is, is it, darling?” Donovan took a breath, ready to explain, to defend, to deny, but Marianne’s mouth had slid back down over his cock. This time she took him in all the way. He could feel the soft heat at the back of her throat as she enveloped him. His cock responded, recalling Sam’s kiss, the way he could take the entire length slowly into his mouth, lowering himself inch by tantalizing inch until his nose was at Donovan’s belly, his hands gripping Donovan’s hips, his eyes closed in ecstasy as if there were nowhere he’d rather be...

Donovan sighed and Marianne, apparently encouraged, began to lift and lower herself over him with callisthenic vigor. His eyes still closed, Donovan recalled Sam’s strong sexy body, his cock hard as steel, covered in satiny soft skin. As Marianne’s lips slid up Donovan’s belly, lingering at his chest as she showered it with butterfly kisses, Donovan recalled Sam’s lips, warm and insistent, his tongue pressing past Donovan’s lips, claiming his mouth as he claimed his body.

Donovan felt Marianne rising over him, sliding her hot, wet sheath over his cock as she gave a low, guttural groan of pleasure. It felt good—it felt better than good. This was where he was supposed to be, damn it! If he were really gay, his cock would have wilted at her touch, wouldn't it? Admittedly he had flagged a bit, but he *was* tired. And he'd bounced back, hadn't he? He wouldn't be able to maintain an erection if his interests had shifted to men.

Donovan, with an attorney's memory for detail, recalled Sam's own comments in that regard... *I appreciate the curve of a breast, the feminine gasp of pleasure at the moment of orgasm, the sweet heat of enveloping warmth around my cock. But my connection, my emotional, even my spiritual connection, seems to be with men.*

Had this become true for Donovan? Could a month really change a lifetime of behavior and acceptance? No, he just needed time to readjust, to recall his place in this world, to get over the one person who had penetrated the reserve he'd spent a lifetime cultivating...

Turning his attentions fully on the woman thrusting and gyrating over him, Donovan pulled her down, kissing her hard as he rolled her over, draping his body over hers, asserting his dominance at last as she shivered and sighed beneath him, crying his name.

* * * * *

The phone rang for the fifth time since Sam had returned from the loft early that morning. He'd lain down for a while and had fallen into a light sleep, filled with swirling dreams so real he could smell the salty air, feel the powdery cool sand beneath his feet, taste the musky sweetness of his lover... Sam lay in the arms of a half dream, unable to awaken...

Donovan lay floating on his back in the island pool, the waterfall rushing and tumbling behind him. He was naked and very still, his limbs spread out on the water, his eyes closed as the sun kissed his cheeks. Sam swam toward him, expecting him to stand, to shake his dark shiny hair and smile toward Sam. But Donovan didn't move. Even his chest seemed still – no telltale rise and fall of his breath.

As Sam came close, he saw Donovan's thick, long cock rise perpendicular to the water, glistening as it beckoned him, silently demanding its due. Sam bent forward, taking the cock into his mouth, massaging its girth with his lips and tongue before letting it slide back into his throat.

Donovan remained still, only his cock pulsing and throbbing under Sam's skilled and loving attention. Sam knew something was wrong but also knew he had to keep suckling and kissing Donovan's cock or something terrible would happen. Gently he cupped the floating balls, wrapping his other hand around the base of Donovan's shaft. Lifting his head a moment, Sam looked into Donovan's face. He hadn't moved, his eyes still closed, his expression blank.

Sam saw his skin was pale, nearly white, not the robust tan it had been just a moment before. Panicked, he called, "Donovan! Wake up! Donovan, what's going on?" He felt Donovan's cock begin to wilt beneath his fingers. Desperately he bent his head, somehow

knowing Donovan's life depended on it. He kissed and licked the now flaccid member, using all his considerable skill to bring it to erection. Instead the cock seemed to grow even smaller, now no bigger than a finger, as pale and cold as the rest of him.

"Donovan!" Sam screamed, panic surging through him as he pulled at his lover, trying to make him stand, trying to wake him. Donovan's eyes slowly opened. He looked at Sam without recognition, without expression. He didn't seem to hear Sam's urgent entreaties. Instead he focused just behind Sam, toward the waterfall.

With dread in his heart, Sam turned slowly around. A tall, slender woman stood behind the veil of the fall. She was naked, her long dark hair swinging behind her. Donovan began to swim toward her, indifferent or unaware of Sam's pleading. Sam followed, unable to help himself. As they approached the woman, Sam saw her face. Her mouth was covered with raw egg speckled with blood. Goopy yellow yolk dripped down her chin, her eyes wild with triumph. The mournful caw of a bird rang through the air like a death knell...

Sam awoke in a sweat, his heart pounding, his jaw clenched. It took several moments to register the sound of the telephone ringing. Since he'd come home, the phone had been ringing off the hook with requests from newspapers and news shows for an exclusive interview. He told each caller he wasn't ready to talk yet. This call was from his mother and so he answered, glad of her voice to pull him away from the grip of the terrifying nightmare.

After his mother's call came a call from a fellow artist he'd once roomed with then his landlord and a cousin he hadn't seen in ten years. Each called to see how the "castaway" was faring. While he'd appreciated the concern, each time the phone rang he couldn't stop his heart from skipping a beat or help the thought that leaped into his head...*Donovan!*

He'd taken another long shower, savoring the hot water he'd been denied for the past three weeks. Just as he was toweling off, the phone rang yet again. "Jesus, who is it now?" he asked aloud. Wrapping the towel around his middle, he hurried to the phone. The caller ID read *Kevin Saddler*. Well, well, look who was crawling out of the woodwork.

Kevin, his sometime lover, the debonair, gorgeous cellist who'd given him the brush-off when Sam had seemed to be getting "too serious". Sam considered letting his answering machine get it but decided to pick up, curiosity winning out.

"Hello. Sam Jamison."

"Sam! Sam, it's Kevin. My god, it's so good to hear your voice! I thought you were—I mean, we all thought, when we read about the cruise liner going down and the people lost at sea..."

"Well, I'm alive and well and living in Brooklyn," Sam laughed.

"I can't tell you how thrilled I was when George Martin gave me a call with the news! He's a friend of your gallery guy, what's his name, Tim something?"

"Tim Fletcher. Small world, I guess."

"Sure is. Anyway, listen, I'm just dying to see you. I've got rehearsal this afternoon. It should be over at five or six at the latest. You don't mind waiting a bit for me outside the hall, do you?" How many hours had Sam sat "waiting a bit" for Kevin? He smiled to himself at Kevin's natural assumption things were just the same as always. "I was thinking maybe we could get together, like in the old days, hmm? I'll drive you back to my place. I've got a pork tenderloin marinating in the fridge. We could put it on the grill while I heat up the Jacuzzi. Of course, no bathing suits allowed." He laughed, the low seductive laugh that used to send tremors of desire through Sam's loins. "What do you say, Sam? I've got the whole night available just for you."

Kevin was independently wealthy courtesy of family inheritance and owned a very nice house in Larchmont. Sam well remembered their leisurely, sexy times in Kevin's heated tub. How he had admired Kevin's long, lean body, the water sliding off his graceful form. Kevin would hoist himself up on the side of the tub, allowing Sam to worship his gorgeous cock and balls. Eventually Kevin would return the favor, leaving Sam weak with pleasure. They would retire to Kevin's huge master bedroom for more serious play.

As Sam listened to Kevin's low sexy voice on the phone, he kept waiting for the thrill to kick in. Once upon a time he would have leaped at the chance for an entire night with Kevin, but now he felt curiously empty at the prospect. Kevin had hurt him it was true, back when Sam had imagined himself in love with him. He knew now what he'd felt for Kevin hadn't been love but simply a lust fueled by Kevin's constant teasing and rejection. He had become the object of desire always held just out of Sam's reach. The game involved Kevin's making the offer, Sam moving forward to accept it and Kevin moving back. Sam now found he didn't want to play.

"Well?" Kevin said, his voice pitched a little higher, his tone impatient.

"I'm sorry, Kevin. I'm not really up for an all-nighter at this point. Maybe we could meet for lunch sometime."

There was a silence while Kevin evidently absorbed this apparently unexpected state of affairs. Kevin Saddler was *not* a man used to rejection. Slowly he said, "Well, okay. How about today then? Let's meet for lunch today before rehearsal. My treat. We'll go to the Backyard Bistro, your favorite, right? Meet me at twelve-thirty. I'm dying to hear about your adventures. You must tell me all about this Donald McCarthy fellow you were stranded with. I want every detail. *Every* detail, do you understand?"

"Donovan McNair," Sam corrected softly, rolling the words on his tongue. He realized as Kevin was speaking how much he did want to talk to someone about Donovan. Not that he would share the intimate details with someone like Kevin, but to get to say his name out loud, to describe him and have someone else bear witness to his existence—it might ease his heart a little.

"Are we agreed on lunch then?" Kevin asked.

"All right, Kevin. I'll see you at twelve-thirty."

Sam felt a surge in his cock when he saw Kevin sitting back in his chair, his posture relaxed but still somehow elegant, his dark hooded eyes staring off into the middle distance. He was dressed in a very white shirt with his charcoal gray jacket slung casually over the back of the chair. His dark hair was slicked back, curling behind his ears. Before Kevin saw him, Sam had a chance to admire the chiseled lines of his face—the olive skin stretched over fine, high cheek bones and a prominent nose, hooked at the end over a lush mobile mouth. Kevin glanced at his watch, his lips pursing. Sam realized he was probably late. He didn't even own a watch and often lost track of time, especially when he was painting. He hurried into the restaurant, smiling as Kevin turned toward him, half standing as he waved.

They embraced briefly. As they sat on opposite sides of the small table Kevin looked at Sam for a long moment. "Sam. You've changed. There's something different about you."

"Well, I've been on a rather unusual vacation."

Kevin laughed. "Well, there's that." He peered at him again. "It's something in your eyes. You look..." He paused and finally said, "Wise. But a kind of wisdom born of sadness, of suffering." Sam didn't answer, not sure what to say. Softly Kevin said, "What happened to you on that island, Sam? What's making you so sad now?"

Whatever he had expected, Sam hadn't expected Kevin's gentle and insightful question. He was so used to Kevin's focus—and his own—being on *Kevin* it hadn't occurred to him Kevin might want to know anything about Sam's experience except for the entertainment value it might afford him.

Kevin put his hand lightly over Sam's. The gesture wasn't sexual but tender. Tears pooled in Sam's eyes, spilling down his cheeks, to his utter surprise. "I'm sorry," he said, "I had no idea I was about to cry."

"It's all right. I can only imagine what you've been through."

"No, no. It isn't that. It's—it's what I lost."

"Tell me."

The waiter chose that precise moment to appear, regaling the two men with details of the daily specials and bouncing eagerly on the balls of his feet, his pen poised over his pad as he waited for their choices. Their orders placed, Kevin turned back to Sam. He had managed to control the odd outpouring of emotion that had caught him by surprise. Kevin was looking expectantly at him. Sam knew he was waiting to hear of the ordeal of the ship's sinking—the explosion in the engine room, the fire, the chaos, his being left behind and finding a raft, his finding the man drifting along in his bright orange lifejacket, the man who would end up changing his life...

He started to tell Kevin what he knew he expected to hear—how they managed to survive, how they learned to find food, to catch fish, to make and keep a fire going, how they never gave up hope, even as the days turned into weeks...

He started to speak, to tell the story of the events as they occurred—a narration of the facts of their marooning, their survival, their dramatic rescue. He would omit the

passion, the fear, the desire, the longing, the love. He would save the secret story, the untold story close in his heart and take it out on lonely nights to remember in his dreams. He would remain cool, aloof, his heart firmly shielded from Kevin's probing, idle curiosity.

But when he opened his mouth he said, "His name is Donovan."

Chapter Ten

"Hello. Sam Jamison. Hello?"

Donovan snapped his cell phone shut. What a coward he was! This was the fifth time over the past few days he'd called Sam's place. Three of those times he'd gotten the answering machine. Sam's voice coming over the line made him catch his breath—at once so familiar and so unattainable. He hadn't left a message any of the times. He found himself wondering what his office-issued cell phone showed on Sam's caller ID. Did he know who was calling and hanging up? Did he care?

It had been five days since they'd parted at the small private airport. Donovan hadn't yet returned to work. Jack Forman had called a few times to see how he was getting on. He would begin each conversation assuring Donovan he could take all the time he needed to "recover from the ordeal"—they were holding down the fort in his absence. But by the end of each call he'd made it subtly clear Donovan's position couldn't be held open forever—billable hours were the key to success and Donovan hadn't racked up too many in the last month or so. The hearty guffaw that always followed didn't fool Donovan, nor was it intended to.

It wasn't that he didn't feel physically ready to return to his old job with his nice office at the tip of Manhattan with a view of the Statue of Liberty, his bevy of support staff and his sizable salary. Yet somehow the attraction of plowing through stacks of legal papers, endlessly reviewing and preparing to represent wealthy companies and individuals who might have fallen just a little on the wrong side of the law seemed to have lost its glamorous aspect.

He thought of his life before the shipwreck—the sixty-hour workweeks, the power dinners, the hundred-dollar neckties and thousand-dollar suits—the uniform he wore to impress the world of high finance and law with his *savoir-faire*, despite his relative youth.

At the moment he was dressed in faded jeans and a black T-shirt. He found himself wondering idly what had become of his clothing from the island. The San Juan hospital staff had taken their things when they'd been admitted, issuing them the standard hospital gowns and later outfitting them with fresh clothing probably reserved for indigents and bums who found their way to the emergency room from time to time.

He touched the gold ring on his index finger, recalling how it used to be on Sam's hand. Sam had made this ring himself, had worn it for the last ten years, and on an impulse had thrust it into Donovan's hand as they'd parted.

As he had a hundred times since, Donovan pondered the meaning of the gift. Was it merely a keepsake? Or did it represent more? A promise to return someday? Yet Sam had made no contact. Donovan checked daily to see if a message had been left at the

office for him. He'd even given Carol, his secretary, explicit instructions to notify him immediately if a Sam Jamison should call.

But you haven't called him either, Donovan reminded himself. *At least you haven't followed through on the call, instead hanging up like a teenager trying to screw up his courage to ask a girl to the prom.*

The buzzer sound on the intercom near the front door of his high-rise apartment, startling Donovan. He looked at his watch—it was lunchtime and he knew who was downstairs or already on her way up as she had a key and had only buzzed to alert him she was coming.

At first Donovan had welcomed Marianne's presence. She served to distract him from his obsessive thoughts about Sam. He figured she was the tonic he needed to recover his identity as a straight male, a man who defined himself as a successful Manhattan attorney who dated a beautiful, strong-minded woman who would probably someday be his wife.

Yet if he were honest, things were not going so well between them. Usually when they got back together after one of their many breakups, the sex was hot and the sweetness remained at least for a month or so. Yet here it was less than a week and Donovan found himself irritated all too often by Marianne's constant prattle and her less-than-subtle efforts to control and influence Donovan's actions.

He recalled their conversation the morning after he'd returned. She stayed the night, assuming it was her right. He couldn't really blame her for that as he hadn't asked her to go, though secretly he had wished she would. The sex had been a nice release but he found he didn't want to wake up with her by his side. He immediately felt guilty for this thought however, and thus remained silent, passively allowing her to move right back into his life as if nothing were changed.

"What's that?" she'd asked, pointing to Sam's ring on his finger.

Impulsively Donovan had pulled his hand away. "Oh that? It's—it's nothing really. Sam's ring actually. He, uh, he gave it to me at the airport. Uh, just a memento, I guess you'd say. You know, of our time together."

Marianne had peered curiously at him, her dark eyes narrowed. "Your *time* together! You make it sound like something romantic! Is the guy gay or something?" When Donovan didn't respond, she added, "You shouldn't have accepted that ring, Donovan. You'll give the guy the wrong idea." When Donovan still didn't answer, she'd pressed, "Why would you want a keepsake anyway? You were found half-starved on a rock, for god's sake! Why would you want to remember that?"

"It wasn't a rock. It was a beautiful bit of paradise. If we hadn't found that 'rock', as you call it, we would have died at sea. We went through a lot together, Sam and I on that 'rock'." He hadn't meant for his voice to sound angry and defensive, but he knew it had.

She knew it too and with a lover's silent radar, she became alert at any mention of Sam, perhaps unconsciously aware he posed a potential threat. "You almost sound like

you and he were having affair, Donovan. If I didn't know you were straight, I might be jealous of this guy, this Sam. He *was* awfully good-looking, with his long blond hair and those dark brooding eyes."

Is awfully good-looking, Donovan thought. The man's not dead. But he held his tongue, not wanting to fight with Marianne his second day back. After the first night, he hadn't allowed her to sleep over. Marianne had been angered by this, taking it personally as indeed it was. Though Donovan pretended otherwise, claiming he just needed time to adjust to the world again and time to think.

She'd come each day at lunchtime as she did now, ringing his doorbell while simultaneously using her key to unlock the door. "Look what I've brought! Your favorite pork sandwich from the Cuban place you like. And a nice wedge of cheesecake for dessert. We'll get you fattened up in no time."

She bent down to kiss him as she passed him. "I love you, Donny," she said with a pouty smile. When he didn't respond, she turned sharply away. He knew he had been expected to answer in kind but his mouth simply refused to comply.

Instead he thanked her for the food as she moved to the kitchen, her long legs elegant beneath the silk designer suit that must have cost her a month's salary. A flare for fashion was Marianne's strong suit and had used to be one of the things that attracted Donovan to her. Now he found himself indifferent, even annoyed, by her ostentation. He sighed. This couldn't go on. He was living a double life—the one he pretended with her and the one in his head. Neither was giving him any peace.

He moved to the table as she set out their food. She had already begun to eat, being on her lunch break from the office. "So Forman was going on about you again this morning," she reported. "I think you'd better get back in the office by Monday, Donovan. He's having his doubts you're still a serious player."

"I'm having them as well," Donovan said before he could stop himself.

Marianne wrinkled her brow. "What?"

"Well," Donovan took a breath. "I don't know exactly what I mean. But I've been sitting here in this apartment for the last week, waiting for my drive to kick in. Waiting to feel the revving of my competitive engine, the thrill of the chase I used to have when embarking on a new case. I can't seem to find it, Marianne. Instead I find myself thinking about the heron behind the waterfall."

"Oh god, not *that* story again! How long are you going to obsess about some stupid bird eggs? Jesus, you have a six-figure job waiting for you. I would *kill* for what you have, Donovan. Are you going to throw away your golden-boy cushy position at Walker & Holmes because you can't stop thinking about some fucking eggs? I know you've been through a lot, but when are you gonna start behaving like a man?"

Her words seemed to echo through the room so he heard them over and over in his head. The remark about his being a "golden boy" wasn't a new one. She'd made it clear many times she would be in his position instead of merely a paralegal if only she were a

man. And if only she'd gone to law school, he'd once reminded her during a nasty argument about "priorities" just before one of their breakups.

Donovan looked at Marianne as if she were a stranger. Who was this woman sitting in his house, lecturing him about what mattered? Why had he passively let her steamroll back into his life? How long would he let her call the shots, order him to attention, demand he toe the line to suit her expectations?

"You know, that's a good question, Marianne," he said finally. "When am I going to start acting like a man?"

"Well, yes," she answered uncertainly, and from her tone he knew she wasn't sure if he was attempting to mollify her or if he was making fun of her. In fact he was doing neither. He'd almost forgotten she was in the room as he mulled the question over in his mind.

How does a man act? A mature, thoughtful man who takes responsibility for his feelings and his actions? A man with the courage to express his nature, despite fear of recrimination or rejection? Sam was such a man, he thought. Sam would follow his heart, never thinking about how it might make him rich or win him friends or lovers. Sam was the kind of man Donovan admired. Could he say the same of himself?

He looked at Marianne with her perfect makeup, her large dark eyes now fixed upon his face as if he were a bug or an alien. He had let her seduce him and reclaim him because it was easier than resisting her strong will, easier than facing his true feelings. He hid in her skirts to try to prove to himself what Sam and he had shared had been nothing more than a sexual release to pass the time and stave off the fear of death. Though his secretary had told him the reporters had been calling, asking for interviews with "the hero of the Caribbean shipwreck", Donovan knew he was no hero. A hero acts like a man—a hero is true to himself above all things.

Slowly he stood from the table, his sandwich untouched. "Marianne. If you'll excuse me. I have somewhere I have to be."

* * * * *

Sam held the paintbrush poised in front of the fine shiny paper pinned to his easel. He had planned to work on the series of watercolors of a country cottage in Ireland a man had commissioned from him before the cruise. He had the series of photographs blown up and pinned to a second easel. He'd already made a number of drawings before he'd left. He knew just what he wanted to do.

The light in his loft was perfect, the late afternoon sun of the dying summer filling the room. Sam dipped his brush in water and then daubed at the black cake of paint until he had just the right amount on the tip of his brush. He had intended to paint the outline of the house but his fingers had other ideas.

A stroke of the cheekbone. The firm line of his jaw with the cleft chin that made Sam's heart twist with tenderness. The dark hair, falling raggedly over his eyes before they'd cut it all away at the hospital. He dipped the brush in water and now into the

blue. He daubed it into the pale green to create the perfect color—the azure blue of a clear early morning Caribbean sky before it darkened to the deep blue of a tropical day...

Donovan. Sam smiled sadly. He knew Donovan had been calling—knew it was him drawing a breath a moment before he hung up. Even that one breath, that instant of near contact, had been solace to Sam. He was glad he'd decided to stay in the old place until the end of the month, hoping against hope he would hear from Donovan.

When he'd confided in Kevin about what had happened between them on the island and what was happening now, it had helped him clarify it in his own mind. He knew with absolute certainty he was in love with Donovan. Enough time had passed to reassure him what had happened between them was not merely the desperate infatuation of lonely men staving off death with sexual distraction. He loved Donovan with all his uncertainties and imperfections. He wished now he'd made that clearer to Donovan when he'd had the chance. He'd been so concerned about giving Donovan time to make up his own mind and also so careful about protecting himself from the pain he feared Donovan was going to cause him, that he'd failed to really let Donovan know the depth of his love.

He'd thought often of seeking Donovan out. Tracking him down at his law firm and asking for an appointment or whatever one did at those places. He would pour out his soul to the one man he'd ever truly loved. What Donovan chose to do with that would be up to him, but at least Sam would have given it his best. He wouldn't spend the rest of his life wondering what if.

Kevin hadn't been encouraging. He'd shaken his head when Sam had confided his love for a man who until the shipwreck had never had a gay experience. "You can't change a tiger's stripes, Sam. You know as well as I you can't force someone's orientation. Sure, he probably had fun experimenting. You probably swept him off his feet with your romantic, highly skilled attentions." Kevin had flashed his smoldering dark eyes at Sam, his tongue lazily licking his lower lip in clear invitation but he gave up after a few moments, grinning. "Seriously—it must have been very intense for both of you—stranded, possibly for the rest of your lives—two hot young guys in their prime, why wouldn't he want to experiment? But now that he's back 'in the real world' if you will, you're something to be put behind him. To be forgotten and stashed away, a shameful little secret now that he's a big-shot attorney again on Wall Street with girls fawning all over him and his image to uphold."

Sam tried to deny Kevin's assertions, to explain Kevin just didn't understand the depth of what they had shared, but the seeds of doubt had been planted. Many times he played out the scenario in his head. He would take the subway to Manhattan and find the huge office complex that housed Donovan's law firm. He wouldn't call first, he would just show up. He would take the elevator up to the receptionist, who would politely ask if he had an appointment and she would check if Mr. McNair were in, directing him to please have a seat. When he got to this part of the daydream Sam would falter, imagining himself sitting for an hour in a waiting room, riffling through a

magazine while Donovan had in fact slipped out the back. Eventually the receptionist would apologetically inform him Mr. McNair had had to go to court and wouldn't be back until tomorrow, was there a message?

Sam put the painting of Donovan's face aside and began with a fresh sheet. This time he painted a full body picture—Donovan lying nude on the black rock by the waterfall, letting the sun dry him after a swim. He caught the masculine curve of his thigh, the broad lines of his shoulders, his head back, his throat exposed as if waiting for Sam's kiss...

After several more paintings of Donovan, he finally felt ready to start on the commissioned work. Again he cleaned his brush, preparing to paint the pretty stone cottage with its climbing ivy, wild flower garden and the rolling green gray hills behind it. He stared at the photographs and at his blank paper. The sun was an orange ball, lowering in the sky outside the windows when with a sigh, he rinsed the brush and set it in its slot in the watercolor box, the paper before him still a pristine white.

Perhaps a walk would refresh him and clear his mind. Maybe he'd walk the mile back to his basement apartment instead of taking the bus. He'd get himself an early dinner and do some more packing for his move to the loft.

* * * * *

When Donovan walked out of his apartment, Marianne had not tried to follow him to his relief. He'd taken the stairs, running down seventeen flights as if someone might be trying to catch him. Once on the pavement, he'd walked quickly, no clear idea where he was going but certain he had to get away. As he walked, he realized he was hungry. He regretted not eating the hot pork sandwich with melted cheese Marianne had brought for him.

He slipped into a pub on the corner, his eyes taking a moment to adjust in the dim light. He reached into his pocket, relieved to find he had his wallet. In his back pocket was the faded red strip of Sam's bandana he'd taken to carrying for good luck.

Most of the small booths were filled with the lunchtime crowd but there was space at the bar. Sliding onto a red barstool, he ordered a burger and a mug of beer. A woman appeared a moment later, somewhere in late middle age, her graying hair unkempt, her clothes baggy and ill-fitting. With some effort she hoisted herself onto the tall stool. She raised her hand to the bartender, who obviously knew her well enough not to have to ask what she wanted. Donovan peered discreetly at her as the bartender poured several fingers of vodka straight up in a glass and set it in front of her. She was the sort of woman Donovan would have found disgusting once upon a time. A drunk with no redeeming qualities—a drag on society his taxes would have to support.

Now he realized as he sat dazed in his own confusion and misery, he was no better than she, possibly worse. Sam wouldn't have judged the woman. He might have talked to her—gently engaged her in conversation, see if she needed help. Donovan thought

about saying something but as his food arrived at that moment, he focused instead on his burger.

"Smells good," the woman said, hungrily eyeing his food.

The old Donovan might have retorted or at least thought, "You have money to buy vodka, why not use it for food?" Instead, to his own surprise he said, "Can I order you the same? My treat."

She looked into his face, her own breaking into a smile, her teeth ragged and gray, several of them missing. "A gentleman. Didn't know there were any left in this city of ours."

He smiled and signaled to the bartender, who took his order and nodded. Once her food had arrived they ate in silence for a while, Donovan's mind again focused on Sam and the mess he'd made of things so far.

He wondered what Marianne would make of his defection as he'd run out of the apartment, for that was surely how she would see it. In a way he supposed it was. He wasn't sure how clean the break was but he knew something was different. He had changed. As he'd looked at the beautiful bewildered woman across his kitchen table, he had suddenly seen his future. A lifetime of compromise, muted misery and denial of his true self awaited him. He would lose himself in his career, rising to partner in the firm, doing work that no longer seemed relevant in the scheme of his life, probably married to a woman with whom he felt no emotional, no spiritual, connection. He would have the income and the toys that came with it, but he would be bereft of what mattered. He would have escaped the tyranny of his father only to voluntarily enslave himself in a life that no longer had meaning.

"You've got the mark, boy." The woman drained her glass and pointed at it as the bartender moved forward to oblige. She'd finished her hamburger and was mopping the last bit of ketchup from her plate with a lingering fry. Most of Donovan's food remained untouched.

"Excuse me?"

"The mark. The mark of a love lost. Heartbreak. I can read truths in people's faces, you see. I used to be a professional psychic. Charged twenty-five dollars for a consultation, I did. I still have the gift of reading faces and you've got the mark."

Donovan didn't answer, instead pointing to his beer mug as he caught the bartender's eye. Was it so plain on his face? Had Marianne seen it too? Had Sam when they'd parted at the airport?

"So am I right?" the old woman persisted.

"Yes," Donovan admitted softly.

"Tell me about it," she said, her voice surprisingly gentle.

He looked at her full-on now, examining the crags and wrinkles in her weather-beaten face. He looked into her eyes, not seeing the bleary bloodshot eyes of a drunk he

had expected to see, but discerning clear gray eyes that seemed to be piercing through his head to his most secret thoughts.

"Well," he said finally, "his name is Sam."

* * * * *

Donovan sat with his elbows on his knees on the brick stoop of 546 Waterfront Road. Several people had come in or left the building as he waited, none of them Sam. He'd knocked when he'd first arrived, his heart hammering in his throat, his hands clenched at his sides as he waited for Sam to open the door.

He'd tried to peer down into the single window but it was covered with slatted blinds, the room inside dark. Did he have the right address? Maybe it had been 456? Or some other combination of numbers on some different road altogether! Or perhaps Sam had already moved away, eager to put his old life behind him, ready for a fresh start somewhere far away.

The old woman at the bar had introduced herself as Betty as they'd begun to talk. Donovan had steeled himself for her expression of disgust or incomprehension when she realized he was talking about another man, but she hadn't even blinked. She had acted as if his attraction, his passion, for another man was the most natural thing in the world. Her calm acceptance had unleashed the floodgates of his confession.

When he'd talked for some minutes in a rather vague way about his confused, aching yearning, Betty said, "I've been around a long time. I wasn't always a drunk, you know." When Donovan tried to politely deny it, she waved her hand in his face and laughed. "Oh stop. It's not a secret. Don't waste your breath with false chivalry. I don't need your pity. I do what I want. But like I said, I wasn't always a drunk and maybe someday I'll check in somewhere and clean up." She took a healthy sip of her vodka and grinned her gap-toothed grin. "Probably not though. Booze is the only thing that never lets me down." She glanced at the bartender and waved again toward her glass, silent until it was refilled, at which point she continued her narrative. "Once upon a time I lived in a fine house in Queens. I went to college. I've been married three times, buried two of 'em. I've raised four children. I've been to Europe, I've been to India, I've collected and lost more things and more friends and packed more in a lifetime than you can imagine. Now I got nothing left, except experience. Want to know what I've learned?"

"Yes," Donovan said softly.

"Nothing matters except love."

"Nothing?"

"Not a blessed thing. Not money, not power, not your work or your hobbies or world politics or forcing yourself into the mold your family or your church or whoever thinks you should be. None of it makes a bit of difference when it's all said and done, and you'll end up destroyed to please people who already forgot you were alive." She put her hand over his, squeezing it. Donovan didn't pull away. "*Love* is the only thing

worth living for, the only thing worth dying for. I had a chance at love—I threw it away. Doesn't even matter why now—to please my parents, to please my children, to please my boss, to fool myself I didn't need another person to make it in this world. If you get lucky enough, boy, to find love, you grab it, you hear me? I don't care if you love a kangaroo! You take hold of it and you bind it to your heart."

Donovan took a breath. "I left him though, you see. I betrayed him. I turned my back on him because I was ashamed."

Betty interrupted. "Yeah, yeah. I know. I heard you before. So hopefully you've got a chance to fix it. Is he still alive?"

"Who, Sam? Of course he is."

"And he lives nearby? Here in the city?"

"In Brooklyn."

"Well, here's my advice, boy." Donovan waited as she paused for dramatic emphasis. "Get up off your butt and go there right this instant and apologize for being a jackass and ask him to dinner."

Laughing, energized by her encouragement, nearly giddy with nerves, Donovan had pulled all the money from his wallet, nearly a hundred dollars, and put it on the bar. "For our tab and a little extra for your next drink," he had said, grinning.

Now here he sat, the bravado of that moment dissipating with each passing minute. The sun was low in the early evening sky. He glanced at his watch and decided to give it up. He would have used his cell phone to call Sam's number but in his haste to run out the door, he'd left it behind. With a sigh he heaved himself up from the stoop, realizing it had been a stupid idea to just camp out with no invitation from Sam and no idea when or if he would be returning.

As he began to walk along the sidewalk, someone came around the corner of the block. Donovan stopped in his tracks, the blood rushing to his face as his heart began to pound. Like a scene from a Clark Gable movie, Sam moved toward him with a slow, easy stride, silhouetted by the setting sun behind him, glowing like an angel in the sultry golden evening light.

Chapter Eleven

As Sam came around the corner, he saw but didn't recognize the tall dark-haired man standing in front of his apartment building. As he came closer, something in the way the man held his body made Sam scrutinize him more carefully. When he realized it was Donovan, it took every ounce of self-control not to break into a run.

On some level he felt Donovan was like a wild animal or a spirit, one that would vanish if he moved too fast, if he scared or startled him. He had been waiting, willing, Donovan with every fiber of his being to come to him but he had been unwilling to seek him out. He had accepted Donovan would come to him on his own terms or not at all. Sam refused to influence the outcome, knowing if he did, Donovan might well run again. Sam knew he couldn't bear to lose him a second time.

As he came near enough to see the clear blue of Donovan's eyes fixed upon him, he allowed himself to walk more quickly. It was hard to believe it had been less than a week since he'd seen him last. In some ways it felt like a lifetime. As he came within arm's length, Sam felt his heart thudding against his ribs.

He stopped short, standing stiffly. "Donovan. I was wondering when I'd see you." Sam swallowed, aware the words conveyed nothing of what he was feeling. He was close enough to smell the hint of Donovan's woodsy cologne and the essence of the man beneath it. He felt paralyzed, like a snakebite victim, the venom inching through his system.

It was Donovan who reached out. "Sam," he said, his voice cracking with emotion. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry." He wrapped Sam in an embrace, dropping his head to Sam's shoulder as he held him. They clung to one another, Sam stroking Donovan's soft hair until finally Donovan lifted his head, tears in his eyes.

"Donovan. You don't have to apologize for anything."

"But I do, Sam! Because of my own fear, my own cowardice, I shut you out of my life. That night in the hospital room, when you asked me what I wanted to have happen between us and I said I didn't know, well, I did know. I thought I knew anyway. I thought I knew there was no place for you in my life back in the city. My identity, my ego, was so wrapped up in my 'status' as an attorney with a high profile and as a straight guy with a reputation to uphold. A man like that does not have love affairs with other men! A man like that has no room for a dreamy, sexy male artist whose kiss is hotter than any I've ever tasted..."

He bent down in full view of the few passersby on the sidewalk and kissed Sam on the lips. Sam thrilled to the feel of Donovan's mouth and began to kiss him back. After a moment he pulled away as Donovan moved forward, his eyes still closed. "Hey, this is Brooklyn, not the Village. You want to get beaten up? Cut it out." He laughed and after

a beat Donovan laughed too. Sam had a ridiculous urge to sing and cry and laugh at the same time, to grab Donovan's arms and whirl with him in a circle of abandoned joy. Instead he merely stood grinning, his heart filling with quiet elation.

"Where were you anyway? I was waiting hours here for you. I was starting to figure I had the wrong place."

"Nope, you had it right, though not for long. At the end of this month I'm moving out for good."

"Oh," Donovan said in a gasp. "Not because of me...?"

"No, no, my little egomaniac, not because you had left me." Sam smiled as Donovan flushed. "Remember the cool loft I rented for my studio? Well, the landlord fixed it up really nicely while I was gone and I've decided to move in permanently."

"The facility is approved for residential occupancy?" Donovan said, sounding like the lawyer he was.

"I don't know. Who cares? I'll have my futon bed in there and a microwave, a little refrigerator and a hot plate. That's all I need. The futon looks like a couch when it's made up, and who's going to notice if I sleep there or not?"

"I guess you're right," Donovan said, smiling slowly. "So where is this place?"

"It's about a mile from here. I was walking back from there just now."

Sam suddenly noticed his ring on Donovan's finger. He touched it, looking up into Donovan's face. "I was saving this, you know. For my true love. That's why I gave it to you."

"Sam," Donovan said, his expression filled with emotion. He took a deep breath and for a moment Sam thought he might cry but he smiled and Sam smiled back. He felt himself falling into those azure blue eyes, lost in their loving caress. Finally he realized he was being inhospitable. "Would you like to come inside for a bit? I have to warn you though, I'm in the middle of packing so everything is in kind of a mess right now."

"I thought you were never going to ask," Donovan laughed. "Of *course* I want to come inside." Together they descended the stairs of Sam's basement apartment. Donovan stood just behind Sam as he unlocked the door. If he turned around, would Donovan still be there? Or was this just another of his many daydreams?

Donovan was still there as Sam opened the door and gestured for him to enter. The place was small, its one window filtering the dying light of the waning winter afternoon. Boxes were piled here and there, some half-filled with clothing, others crammed with art supplies. Canvases were stacked along the walls. The futon bed was neatly made and in its upright position, serving as a couch during the day. It was covered with a faded yellow and white patchwork quilt.

Sam moved to the couch and sat down, gesturing for Donovan to sit beside him. "Are you hungry? I was just going to make a sandwich or something."

"I am kind of hungry now that you mention it. I walked out on two different lunches today." As Sam looked at him quizzically, Donovan grinned. "I'll tell you all about it. But in a minute. You see, if I don't kiss you again, I think I'm going to die."

Needing no second invitation, Sam leaned toward Donovan. Their lips met and parted, their tongues performing the dance at once so familiar and so new. They wrapped their arms around one another as they kissed. When they finally separated, Donovan, his eyes blazing with emotion, reached out to stroke Sam's cheek. His touch was at once erotically charged and aching tender. Sam, his defenses lowered by the heated kiss and Donovan's gentle gesture, felt his eyes fill with tears.

"Sam, oh Sam," Donovan said, his own eyes shining with unshed tears. Sam began to cry—not the heaving sobs of wretched misery he'd cried alone in his room his first night back, but a gentle rolling of tears. Donovan reached forward to wipe them away, which only made more tears flow. It wasn't that he was sad—if anything one could say they were tears of joy, but that wouldn't have been entirely true. The sudden rush of emotion he could no longer hold in check once he'd seen Donovan's handsome face had left him weak, his defenses damaged. He looked at Donovan's concerned open face and more tears spilled.

"I'm sorry, oh Sam, you have no idea how sorry I am."

"No, no," Sam said, trying to smile through his tears. "I swear, I'm not really crying. I mean, I'm not sad. It's just a release, I think. I'm so relieved you're here. But also I'm..." he paused, not wanting to scare Donovan with the intensity of his feelings.

"What? You're what? Tell me."

"I'm afraid," Sam admitted softly. "Afraid you'll change your mind again. Afraid to allow free rein of these crazy feelings I'm having. Afraid to..." he paused again, refusing to say what was on the tip of his tongue.

Donovan looked crestfallen. Softly he said the words Sam had withheld. "Afraid to trust me. Afraid to trust a man who could take your love so freely when he thought that's all there was but could turn his back so easily once the scrutinizing eyes of society were turned upon him."

Sam couldn't help but smile at Donovan's lofty turn of phrase, but nor could he deny the truth behind the words. What was to keep Donovan from leaving again? After he had indulged in a little experimentation, a little more gay fun with his boy toy, wouldn't he begin to long for his old way of life? For a woman's touch, a woman's embrace? "*You can't change a tiger's stripes*," Kevin had cautioned him. Did Sam really have the courage to face the loss a second time?

Donovan moved closer, lifting the hem of his T-shirt to wipe away Sam's tears. Sam recalled how he had done the same for Donovan, wiping away the blood when he'd nicked his cheek with the sharp razor blade back on the island. Donovan also remembered, for he said, "Now we just need sweat." It took Sam a moment to get the joke.

When he did, he grinned and said, "So you remember that."

"Of course I remember. I remember everything that happened between us. I've thought of little else since I told you goodbye." He sat back, running his hands through his hair as he looked down at the floor. "I learned something important today, Sam."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. A drunken bag lady psychic told me." He laughed.

"A what?" Sam didn't get the joke, whatever it was.

"I'm being flip," Donovan said, sobering. "Actually, she is maybe the most insightful person I've ever talked to. Well, except for you of course." Sam felt his face flush and he looked away but he was listening as Donovan continued. "She gave me advice. Want to hear it?"

"Yes."

"She said something that sounds obvious, I guess, but had never really occurred to me. Wasn't even in my equation of important things. I had thought it was vastly overrated. I had never experienced it and thus was quick to reject its importance."

"Okay, you have me really curious now. Come on. Out with it."

"Love."

"Huh?"

"She said nothing else mattered in the end. Not power, fame, fortune, other peoples' expectations or approval or rejection. Nothing mattered in the end but love. True love. If you find it, hold on to it, she told me. She even paraphrased Shakespeare."

"...those friends thou hast, grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel," Sam said softly, quoting from Hamlet, one of his favorite plays.

"Yes," Donovan said, his eyes sparkling. "So listen up, Sam Jamison. I love you." Sam stared at him. It was the first time—the only time—Donovan had ever uttered the words. Even through all the hot sex and romance they'd shared, those three words had never passed Donovan's lips.

Greedy to hear them again, to make sure of what he'd heard, Sam said, "What?"

"You're gonna make me repeat it, huh? I practiced it all the way over here!" Donovan laughed. "I love you! I don't care if you're a man or a woman or a..." He paused. "Or a kangaroo! I love you, Samuel Frederick Jamison. You are the person I want in my life. You are the one I want to bear witness to my existence, to share my failures and joys, to be there when I go to sleep and when I wake. I love you. I'll say it ten more times, a hundred more, a thousand—as many as I need to make you understand."

Sam was smiling so hard his cheeks ached but he couldn't help it. "That was the most beautiful thing anyone's ever said to me. I guess you're going to be the one to write our book, huh?"

"Our book?"

"*Island of Temptation*. Is that a good title? Think we'll make the bestseller list?"

Several hours later Sam awoke, confused for a moment, his arm wedged uncomfortably beneath the still sleeping Donovan beside him. They'd opened the futon into a bed, no more words needed as they stripped one another, tossing their clothes in a pile as they hungrily tasted each other's bodies.

Sam loved the indentations just below Donovan's narrow hips. He truly was as finely sculpted as a Greek statue, his thighs thick and firm, his belly flat and hard. Unable to resist his naked offering, Sam had wrapped his mouth around Donovan's rising cock, licking it to rock-hard attention and then teasing him until Donovan could contain himself no longer. Grabbing Sam's head in his hands, he had cried out, shooting his hot seed into Sam's eager mouth.

Sam had lain beside him, resting his head on Donovan's masculine hairy chest, prepared to drift into slumber with him, though his own cock remained firm as steel. However Donovan had other ideas. Gently disengaging from Sam, he'd scooted down to kneel beside Sam's cock.

With a passion born of pent-up desire, Donovan drove him nearly mad with pleasure. He took Sam's cock deep into his throat—as skilled as anyone Sam had ever been with as he suckled and stroked Sam's shaft with his lips, tongue and throat. Sam groaned as Donovan's fingers curled around his balls, gently squeezing as he licked the head of Sam's cock for several delicious moments before plunging himself down onto the shaft. It wasn't long before Sam shot his load into Donovan's willing mouth. He remained kneeling, licking Sam's cock and balls in a gesture of loving subservience that at once stunned and thrilled Sam.

Finally he'd allowed Sam to pull him up into his arms where they'd fallen into the sleep of the sexually sated. Now Sam freed his arm and rearranged himself so Donovan's head rested against his chest. He began stroking Donovan's hair in a soothing rhythm that seemed to blend with the beat of his heart.

* * * * *

"Wow, this is really great," Donovan said as he turned slowly in the center of the huge loft.

"Wait'll you see it in the daytime! It's the light that entranced me. I knew I could paint in here the entire day using natural light. And I got it really cheap. Now that I'm making some money, I'll be able to afford this place plus all the art supplies I want." He beamed proudly as Donovan continued to admire the space.

Though they were both wearing coats, Donovan felt a draft and hugged himself with a shiver. "It's cold though! You need to get better heat in here. All these windows—this must cost a fortune to keep warm."

Sam shrugged. "So I'll get some space heaters. I don't like it too warm anyway—it puts me to sleep." Donovan was skeptical but said nothing more. He didn't want to dampen Sam's obvious enthusiasm.

"Hey, what are these?" Donovan walked over to a window where Sam had hung the series of watercolors he'd painted earlier on a clothesline strung for the purpose.

"Oh," Sam said, moving quickly toward them, flushing slightly. "Nothing really. I was just messing around."

Donovan stared at the five paintings, some of them more like ink drawings, sketched in but not completed. There was no doubt as to the subject however. Donovan turned to Sam, who was biting his lip as if awaiting judgment. "Nothing, huh? These are amazing, Sam. I can tell they're me! But they're better than me. I mean, they're like me how I would want to be depicted – so graceful, so sensual."

"No, they're not better than you. They're a mere whisper of you. A hint, a memory. I'm glad you like them though. You can have them. I'm going to paint you, Donovan. I've imagined painting you forever. Capturing the amazing blue of your eyes, the rich browns and reds in your hair, the masculine curve of your jaw. I want to try to capture your expressions, your essence. I want to paint your face. I want to paint you nude. I want to paint you while you're sleeping, while you're reading, eating an apple, gazing out the window..."

Donovan laughed, embarrassed but pleased. "Sounds like we're gonna be really busy for the next few months, huh? You painting, me sitting there staring at things!" Sam laughed too and Donovan felt joy surge through him. "Let's go eat. We'll catch a cab to my favorite little Italian place. I've been dreaming about lasagna for a while now."

Over dinner they began to talk about the future, at least the immediate future. Donovan knew he had some decisions to make and wanted to bounce them off his lover. His lover! Donovan still couldn't quite believe he was here, across from Sam, from the man he'd obsessed over for the past month, the man he couldn't imagine living without.

What would his family say? What would his colleagues and clients say? What would Marianne say? Donovan took a long drink from his glass of wine. His expression must have betrayed some of his anxiety because Sam said, "What's the matter? You look upset."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I'm thinking about stuff. Well, about us. I mean, about what I'm going to do next. How it's going to affect the people in my life."

"You mean, coming out? Is that what you're talking about?"

"Um, I guess so." Donovan felt his face heat, uncomfortable with the stark term.

"I'm teasing you. It's not like you're going to have to confess to everyone you know you've fallen into evil homosexual ways." Sam grinned. "First of all, it's really no one's business but your own how you choose to live your life or who you choose to live it with. Does Jack Forman confide in you about his marital life or his sexual fantasies? Does the judge in the courtroom let on he's wearing women's panties beneath his black robe?"

Donovan laughed, relaxing into his chair as the waiter set their salads before them. As he picked up his fork he said, "They make the best balsamic vinaigrette here. I've tried to duplicate it at home but there's always something missing."

"Maybe it's coconut," Sam quipped. "We should have brought some back with us."

Donovan started to retort with something clever when someone called from a nearby table. "Hey, Donovan McNair! Is that you?" Donovan turned to the sound of the voice. It was Mike Bradley, a junior associate at his law firm well-known as the office gossip—or one of them. He was with an attractive young woman Donovan didn't recognize. He waved a little toward Bradley, hoping that would be the end of it but saw he was rising from his table and making his way toward them.

A short thin man with a mustache cropped too close to be attractive, Mike Bradley stood over their table, perhaps expecting an invitation to sit that wasn't forthcoming. "Wow, you're famous, you know that?" He grabbed Donovan's hand, pumping it furiously. "It's really great to see you! I gotta tell you, man—when we heard about the shipwreck and then they couldn't track you down, we thought that was the end. All over but the shouting, you know?" Donovan could only imagine the hours of fodder he'd provided Bradley and the other water-cooler gossips. "Larry Dougherty had already taken over your office, the vulture. Forman had to kick him out when we heard the great news you'd been rescued! You should have seen Larry's face—trying to act like he was glad you were alive while he kept glancing back at your office. It was really funny."

"Huh," Donovan said, not sure how to respond.

Bradley rattled on, "Yeah, but I gotta tell you—Forman's kind of pissed you're not back yet. I know because Sarah here," he pointed toward his date, who sat looking uncomfortable at their table, no doubt wishing her date would return his attentions to her, "is Forman's new secretary. Mabel Harris quit, if you can believe it, after thirty-two years on the job! I thought they might set her to her final rest under her desk, to tell you the truth. But she just up and quit last month, right after you left. Sarah found out from the other girls Mabel had met a man! After being widowed so long—we all thought she was an old maid—she met this guy at a bingo game who just swept her off her feet. They're traveling the world right now, star-crossed lovers at sixty-two!" He laughed at what he clearly considered a ludicrous situation.

Donovan shook his head smiling. "True love is amazing. You never know when it's going to strike." He glanced involuntarily at Sam, who was smiling at his plate. Mike's eyes followed his glance and he furrowed his eyebrows a little.

"Say, you haven't introduced me to your *friend*. This the guy you were marooned with?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. Sam, allow me to present Mike Bradley, an associate at Walker & Holmes. Mike, this is Sam Jamison."

"Honored to meet you," Bradley said, pumping Sam's hand. "It's amazing you guys were on the same cruise and both from the city. Small world, huh?" *A little too*

small, Donovan thought sardonically, annoyed as Bradley continued to hover over them.

The waiter arrived, his tray laden with steaming food. Reluctantly Bradley moved out of the way. "Yeah, well. It was great to see you, McNair. I guess I'll see you Monday, right? Bet you're dying to get back into the thick of things. You musta been bored out of your gourd stuck out in the ocean with nothing to do." Again he looked at Sam, his gaze more scrutinizing as Sam looked calmly back at him. "Uh, okay then. So, nice to meet you and all that. Later."

"Jesus, I thought he'd never leave," Donovan muttered as he passed the garlic bread to Sam. "You talked about 'coming out'. It won't be necessary now. Bradley will have the whole office buzzing before I walk in the door, I can guarantee you. By the time he's done telling the story, you'll be dressed in drag and full makeup, on your knees under the table giving me a blow job."

Sam laughed. "Sounds like a real winner, that guy. Where does he get the time to do his job with all the gossip he has to disseminate?"

"You got me," Donovan said, still annoyed. He'd known people would see him out in public with Sam and so what? There was no law that said he couldn't go out with whomever he pleased. Was he worried now because someone from work had seen him out and with someone who, if he didn't look expressly "gay", whatever that looked like, was certainly extremely good-looking and not the type of man Donovan would have been seen with before. Would Bradley go running to Forman to report not only was Donovan obviously fully recovered but carrying on a homosexual affair with his island lover?

"Hey," Sam said softly. "You're trying to kill your lasagna there." Gently he touched Donovan's arm. "Relax. I can see you're working yourself up over this. In the scheme of things, does it really matter?"

"Does what really matter?" Donovan's words came out harsher than he'd intended.

"You tell me, Donovan. What's going on in your head right now?"

Donovan started to lie. To smooth it over, to deny anything was wrong. He forced himself to stop, having promised himself to begin living his life more honestly. He wanted to be true to himself and to the man sitting across from him, who meant more to him than anything ever had.

He took a breath. "Okay. Here's the thing. When Bradley was getting in his digs about my office and Dougherty taking over, for a second I gave a shit. For a second my old competitive thing reared its head and I thought, fuck! I'm going to go in there and take back my office and send Dougherty back to the pen where he belongs! Then I realized I didn't want to. I realized the thought of walking back into that place fills me with dread. It'll be bad enough to endure the curiosity and attention over our whole shipwreck rescue thing. But even once that dies down, what is there? Endless briefs, papers, motions, court dates, client meetings, power lunches, business golf and being surrounded by people who bore me, doing something I no longer care about.

"I don't know what's happened to me, Sam, but I seemed to have lost my moorings. Except for you." His voice dropped and he smiled, pausing a moment to take a bite of the very delicious food in front of him.

"Go on," Sam said. "I'm listening."

Donovan drank the last of his wine. As Sam refilled his glass, he continued. "It's like nothing matters anymore. Or more accurately, everything matters way too much to keep going on autopilot. Being stuck out there, realizing we might die stranded and alone, it really changed my perspective. Life is so precious. It's such an amazing gift. I've spent twenty-seven years living up to other peoples' expectations of me or feeling like shit because I didn't. I've got this incredibly expensive apartment I'm hardly ever in because I'm always at the office. I have a family I barely know any longer. I see them once a year at Christmas so they can make jokes at my expense about the 'big shot ambulance chaser' and wouldn't mom be proud if only she'd lived to see the runt of the family make good. I have 'friends' who mean so little to me and me to them that I barely thought about them while we were stranded, and aside from a perfunctory phone call and an 'oh, let's get together for a round of golf or a beer', they've barely thought of me. I have a girlfriend who breaks up with me every couple of months because I'm a lousy lover and a shut-down, insensitive jerk, but every time she snaps her fingers, I'm back like some stupid lap dog, panting to obey her next order on the direction my life is to take.

"I tell you, I'm fed up with all of it. It's all a pile of sand, it means nothing to me! I've created a life without meaning, surrounding myself with people I don't care about, doing work that leaves me empty at the end of the day. My life, quite frankly, sucks!"

As he paused for breath Sam raised his eyebrows and said simply, "Yeah? So change it."

Chapter Twelve

Donovan stayed the night with Sam at his place, amidst the clutter of boxes, nestled together on the small futon. He could honestly say it was the first restful night he'd had since the rescue. He awoke full of joy before he was even conscious of the source of that joy. As Sam had sighed sleepily and snuggled against him, he remembered.

It all seemed so simple the way Sam had put it. It was as if his thoughts had been jumbled in a hopeless mess of confusion and with a word, Sam had helped it to all fall neatly into place.

"It's all details," Sam had added. "You've already made the big decision. You've recognized and admitted to yourself you want to change your life—that it needs changing for you to be happy. Now you just go through the details of making that happen, one step at a time."

His first step, Donovan had decided, was to talk to Marianne. He felt bad for having walked out on her the way he had. For all he knew, she'd torn up his place in her rage. He stopped at home to shower and change his clothes, using the spare key he kept in his wallet to let himself in. The place was intact he was relieved to see. His cell phone had several messages on it, three of them from Marianne. He didn't have the energy to listen to them. Instead he simply punched in her number. It was Saturday morning so she should be at her apartment, doing her ritualized ferocious Saturday morning cleaning.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Marianne. It's Donovan. I was wondering if—"

"Donovan! Where the hell have you *been*? I was worried sick over you, do you know that? You just walked out on me like a crazy person! Listen, Donovan. I think we need to get you psychiatric help. I honestly didn't realize what a number that shipwreck did on you. I blame myself really. I should have been more sensitive. I think you have PTSD."

"Marianne, I—"

"That's post traumatic stress disorder. I looked it up online and Barbara and Rachel agree. Rachel used to be a nurse, you know. She knows about these things." Barbara and Rachel were paralegals along with Marianne at Donovan's firm.

"Jesus, Marianne, now you're discussing my *case* with people at work?"

"Well, Donovan. It's not like I could discuss it with *you*. You fly out of apartment buildings without even taking your cell phone and don't show up until the next day. What's a person to think?"

Donovan felt his blood pressure rising. He forced himself to speak calmly, trying to see it from her perspective. His behavior must have seemed very odd indeed, and certainly it had been rude. "Listen. I'm really sorry about that. It was a very irresponsible thing to do. I should have called you."

"Damn right you should have! I'm your girlfriend! The future mother of your children!"

"Marianne. We need to talk. Face-to-face. I've been unfair to you. I haven't been upfront. I want to fix that. We need to talk."

"Well, I don't know. I'm not in the mood to schlep to your place right now, thank you very much, and Stella is doing her hair..." Stella was Marianne's roommate. Donovan had noticed she always seemed to be doing something that kept visitors from coming around but he didn't care at the moment as this worked into his plans. He wanted to avoid a scene and hoped a public venue would make one less likely. Maybe it was the coward's way out — *so be it*, he thought wryly.

"Let's meet at the Greek diner around the corner from your place. How's that? I'll buy you breakfast and we'll talk."

She agreed and forty minutes later they were seated in a little booth, grilled buttered cornbread sticks and feta cheese omelets on their way. Marianne began to lecture him the moment they were seated but Donovan held up a hand and said, "No. I need to talk. You need to listen." Something in his tone made her finally close her mouth.

"First of all," he said, trying to calm himself down. Marianne had a way of arousing his ire he used to mistake for passion, but now realized was just her irritating way of trying to control everything. "About Walker & Holmes."

"Oh thank god! You're coming back to work! I think Forman's on the edge now. He would have fired you if you'd stayed away one more day."

"No. I'm not coming back. I'm quitting."

Marianne stared at him for several moments, her eyes narrowing with disbelief. Finally she said, "Very funny. You've turned into a real comedian since you got back, you know that?"

"Marianne, I'm not kidding. I've never been more serious. I've come to realize my life no longer has meaning. Not the way I've been living it to this point. I'm starting over. I've got plenty of savings and investments. I don't know — I might write. I might just travel for a while and get my head on straight. I honestly don't know."

Marianne began to shake her head, incredulity twisting her lovely features into a grimace. "Donovan McNair, you've done some really stupid things in your life but this takes the cake! What makes you think I would want to marry a — a writer! How do you expect to support our family? Private school is a must, surely you know that! And I was hoping to stay home for the children and we'll definitely need a bigger place —"

"Whoa, whoa, Marianne. Slow down! What gave you the idea we were engaged? You're the one who not two months ago broke up with me! For the fourth time! You've

never been happy with me as I am. I've always fallen well short of the mark in your book. You've told me so in any number of ways. What's different all the sudden?"

"Well," Marianne looked taken aback. "I—I just assumed. I mean, I realized when you were gone, when I thought you were," she lowered her voice to a whisper, "dead...well! I just realized how much I loved you is all. I promised myself if you ever came back alive, I'd marry you and make you into the man I wanted. People do change, you know."

Donovan laughed despite himself. "Speaking of taking the cake, you get the prize." Marianne looked confused. He continued, too amused to be angry. "Listen. I'm not going to marry you. I don't even love you and I'm pretty damn sure you don't love me. To tell you the truth, I don't think we ever loved each other. We were attracted to things about each other. You're beautiful and you're very, uh, persuasive." He had been about to say pushy but managed to find another "p" at the last second. "I guess I'm reasonably good-looking and while not rich yet, have potential in that arena."

"*Had* potential, you mean," Marianne said nastily. "When you were headed for partner. You would have been a rich man in five years, you bastard. But you're throwing it all away on some teenage pipe dream. I don't know you anymore. Whatever happened on that island has changed you, Donovan."

"Yes," Donovan agreed. "Yes, it has."

* * * * *

"So she was pretty pissed, huh?" Sam said. They were lying together on a thick quilt on the floor of Sam's loft, the sunlight filtering through the room in a golden haze, reminding them both of the island, though neither had said so aloud. The moving van wasn't coming for another two days. Donovan had convinced him they should buy a few more pieces of furniture for the space as well and Sam had happily agreed, delighted at the thought Donovan wanted to be involved.

"Yeah. That's putting it mildly. She had actually managed to get the idea in her head we were engaged. I'm surprised she hadn't already rented the hall for the reception! She was furious when I told her I was quitting the firm. Apparently all her dreams and hopes were wrapped up in me, or rather in my income earning potential. When she figured out I was dead serious about leaving, her deep and abiding love for me seemed to evaporate like so much smoke. She didn't even stay for breakfast. She said if she ate, she'd probably vomit."

"Well, I guess you're even then," Sam said, grinning. "You walked out on her and she walked out on you."

"Yeah. You know what she said? As she was walking out, she turned back toward the table and said in a voice designed to carry, "I never want to see you again, Donovan McNair. Go back to your little blond boyfriend and live happily ever after in his—his garret!"

Sam laughed with actual delight. "Garret, huh? Isn't that like an old-fashioned word for an attic?"

"Yeah. We saw *La Bohème* last year at the opera. A bunch of starving artist types live in a garret. Marianne was very taken with the story as I recall. I basically tried to stay awake."

"Well, it's rather discerning of her, wasn't it? To send you off to me?"

"I suppose, though I don't think she quite knew it. I think she meant to insult me."

"And did she?" Sam's tone was playful and Donovan laughed, grabbing him up into his arms as they lost themselves in an endless kiss.

* * * * *

The loft was brightly furnished with all of Sam's possessions fitting neatly into one corner. They'd added a sofa and a thick throw rug in front of it as well as bookshelves and shelving and cupboards for Sam's art supplies and canvases. Several portable heaters were set about the room at Donovan's insistence. Though it was early March, winter hadn't yet released its clutches on New York. Two comfortable leather chairs faced the sofa and Donovan could often be found in one of them, reading a novel. He'd read more novels in the few weeks since he'd quit, he told Sam with delight, than he'd read since he'd left college.

Donovan, who had never taken an interest in decorating before, found himself having great fun helping Sam to select just the right items to make the loft a cozy home. He realized he'd simply never had time before to focus on what he would have called the minutia of life. That's why he hired interior decorators to handle such things. His apartment while tastefully furnished in appropriate muted masculine tones, was done to someone else's taste.

"We're practically living together," Sam ventured. "Are you sure you want to keep your expensive apartment?" Donovan had spent every night with Sam, either at his tiny basement apartment or, once he'd made the move, in the loft on a queen-sized futon they had purchased together.

"We missed the brunt of the winter cold, Sam. Even so you had one hell of an electric bill. This could well be why this space went so cheap. And why it was never finished out. It was probably just used for storage."

Sam was thoughtful. "You're probably right. I never think of those sorts of things."

"That's okay," Donovan grinned. "That's why you have me around. Now here's what I think. My lease will be up in a few months. Let's see where we are then. Maybe we'll put everything in storage and travel! I've never been anywhere! The cruise was the farthest I ever got from New York. I went straight through college and law school directly into a law firm. I realize now I was running so fast from my father, I ran myself headlong into a kind of prison with bars made of billable hours and no time to myself."

"I think that's a great idea, Donovan. We'll see the world! I need the next few months to get ready for Tim's next showing. He wants as much as I can produce by June. We could get it ready and then take off!"

"Sounds like a plan." Sam had already begun sketching several ideas using Donovan as his subject. He had painted several backgrounds of the island, capturing the play of light against the sea, the vivid colors of the tropical foliage, the silver tumble of the waterfall. Donovan was entranced as he watched him work, splashing color on the canvas, working it with his brushes and a rag until a picture began to emerge, an image that thrust Donovan back to the little bit of paradise.

Without the fear of being stranded, he found himself free to simply enjoy the images Sam created, even adding his own recollection of a color or the way something had been laid out. Sam always listened, cocking his head attentively toward Donovan as he spoke, making him feel valued and special.

Sam treated him so differently from anyone he had ever been close to. He thought about his father's derisive response when he'd let him know he'd left his law firm and was going to try something new, perhaps write a novel or maybe the story of their shipwreck and rescue.

"Oh brilliant. You finally had something you were good at and now you'll throw it away for some sensationalistic crap. You'll be a flash in the pan, boy. Sure, they'll buy your book but then what? You'll be yesterday's news. With no career left, doing god knows what with yourself. If you think I can take you on in my landscape business, think again. You can't just walk out on the family business and expect to come waltzing back in when you're tired of chasing ambulances or writing sensationalist crap about being on an island with some faggot artist."

One of the papers had written a story about Sam soon after their rescue, interviewing Tim Fletcher, among others, who had hinted he and Sam were *very close indeed*, obviously leaving the reporter with the impression Sam was as flamboyantly gay as Tim. The story had been slanted accordingly, with innuendo about Sam and Donovan's relationship while stranded on the island. It figured Donovan's father had honed in on that particular article. The irony was he thought he was insulting Donovan. If he knew the truth, he would probably have dropped dead on the spot.

Donovan didn't choose to confide in him however. Let the old man hold on to his misguided notions and his bitterness. It wasn't Donovan's job to save him or to disabuse him. "Thanks for your vote of support, Dad. I always could rely on you." Softly he cradled the phone, a bittersweet smile on his face.

* * * * *

Sam took a sip from the crystal champagne flute and leaned back in Donovan's hot tub with a satisfied sigh. "I could get used to this royal treatment, you know." Donovan was sitting across from him in the bubbling, steaming water. They'd spent a lazy day together in Donovan's apartment. They'd slept late and Donovan had cooked up a big

batch of spaghetti with homemade sauce, his one and only specialty, he informed Sam with a grin.

In the late afternoon Sam worked on his current painting of Donovan for his show. The painting depicted Donovan lying nude on black volcanic rock, brilliant tropical foliage behind him as well as the waterfall that had saved their lives. The painting was impressionistic with vivid colors and rich textures.

Sam had already made a series of such paintings, each one more lush and intoxicating than the last. Sometimes when the spirit took him, he would paint until nearly dawn, falling exhausted into bed beside a long-sleeping Donovan, who would always awaken when Sam slipped in beside him, taking him into his arms before falling back asleep.

Donovan leaned over to refill Sam's glass and his own. Sam said, "You know what I just remembered? The very first day when we were floating on the raft with no idea if we'd be rescued, I had this full-blown fantasy about you. I'd forgotten it until just now."

"Oh yeah? You were fantasizing about me while we were drifting toward possible death? Do you have a one-track mind or what?" Donovan's voice was teasing, his eyes sparkling with affection.

Sam grinned sheepishly and tried to defend himself, "Hey, it was a distraction. What can I say? From the minute I saw you I wanted to paint you...and to kiss you. What I fantasized as I watched you stare gloomily out at the horizon was that we were lovers. I was painting your portrait but we would stop between sessions to talk and make love and fall asleep together..." He sighed happily. "Sometimes I can't believe it's really happened. It's that corny old adage that fairy tales can come true. You're my dream come true."

"My romantic man," Donovan said, draining his glass. "We'd better get out of this hot water before we boil ourselves like lobsters. How about we retire to the bedchamber, your highness?"

Sam laughed and they climbed out of the tub, toweling each other dry with big fluffy towels. As they lay together on the bed, Sam said, trying to keep his voice light and casual, "So do you think tonight's the night?"

"For what?" Donovan asked.

"For you to make love to me. For you to fuck me."

"Oh," Donovan said softly. "Sam, I don't know." Sam knew Donovan's hesitation stemmed from fear. He'd expressed these fears before. He was afraid of hurting Sam or of doing it wrong and losing his erection in the process. Sam noticed with some satisfaction Donovan's rising cock and decided to press the issue.

"Listen, I know about your fears. You're ready to move past that. I know your first time with a woman was nothing to write home about but you were just a kid then with an unwilling partner. We're two adults who both want this. You do want it, don't you?"

Donovan nodded, his cock growing harder by the second. "Here's the thing, Donovan. It's about trust. You need to trust me—to trust I'll be honest with you and let you know if you're doing something that hurts me or doesn't feel right. And you need to trust yourself. To trust the love you feel for me and let it guide you. Remember when you first sucked my cock?" Donovan colored. Sam reached out to stroke his cheek. "God, Donovan, I love how you blush like a schoolboy. It's so endearing!" This of course had the effect of causing Donovan to blush even more.

Donovan was stretched out next to him, naked on top of the sheets. Sam leaned up on an elbow and brought his lips to Donovan's, giving him a slow, sensual kiss that soon had his lover panting. He pulled away, noting Donovan's bright eyes, feeling his eagerness. "You don't need technique or prowess or anything at all to make love to me. You've got everything I want, because all I want is you. I know it will be wonderful for both of us. You know why?"

"Why?" Donovan said softly.

"Because it isn't about you or about me. It's about *us*. It's what we give each other that makes our connection so intense, so unique, so amazing. When we play, we aren't just fucking around. We don't just get off on the physical aspect of what we're doing. We actually *make love*. I don't know if you know how rare that is, Donovan, but trust me. Especially in the gay community, to tell the truth, men tend to be less willing to commit emotionally. They hold back of themselves and that diminishes the experience."

"Hey, that's not just gay men, trust me," Donovan laughed. "I think it's men period."

"Probably," Sam agreed, grinning. Sobering, he added, "If you can trust yourself and me, if you can trust *us* enough, you won't even have to think about what you're doing. I promise."

Donovan, with Sam's gentle encouragement, not to mention two glasses of champagne to relax him, decided he was finally ready to attempt anal sex with his lover. He had come to crave the experience for himself, delighting in the full, sensuous feeling of Sam's cock buried inside him, his hands teasing Donovan's cock as he made love in this most intimate of ways.

Donovan was nervous but determined to try it at last. He wanted to give Sam the same pleasure. He knew Sam had wanted it for a long time and at last he felt ready to please him. Poised behind Sam, Donovan dared to press the well-lubricated bulbous head of his large cock against Sam's tiny nether hole. He could feel the tight ring of muscle at the entrance resisting his touch. Sam leaned back against him, inviting his penetration. Donovan tried again, holding his shaft as he pressed through the tight entrance. Sam grunted a little but didn't pull away. Donovan saw to his delight the whole head had slid its way inside.

He leaned over Sam's back, holding himself carefully so as not to penetrate farther. "You okay? Am I hurting you?"

"No. It's fine. It's good. You did it, sexy boy! Go ahead, take it nice and slow and move forward. I'll let you know if I experience any discomfort. You're doing great!" Encouraged, Donovan pressed forward, marveling at the tight, delicious sheath of muscle clamping down on his cock as he fully entered his lover.

"Jesus," he moaned. "It's so *tight*! It feels incredible. I'm afraid if I move at all, I'm going to come." Sam wriggled his ass in playful response, wresting another moan from Donovan. Unable to control himself, Donovan began to thrust in and out of his lover's ass, grabbing Sam's hips to keep himself steady.

"Yeah, do it, do it," Sam crooned, his voice breathy and low, punctuated with gasps of pleasure. As Sam had done for him, he reached around and found Sam's cock, rock-hard to the touch. He grasped the shaft, massaging it as he moved against Sam. Sam groaned, "Donovan. Oh yes." He hissed the last word as Donovan continued to fondle his cock and balls while fucking him hard.

Donovan felt the power of his position infuse his blood like hot wine. Forcing himself to slow down, he withdrew almost completely from Sam's ass. Sam responded by pressing back against him, his body clearly asking for Donovan's cock. Donovan laughed softly, almost cruelly. "You want it, don't you, Sam?"

"Yes, oh yes."

"Say it. Tell me what you want, Sam. Tell me." Lust coursed through his body as he waited for Sam's response. How many times before had Sam reduced Donovan to shivering, trembling need, taking advantage of Donovan's desire by forcing him to articulate what had at once thrilled and embarrassed him? Now the tides were turned and Donovan felt his power like drug.

"I want you to fuck me. Please, Donovan. Don't stop. Fuck me. Hard." Donovan obliged with delight, pressing his cock in to the hilt while Sam moaned his appreciation. Slowly he moved in and out, trying to take his time, trying to control his body and contain his raging lust. He reached out again to stroke Sam's cock and found Sam's hand there. He placed his larger hand over Sam's and together they tugged at Sam's hot, hard cock while Donovan continued his onslaught. "You hot, perfect boy," Sam said in a low voice hoarse with passion. Sam began to tremble, his body warning of his own impending release.

Donovan felt his orgasm rising up like a wild thing inside of him. His body was bathed in sweat, his heart thrumming in his ears. Sam's shuddering body pressed back to meet his every thrust, his breathing rapid, punctuated with gasps and moans. He knew from Sam's movements and cries he was in the throes of orgasm.

As his own climax overtook him, Donovan forgot about Sam's pleasure. He forgot to be careful about hurting him as he slammed against him, his balls slapping Sam's ass. It was as if Sam had become merely an extension of his own body. They moved together in a primal sexual dance as Donovan felt himself toppling over the edge of the most intense orgasm he'd ever experienced in his life. He felt frozen in time as his body

arched and spasmed against Sam, his orgasm lasting seconds, minutes, an infinity of suspended glorious time.

At last he fell forward against Sam, his body deadweight as Sam fell beneath him to the bed. They lay where they'd fallen, a tangle of legs and arms, hearts beating in rhythm, one indistinguishable from the other. Donovan knew he was heavy on his lover, contorted beneath him. He wanted to lift himself from Sam—to withdraw from his ass and dispose of the condom. Yet when he tried to move, he found himself immobile, utterly spent. Even his capacity for speech was impaired. "Muscles aren't working right," he mumbled, his words slurred. "Sorry."

They remained still for several minutes. Donovan was in a state of semiconsciousness, his body flooded with the endorphins from his fierce orgasm. Gently but with surprising strength, Sam lifted the larger man off himself, turning so Donovan rolled away from him onto his back. As Donovan lay like a stone on the bed, Sam slipped to the bathroom, returning with a hot washcloth and a hand towel.

Carefully he slipped the used condom from Donovan's cock, dropping it into the trashcan near the bed. He washed Donovan's cock and patted it dry before pulling the covers up over his lover and climbing in beside him. Sleep took them both before they could even whisper the words in their hearts.

Chapter Thirteen

Donovan awoke to the phone ringing urgently beside the bed. Since he'd pretty much withdrawn from his old life, having severed ties with his law firm and the people he used to hang out with, it was rare for his phone to ring at all. As the number was unlisted, it could only be someone who knew him.

He fumbled for the phone, reaching over a still sleeping Sam to grab the receiver. "Hello?"

"Donovan, that you?"

"Patrick?"

"None other." Patrick, Donovan's older brother by eleven months, was his favorite brother, or rather, the one who annoyed him the least. He mostly went along with the rest of the family when ribbing Donovan but rarely laid into him of his own volition.

Donovan sat up, fully awake now, convinced Patrick was the bearer of some family crisis. "Dad?" he said anxiously. "Is he okay?"

"Dad? Yeah, he's fine. Well, not exactly fine. That is, he's not sick or anything, if that's what you mean. I just thought I'd give you a heads-up in case you hadn't already seen it, about your front-page picture on the *Daily Star*."

"What?" Donovan didn't know what Patrick was talking about and said so.

"You and your boyfriend. Your blond artist. You've been 'outed', bro. Isn't that what they call it?"

Sam was awake by this time, Donovan's urgent tone having roused him. He watched Donovan as he paled and put a hand on his arm, mouthing the words, "Is everything okay?"

Slowly Donovan shook his head, forcing himself to concentrate. Patrick continued. "Well, there's a front-page story—you know they just report sensationalist nonsense." *Which didn't stop you from reading it*, Donovan thought. Patrick had a subscription to all the pulp magazines, claiming they amused him. "At least they didn't pair you with an alien," Patrick laughed.

"Well," Donovan said slowly. "I haven't seen the picture, but whatever it is, it's all a crock of lies. Sam Jamison is a friend of mine, yes, but it's ridiculous to read more into it. We certainly didn't give an interview to the *Daily Star*. Anything they wrote—"

"Can and will be used against you," Patrick interrupted. "It's not so much what they said though. It's what you were doing, Donny boy. You and your gay lover boy were caught kissing, right out in broad daylight." Donovan heard commotion in the background as Patrick said, "Hey, gotta go. My ride's here. Don't say I never did ya no favors. Forewarned is forearmed. Bye!"

As Donovan cradled the phone he felt numb. He couldn't seem to get his mind around what Patrick had said. Seen kissing! When? Then he remembered. They'd had a picnic in Central Park. Spring was making its best effort to take hold, a warm sun shining down on the pale shoots of grass beneath their feet. They'd been strolling along a path when on an impulse they'd leaned toward one another, sharing a rather chaste, close-lipped kiss before quickly separating again. It wasn't unusual for gay men to openly display affection in New York City—they were pretty much ignored by the rest of the population, just like everyone else.

Donovan and Sam had gotten lax, he realized. The first few weeks after their rescue, cameramen had seemed to hide in bushes and behind doors waiting to snap their pictures. They'd given a number of interviews, both together and separately, and had thought the interest had died out at last. Apparently someone who recognized them, someone with a camera, still found them to be the subject of interest.

"Donovan, what was that about? You look like you've seen a ghost. You look positively ill! What's going on?"

"That was my brother. Apparently someone snapped a picture of you and me kissing in Central Park. It's the headline story in the *Daily Star*. He said he wanted to warn me for when the shit hits the fan with my dad."

"Oh," Sam said quietly.

Donovan looked quickly toward him. "It's not that I'm embarrassed of you or anything," he hastened to say. "I mean, it's just—I hadn't told them. I haven't really told anyone. I mean, it's not like it's anyone's business, you know. Our private life is our private life!"

Sam nodded, watching Donovan's face. Donovan turned away, suddenly ashamed. He realized he was in fact embarrassed. Ashamed to be defined as gay, especially by the mass media, exposed for all the world to see. What would the guys down at Walker & Holmes think? How about Marianne and all the other women he'd dated over the years? And worst of all—his brothers and his father. What a party they'd have over this one, gloating to each other, making snide remarks, telling each other they always knew little Donny Boy was a faggot.

Sam had gotten out of bed and was pulling on fresh jeans and a sweater. His long blond hair was tousled and he combed it out with his fingers as he turned to Donovan. "You've obviously had an unpleasant shock, Donovan. I'll just run out and get one of those papers so we know what he's talking about. I wouldn't let it bug you, kid. It's the price of fame." He tried to smile but didn't quite manage it. Donovan watched him go, aware he'd hurt the one person who really mattered.

Sam walked quickly down the block toward the newsstand, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, his mind in a whirl. As he recalled the look of shame in Donovan's eyes he winced, pain hurtling through him though he knew Donovan hadn't meant to be unkind. He could still hear Donovan denying him by omission as he said, *Sam Jamison is*

a friend of mine, yes, but it's ridiculous to read more into it. Sam knew it was unfair to have expected more, but if he were honest, he had. Though he knew it was unrealistic, he had wanted Donovan to say, "So what if we were kissing! We're lovers! Deal with it! I love Sam Jamison!" Instead he'd offered that muted, mumbled betrayal.

Oh stop being melodramatic! Sam admonished himself. He knew Donovan's biggest hurdle, the one he hadn't yet leaped, was in his relationship with his family. It wasn't fair to expect a man who had only come to grips with his own nature so late in his life to suddenly be ready to share it with the people most critical of him. Sam knew Donovan loved him with all his heart. He should find the compassion within himself to let Donovan handle how he presented himself to the world in his way, in his own time.

Sam arrived at the newsstand, perusing the papers and magazines for the one in question. He found it and pulled out a crumpled five-dollar bill. Without waiting for any change he turned on his heel, heading back to Donovan's apartment building, determined to handle his reaction with as much grace as he could muster.

Sam returned, dropping the paper onto the kitchen table. Donovan had gotten up and made them a pot of hot chocolate. He poured Sam a cup and added a little cream. "Hmm, thanks," Sam said, wrapping his hands around the warm mug.

Donovan sat across from him with a sigh. "Listen, I'm really sorry if I—"

"Hey, no apologies necessary. Let's see what the paparazzi made up about us today? Who knew we'd be such a topic of interest, right? I wish they'd pay as much attention to my art exhibits!"

Donovan smiled, shaking his head a little as he watched Sam making the effort to handle his insulting behavior earlier with his usual grace and aplomb. If possible, he fell even more in love with Sam at that moment.

He sat next to Sam, spreading open the paper as they leaned over it. *Gay Castaways Exchange a Kiss in the Park* read the headline. "Boy, that's original," Sam commented dryly.

One-time prominent attorney Donovan McNair, known as an "up and comer" at the prestigious firm of Walker & Holmes, has dropped out of sight since being rescued from an uncharted Caribbean island this past winter. Once active in the trendy Manhattan social scene, he's gone underground it appears.

"We all kind of suspected he was gay," said one-time friend and associate Michael Bradley. "Whatever happened on that island totally screwed up his head."

His partner Sam Jamison, a struggling artist before his dramatic rescue, sold out his gallery show once it was believed he had been lost at sea. The gallery owner could not be reached for comment. Jamison makes no secret of his orientation, having been seen coming out of gay bars on a number of occasions by an unnamed but reliable source.

Donovan stopped reading, nearly sick with anger and disgust. "What the hell is this? It's like gossip in a seventh-grade girls' locker room! How can this drivel even be printed?"

Sam pointed to the article below it, the headline of which read, *Mother Gives Birth to Canine Baby. Doctors Astounded.* "At least our article just has humans in it."

"If you can call Mike Bradley a human! That asshole! I bet he was waiting for a chance to slander me. He's gonna be famous now at the water cooler, the little prick. I bet he's the one who took the picture!"

"Could be," Sam grinned. He put his hand on Donovan's arm. "Listen, I know this is a shock. But really it's just a stupid, ridiculous piece of fluff. You know, what's really insulting in the piece to me is not the fact they reported on us kissing, though why that's news to anyone but you and me, I have no idea. The real insult came in how they managed to imply you were a confused loser who dropped out of society because you're 'screwed up', to quote Mr. Bradley. And I'm a would-be artist who only sold his work on the coattails of disaster and will now fade back into obscurity where I belong." He spoke gently, touching the gold ring Donovan still wore on his finger. Softly he said, "The rest of the article isn't untrue. We *are* lovers. We don't choose to define ourselves as gay or straight, but society loves to pin labels on everyone, you know that."

"Yeah, I know. The article is stupid. The magazine is absurd. Anyone with any brains knows most of the stuff is just completely made up. But the picture..." Donovan paused, thinking of his brothers poring over the image, imitating it as they laughed uproariously, his father watching them with tacit approval, waiting for the right moment to summon Donovan to explain himself.

As Sam had so often before, he seemed to read Donovan's mind as he said, "You don't owe your family any explanation, Donovan. What you choose to tell them or not tell them is entirely your affair. I hope you know that."

"It's easy for you to say," Donovan retorted, aware he was being unfair but not able to stop himself. "Your mom accepts you for who you are. She doesn't make judgments. You don't have any siblings to make fun of you or for you to fail to live up to. You don't know the pressure I've been under for years."

Sam stood, frustration loosening his tongue. "Donovan, you're nearly twenty-eight years old. You're not ten. You don't live with your brothers and your father. You've been financially independent from him since you were eighteen, for god's sake! When are you going to stop letting them live rent free in your head? The only power they have over you is the power you grant them. It's the same in any relationship, Donovan. You and I are together because we choose to be. It's our choice, our private, adult choice and has nothing to do with achievement or success or fitting in.

"I don't mean to be so blunt, but I'm tired frankly of watching you get hurt by the way your father reacts to you. He isn't ever going to approve of you, you know. It doesn't matter if you were elected president, he'd find fault with it. It doesn't matter if you married a princess and made him a king, it wouldn't be enough."

Donovan was biting his lip, his face a mask of misery as he listened to Sam. Sam felt his heart ache for him but knew he had say the words, had to somehow make Donovan hear him. "Don't you see? It doesn't *matter*. He may love you, he may not—it *doesn't matter*. Because you're a grownup now and you have someone who loves you with all his heart. And I think you love me as well. I think our love is big enough for you to handle without worrying about what other people think about us."

He sat down again at the table, pointing at the offending newsprint. "Be honest now. Do you really give a flying fuck what Mike Bradley has to say? Do you really care if your stupid, bone-headed brothers know about us? We have more love in our little fingers than they'll probably ever find. If this article makes us the butt of their adolescent jokes with each other, do we really care? I know I don't. All I care about is you. The fact this article has hurt you makes me furious but beyond that, I don't give a fuck what people say."

Donovan nodded slowly. "I know you're right. I really do. I found myself getting all wound up as Patrick was talking to me. I felt like I used to feel when I was under so much pressure at the firm—my heart kind of constricted, I felt unable to take a proper breath. I don't want to be like that." He put his hand on Sam's thigh. "I love my life now. I wake up full of joy."

"You know, while you were talking just now, I thought about Betty. Remember that old woman at the bar?" Sam nodded as he continued. "She said something I've thought a lot about since then. She said something about how stupid it was to force yourself into the mold your family or your church or whoever thinks you should be. She said in the end all you'd have done was destroy yourself to please people who already forgot you were alive. That's a pretty powerful statement. I don't want to be that person anymore, Sam. Not in any way. I want to please myself and please you and that's it!"

"Damn straight," Sam said, grinning. "Now get on your knees and please me, boy!" He began to laugh, making it clear he was kidding. Donovan started to laugh too and soon they were holding their bellies, tears rolling down their cheeks, unable to gasp enough air as they chortled with glee. Neither knew quite what was so funny but they'd stop after a while, catch one another's eye and be at it again until at last they were laughed out.

At that precise moment the phone rang.

Sam raised his eyebrows as Donovan walked over to see who was calling. *Thomas McNair* scrolled across the little screen. Patrick clearly hadn't wasted any time sharing the article with their father.

"It's him," Donovan said, turning to Sam.

"You don't have to get it, you know."

"I know. Might as well. I'm tired of renting him space in my head," he grinned. "As good a time as any for his eviction." He picked up the receiver, gesturing for Sam to pick up the line in the other room. It would be easier than having to relate it all later.

"Hello?"

"Donovan. This is your father."

"Hi, Dad. Long time no hear."

"Yeah, whatever. Listen. You've got a problem."

"Have I?"

"Yes you have. Some slanderous filthy rag that idiot Patrick likes to read printed a picture of you with that man you were marooned with. At least they made it look like you. Obviously it's a touched-up photo—they stuck your head on someone else's body. It happens all the time."

Donovan was surprised by this remark. He had assumed his father had called to rail with disgust. Instead he was apparently in denial. The picture was clearly of Donovan. He was even wearing the sweater his mother had knitted him before she died. There was no denying his identity. He waited to hear what game his father was playing. "Listen. Don't just stand there breathing. You've gotta take action, boy! You're an attorney. You haven't been disbarred, right? Just because you walked out on your job?"

"No, I haven't been disbarred, Dad," Donovan said, consciously refusing to allow his father's words to goad him into anger.

"Okay then. You just go file a lawsuit against that paper for slander and defamation of character."

"Well," Donovan took a breath, imagining he was diving off the deep end into a very cold pool. Might as well do it fast and get it over with. "I've seen the article. That is me in the photograph, sorry. You'll recognize the sweater Mom made—you have one just like it. And while the article was stupid and rude, and certainly contained nothing newsworthy, there's nothing much in there to warrant a lawsuit. Just stupid comments by idiots named and unnamed about nothing."

"You're off your head! Jesus, you don't even have the balls to deny you're a flaming queer!" He paused, as if giving Donovan one last chance to defend himself. Donovan waited silently, wondering what Sam was making of all this in the next room. His father continued the rant, his voice raised with outrage. "I raised a faggot! Mark and Tony told me but I told them to shut up! I said no way was a son of mine a homo! But they were right! They were right! Thank god your mother didn't live to see this day. This day of shame in the McNair household."

Donovan had finally had all he could take. "Dad, save your melodramatic dark-ages idiocy for someone who gives a damn. If you ever decide to grow up, give me a call. Otherwise, nice knowin' ya. Bye." Donovan hung up the phone as Sam came out of the bedroom.

"That's was perfect! God, I'm so proud of you I could burst!"

Donovan grinned ruefully. "Hey, I guess I'm pretty proud of me too. Man, I feel like I could run a marathon or something. I'm pumped!"

"Hmm," Sam said with a sly grin. "We'll have to think of some way to expend all that energy!"

* * * * *

"I think these would look great on you." Sam and Donovan were at a large department store, shopping for clothes. Donovan, having spent so much of his time at work, had few "play clothes" while Sam, who had always favored thrift stores and discount outlets due to his very limited budget, had only jeans and T-shirts to his name, plus a few ancient pullover sweaters.

"I still don't know how to handle all this money," Sam mused, upon opening yet another envelope with a large check from Tim Fletcher. "When I'm grocery shopping, I still check every price and agonize over the cost of a pound of hamburger."

"Hey, that's okay, Sam. Frugality is a good trait. Money comes and goes—no reason to go crazy with it. Though you do deserve to enjoy what you've earned. You're a successful artist! You don't have to worry any longer how to pay your bills or if you can afford the proper paints. If you'd like, I'll invest some of your money for you. We'll set up a portfolio. I'd advise it anyway for tax purposes."

Neither of them had thought much about their clothing but when a pair of Sam's pants had literally fallen apart at the seams, they'd laughed and agreed it was time to buy some new clothes.

Donovan came out of an aisle holding an armful of clothing for Sam to try. Sam had several pairs of slacks and casual shirts for Donovan. Together they moved into a large dressing room, shutting and locking the door behind them.

At first they focused on what they were doing, trying on pants, buttoning new shirts, modeling in front of the three-way mirror and for each other. The distraction happened when each man was stripped to his underwear. They caught each other's glance in the mirror and turned slowly toward one another, falling into a sensual embrace.

Slowly Sam slid down to his knees, his arms still wrapped around Donovan's body. He pressed his cheek to Donovan's cock, feeling it rise beneath the cotton. Slowly Sam slid Donovan's underwear down his hips, down his thighs, not stopping until he'd pulled it off completely.

He could see Donovan's shapely muscular ass the in the three-way mirror. He could see himself kneeling subserviently before his lover, eager to take his erect shaft into his mouth. Donovan moaned with pleasure as Sam leaned up over him, licking the head of his cock, teasing him with his tongue. Sam had meant to start slowly, to build Donovan up to a frenzy of desire, to make him beg for what he wanted.

But his own passion had taken over—his hunger sharp for the perfect member thrusting itself toward him. Gripping Donovan's balls in one hand, he lowered his mouth over Donovan's shaft, taking him in deep as Donovan grabbed the back of his

head. Sam was almost rough as he suckled and pumped Donovan's cock with his mouth, his hand still cupping the delicate heavy balls.

He glanced into the mirror as he suckled his lover and saw Donovan was watching him in the mirror as well. They could both see each other from all angles—Sam's strong back bending forward as he balanced in a muscular crouch, Donovan splendidly naked, his cock glistening in the fluorescent light when Sam pulled back.

All at once Donovan grabbed Sam's head, pulling him toward his belly, impaling him on his long, thick cock. Sam tried to pull back after a moment to catch his breath, but Donovan held him fast. Sam stayed still a while longer, a part of him thrilling to this sexy display of dominance by his lover. But physiology intervened—he couldn't breathe with Donovan's cock blocking his windpipe. Again he struggled to pull back, pushing against Donovan's legs with his hands.

Donovan let go all at once and Sam fell back, gasping for breath. Donovan's breathing was labored, his face flushed, his eyes wild. "Jesus. I'm sorry," he gasped. "I don't know what came over me. I had to have you there, I had to keep you there with my cock down your throat. I didn't hurt you, did I?" He was panting, his cock bobbing perpendicular to his body, his throat and chest flushed.

"No, you didn't hurt me," Sam answered, still on his knees. "Except for the fact I couldn't breathe, it was incredibly hot. You took control. I found it very arousing."

"Then get back here," Donovan said, his voice low with lust. Sam complied, scrambling into position as Donovan again took hold of his head, sliding in and out of Sam's mouth as Sam held himself still, his own cock an iron rod. As he watched in the mirror, Donovan's head fell back in ecstasy, his cock pummeling Sam's mouth and throat, sometimes nearly choking him. Far from upsetting him, Sam thrilled to Donovan's rough sexy treatment, nearly coming himself from the experience.

With a stifled cry, Donovan ejaculated in Sam's mouth, spurting streams of hot jism down his throat. He fell back, sitting heavily on the little bench built into one corner of the dressing room. His eyes still blazing with sensual power, he stared down at Sam and said, "Make yourself come for me."

Sam, more aroused than he could ever remember, eagerly obeyed. Just as he'd jettisoned his seed into his hand there came a knock on the dressing room door. "Everything all right in there?" a feminine voice called out.

"Just fine," Donovan answered. "Better than fine, thanks."

Chapter Fourteen

There was a crush of people milling around the hall Tim had rented especially for Sam's show. Tonight was opening night and the place was packed. Sam had been extremely productive over the past two months with Donovan as his muse and inspiration. There had been more than enough work to fill Tim's Chelsea gallery. Wanting to capitalize on Sam's lingering fame as a castaway, Tim had convinced him to bring all his backlog of work as well. Even the five watercolors Sam had painted of Donovan when his heart was breaking had been tastefully framed in one corner of the room, though Sam made sure Tim understood they were not for sale. In fact there were several paintings of Donovan Sam couldn't bring himself to part with, and beneath these, instead of a price tag was a small discreet sign that simply read Private Collection, Not for Sale.

Donovan gazed around the large hall, trying to spy Sam amidst the throng. At last he saw Sam's blond head surrounded by an admiring crowd. Apparently everyone Tim had invited had shown up, along with the usual crashers and hangers-on. Plenty of free champagne and a long table loaded with delicious appetizers hadn't hurt attendance either.

But it was the art that drew people and kept them there. Donovan was confident they would have come with or without the notoriety of the shipwreck and rescue. Sam's work was just plain outstanding. Donovan felt himself nearly bursting with pride as he overheard people commenting on the works, exclaiming over the vivid colors, the compelling imagery, the artful composition.

Not that there hadn't been sacrifices. Sometimes as Sam worked well into the night, barely acknowledging Donovan's existence, much less spending time with him, Donovan felt some resentment toward Sam's art. But he understood Sam's compulsion and tried to be as patient and understanding as Sam always was with him. Sam was driven in the way Donovan had been when he was a practicing attorney, though there was a crucial difference. Donovan's drive had not been suffused with passion, though he would have denied it at the time. Rather he operated from a certain unacknowledged desperation and fear of failure. In short, he was still trying to impress his father, unwilling to admit to himself that would never happen. Sam, on the other hand, was expressing his most innate nature. He couldn't *not* create—it was who he was.

Instead of building resentment and attacking Sam in inappropriate ways when the resentment boiled over as Marianne had used to do to him, Donovan found new interests to keep himself occupied while Sam was working on his show. He had always enjoyed doing his own investing but had left most of it to a financial consultant as he hadn't the time to devote to it with his busy law practice. Now he had begun handling

his own investments, enjoying the research and trading online, deriving satisfaction as he watched his assets build. The portfolio he'd set up for Sam was building nicely as well.

He had taken up cooking, going far beyond his one dish of spaghetti and meatballs. When Sam was ready to take a break from an intense painting session, he would find meals like garlic-crusted pork tenderloin with asparagus in homemade Hollandaise sauce with a caramel-topped crème brûlée for dessert. He loved watching Sam take a bite of something new, waiting with delicious anticipation to see his reaction. Sam had joked he was going to make him fat but he remained as slim and hard-bodied as ever.

"You're Donovan, aren't you?" A couple approached him, snapping him out of his daydream. The woman was dressed in a red silk dress with very high red heels, the man in a fine tailored suit. Donovan had dressed for the occasion as well, even convincing Sam to don lightweight wool slacks and a cashmere sweater, rather than his usual jeans.

"Yes," Donovan admitted, not recognizing the couple, racking his brain to determine if they'd met.

"See, I told you," the woman said to the man.

"I'm sorry, have we met?" Donovan asked.

"No. George Saxton," the man said, extending his hand, which Donovan shook. "This is my wife Gina. We were admiring the series of paintings of the man on the tropical island. Even though they're mostly impressionist and the detail in the face isn't always there, my wife, who has a discerning eye, thought she recognized you as the subject. And since they've got titles like *Donovan in Repose* and *Donovan in Contemplation*, it wasn't too hard to put two and two together."

"I see," Donovan said smiling. "Well, guilty as charged. I'm Donovan McNair and it's nice to meet you."

"The opening is a huge success, at least judging by the turnout," Gina offered. "We collect art. We wouldn't have missed this show for the world. We've admired Mr. Jamison's work since his first show back in Chelsea last year. We bought a little watercolor and a lovely landscape done in oils. Tonight we're going for something bigger."

"That's wonderful," Donovan said grinning. "He really is something, isn't he?" He couldn't keep the proprietary pride out of his voice. The couple glanced knowingly at one another but Donovan didn't care. He was thrilled to be Sam's significant other and could honestly say at this point he didn't care who knew it. He'd worked through his demons about his sexual orientation. Like Sam, he'd come to realize while he still admired and enjoyed women, his emotional connection was with men—with one man in particular who was coming toward him at that moment.

"He's coming over here!" Gina said, her voice rising almost to a squeal.

As Sam approached them, Donovan said, "Hi, Sam. Let me introduce you to two of your patrons. This is George and Gina Saxton. They were buying your work before the rest of the world caught on to your enormous talent."

Sam smiled graciously, still as modest as he ever was. "A pleasure to meet you. I'm so glad you could come tonight."

"We wouldn't have missed it," George said. Tim approached them and George exclaimed, "Fletcher! Splendid show! You've outdone yourself! Let's talk prices, shall we?" The couple moved away with Tim toward a large desk in a corner of the hall where he'd set up the business end of things.

Sam herded Donovan through a little side door Donovan hadn't known was there. It appeared to be a storage room. "What's up? You just need a moment of peace?" Donovan asked. "You must be going nuts with all this attention. I know it's not your style."

"It is kind of hard to take. The champagne helps though," Sam said, holding up his half-empty glass. "I can't believe this many people know I exist, much less want to come see my work."

"Not just see it—they want to buy it! You've got something, Sam. I don't know anything about art, but your stuff, I don't know. It just grabs my attention. It makes me want to keep looking at it. And every time I do, I see something new, something subtle and wonderful that thrills me all over again."

Sam smiled and said warmly, "That means more to me than any art critic's esoteric comments. Thank you, Donovan." He moved toward a large flat canvas leaning against the wall, covered in brown paper. "I have something for you. A small token of my gratitude."

"Gratitude? For what? For being crazy head over feet for you?"

"Yes, precisely for that." Sam laughed but added, "And for more than that. For trusting me, even when you were terrified. And for being my muse. I could never have put a show like this together before I met you, Donovan."

"Oh don't be silly," Donovan said, shaking his head, though he couldn't help but feel delighted by the praise. He looked curiously at the paper-wrapped canvas.

"I'm more serious than I've ever been." With a flourish Sam pulled the wrapper from the canvas and turned it so Donovan could see. In Sam's characteristic impressionist style, Donovan could see a tumbling, rushing waterfall, its silver-white foam splashing into a pool so blue Donovan would have thought it couldn't be a true color had he not seen it with his own eyes. Behind the little waterfall and just off to the side was perched a tall proud bird with gleaming white feathers. Its long graceful neck was curved downward, its beak tipped in a motherly way toward three little chicks leaning up out of their feathered nest, fuzzy and gawking, their little beaks agape.

Donovan felt his eyes fill with tears as he turned back toward Sam, who also had tears in his eyes. "You made them hatch for me," he whispered, his voice cracking. "Oh Sam, it's wonderful. But when did you paint it? I never saw you work on it."

"I worked on it at Tim's gallery. I didn't want you to have any idea. I spent so many hours there with Tim designing the show, what was an hour more here and there over the weeks?"

"Well, I had no idea!" He gazed at the picture a while longer, his heart near to bursting. "It's the most perfect gift anyone ever gave me." They grinned at one another for a few moments and then Sam glanced toward the door.

"I guess I'd better get back in there. Tim will no doubt be looking for me."

"Yeah. But hey, since we're surprising one another, I've got a little something up my sleeve as well." Donovan reached into his jacket and extracted a long thin envelope.

Sam took it, his expression curious as he opened it. Inside were two airline tickets to the Fiji Islands for the following month. His face showed his delight as he looked up at Donovan. "You did it! You actually bought them!"

Over the past few weeks they had been perusing various travel packages online. Now that Sam's show was under way, they'd talked about doing some serious traveling. Staying away from cruise packages, they'd discussed Europe or possibly Asia. Sam had been to both places albeit on a shoestring budget while Donovan had done little traveling.

Yet even as they discussed various tour packages to European cities filled with history, fine food and culture, or Asian mountains imbued with ancient religious significance, each of them kept clicking on the beach packages, gazing with what had to be called longing at the beckoning photographs of the turquoise sea, the white sand and the vast blue sky. These images that had once defined their prison, with enough time and distance, had regained their beauty and allure.

As Donovan watched Sam look at their destination printed on their first-class airline tickets, he was suddenly worried he'd overstepped, making a decision for the two of them that really should have been made together. "I can still get a refund," he said hurriedly, "if you don't want to go. I mean, I should have asked you first but I wanted to get you something really special in celebration of your show."

Sam answered by throwing his arms around Donovan. "It's the most perfect gift anyone ever gave me!" he said, echoing Donovan's words.

* * * * *

"No! No, don't go! No! Don't leave me here all alone!" Donovan was trying to scream but his voice was constricted, the sound muffled as if his mouth were stuffed with goo. Wildly he waved his arms at the passing plane, its engines whirring and rumbling over his head.

As it passed, so low he could see the pilot, he began to run after it, sobbing hysterically. He ran into the water, unaware of the waves as he thrashed and hurled himself after the receding plane. The pilot looked down on him, slowly shaking his head with sorrow. It was Sam. Donovan screamed again and fell face forward into the cold, indifferent sea...

"Donovan! Donovan, wake up! It's a dream. It's just a dream, hush. It's okay." Donovan heard Sam's soothing voice and struggled to regain consciousness, to take a breath, to lift himself out of the cold, miserable ocean, an ocean that still felt more real than the strong arms wrapping around him. He was breathing hard, barely able to keep from screaming aloud as he struggled to orient himself, his heart slamming in his chest.

Sam continued to stroke and soothe him. "Sam?" he said, finally able to focus on the man beside him. "I was dreaming. It was horrible. You were in a plane and I was on the island but you couldn't save me. I had to die. I had to drown for you to get away —"

"Shh," Sam put a finger over Donovan's lips. "Don't relive it. Let it go. It was just a dream. Just jumbled memories and old fears. You're here with me, safe and sound, I promise."

Donovan lay back in the bed, allowing Sam to daub his sweaty forehead with the edge of the soft white sheet. Already the terror that had held him in its powerful sway seemed to be receding like the waves with an outgoing tide. He turned and smiled sheepishly at his lover. "God, what an idiot you must think I am. Was I yelling or something? Is that how you knew I was having a nightmare?"

"You were. You were shouting, 'No! No! Don't go, no!' I knew it was another island dream. Though you haven't had one for a long time."

Donovan thought about this. When they'd first been rescued, he'd had nightmares just about every night. Sam had admitted to having them as well, though his were less intense and less frightening, and he seemed more easily able to let them go once he awoke. For Donovan, the pall of these dreams would sometimes hang over him the entire day, blackening his mood and leaving him morose and edgy. Yet the more time that passed and the more content he became with his life and himself, the less frequently his sleep was disturbed by lingering fears.

Sam turned on the little lamp by his side of the bed and reached for a bottle of water. He offered it to Donovan and then took a drink himself. "It's probably because we're on the beach. The sound of the crashing waves affected your dreams."

"That's probably it," Donovan agreed. "Well, I'm sorry I woke you. I hope you can go back to sleep."

Sam flicked off the light and answered, "If I'm in your arms I can." He snuggled against Donovan's side, resting his cheek on Donovan's chest. Donovan stroked his blond head, thinking how Sam always managed to empower Donovan when he felt his weakest. He had been embarrassed over his emotional display as he awoke from the nightmare and Sam had been there to comfort and reassure him. Yet instead of behaving in any way superior or smug, Sam had placed himself into Donovan's arms, subtly shifting the balance of power back to Donovan, restoring him to himself with that simple sentence and gesture.

Donovan kissed the top of Sam's head, stunned anew at his amazing fortune to be loved by this man. With a smile he closed his eyes, this time drifting into peaceful sleep until the sun awoke them.

* * * * *

Donovan slammed the lid of his laptop down in frustration. "I keep starting and stopping. I get a few thousand words down and then end up deleting the whole thing! I should just forget this. I'm no writer!"

"You got a \$25,000 advance from a publisher who thinks you are!" Sam answered, grinning. They were sitting together under a large umbrella on their own private section of a very exclusive resort in Fiji, the South Pacific paradise. There were only twelve bungalows on the entire island, nestled behind swaying palm trees and tropical gardens. The actual resort, located at the center of the island, contained two five-star restaurants, an indoor pool, full spa treatment and a boutique. The living accommodations were luxuriously appointed with every possible amenity, but more important to both Sam and Donovan, they were completely private and only yards from the shore. Except for the fact they were now on the Pacific instead of the Atlantic, it could have been their island.

Sam hated to see Donovan looking so miserable right there in the center of paradise. Donovan had his laptop perched on his knees. He turned toward Sam. "I never should have accepted that advance!"

"Look," Sam said gently. "I know it's tough to get started. When Tim commissioned me for my first show I went into a tailspin. I couldn't seem to get started either. I was so afraid of producing something horrible I kept doubting myself and giving up in disgust."

"You? But that's crazy. You were already fantastic before Tim found you. You just didn't have the exposure yet."

"Well, thank you for that, but I may have had talent," he ducked his head a little in self-deprecation, "but you're right. I hadn't had a lot of success on my own and I honestly didn't know if there was a market for my work. It took a leap of faith—not only mine but Tim's to get to the point where I could produce without worrying about the end results. This may sound corny but I let my muse take over and that's when things really started to fall into place."

"But I don't have a muse. I'm not a writer! I've never done this before!"

"But you have," Sam insisted. "I've read some of your legal briefs and your summary arguments to the judge. You have a real flair with words, Donovan. I would never have encouraged you in this project if I hadn't seen your talent for myself. You could write a wonderful story. You could tell our story and get paid in the process! How cool is that?"

"Our story?" Donovan looked over at Sam with a question in his eyes. "How much of our story are you willing to share?"

"Well, that's up to you, I suppose," Sam said slowly. While Donovan claimed to be completely comfortable with their lifestyle and his "orientation" as he liked to call it, Sam knew there were still lingering reservations. When Donovan didn't respond, he added, "It doesn't have to be *our* story per se. Think about my paintings. They're of you,

but they're not. It's not your face, but the strokes and colors suggest you. It's an impression, a feeling almost. That's what I strive for anyway."

"Yes! I understand what you mean. I could still describe what happened, the actual facts of the shipwreck and being marooned, but our actual story could be more of an impressionist work. I wonder if the editor would go for it though..."

"Call her and run it by her. What have you got to lose? This could be more than just one of those 'flash in the pan' sensationalist pieces as your father so derisively predicted you would write. It could be a real piece of literature. A blending of fact and fiction to paint a picture—a picture people would want to look at again and again."

Sam watched Donovan as he contemplated Sam's idea. His eyes narrowed as he stared out at the ocean. Something in his face seemed to change. It was almost as if a suffusion of light had illuminated his features from within. He looked calm but just beneath that calm, deeply excited. Sam recognized the look and knew the feeling that lay beneath it.

Donovan had found his muse. Lifting the lid of his laptop, he began to write.

* * * * *

"Right here? Out in the open?" Donovan looked around the empty beach and back at Sam, hesitating. They had just finished a sumptuous breakfast provided by room service, eaten out on their front veranda, which faced the ocean and was surrounded by carefully tended tropical gardens. The discreet waitstaff would not return until summoned.

"Why not?" Sam asked, grinning. "It'll be just like on the island, only better because we can shower afterward." He laughed and Donovan grinned back. "It's not like anyone's going to see us. The closest bungalow is a quarter mile from here and surrounded by as much foliage and palm trees as ours is. Come on, I want to make love on the beach." He reached over and touched Donovan's cock, already erect in his bathing suit despite his protests. "Your mouth may be saying 'no' but your body's saying 'yes'," Sam said with a sly grin.

"How can I resist you?" Donovan said with an elaborate shrug.

"You can't," Sam retorted. "That's why I love you." He got up and went inside, returning in a moment with a blanket. He walked down the stairs of the veranda to the soft white sand below, spreading the blanket beneath the shade of a tall palm tree. As Donovan watched, he stepped out of his denim shorts and stood naked, his gorgeous body a golden tan.

Donovan followed him, not yet willing to take off his bathing shorts, his eyes locked on Sam's thick erect cock. They both enjoyed mild games of domination and submission from time to time—one or the other taking the lead and commanding the other to serve him sexually. It was a game Donovan thrilled to, whichever side he was on.

Thus when Sam said, "Strip and kneel at my cock, boy," Donovan felt the little catch of his breath and his cock, if possible, became harder than it already was. He knew by the tone of his voice and the erotic glitter in Sam's eye he intended to "use" him today.

Eagerly he knelt at Sam's feet, pulling his bathing suit from his body and tossing it aside. Since Sam had ordered it, the decision and worry had been taken from Donovan. He would simply obey his lover.

Sam stroked his head, caressing his cheek for a moment. Tilting Donovan's chin so he had to look up, Sam whispered, "Are you ready to serve me? To please me?" Donovan nodded, his heart tapping with excitement though he knew it was just a game. "Good," Sam whispered as he pressed the back of Donovan's head, sliding his hard cock into Donovan's mouth.

He closed his eyes, reveling in the spicy-sweet taste of his lover's cock as he began to thrust in Donovan's mouth. How far he had come from the hesitant, fearful, gagging novice he had been on the island. Now he was able to relax completely, opening his throat as he received Sam's loving onslaught, thrilling to Sam's strong hands holding him still as he brought himself to the edge of orgasm.

Sam said in a ragged voice, "I want you." Donovan knew what he wanted. Dropping to his hands and knees, he watched as Sam pulled a condom from the pocket of his shorts and rolled it onto his hard cock. The pre-lubricated sheath glistened in the morning sun as he knelt behind Donovan. Sam draped his body over Donovan's, allowing Donovan to support him with his strong back as he wrapped his arms around Donovan's body, reaching beneath to find and stroke his cock and balls.

"You ready for me?" Sam whispered.

"Yes, oh god, yes," Donovan responded. He couldn't help but glance around the empty shore, aware that though it was unlikely, it was possible someone could approach from either side and catch them naked in the act. What would he do if that happened?

Sam laughed a throaty, sensual chuckle as he observed his nervous glance. "You're afraid someone might see you, hmm? Doesn't matter. At this moment you exist for one purpose—to please me. And it pleases me to have you here naked on this beach, on your hands and knees with your ass cheeks spread, ready to receive your lover."

Donovan shivered despite himself, deeply aroused by Sam's dominant words. He moaned with anticipation as Sam squeezed his cock and moved himself into position. As he felt the head of Sam's cock touch his nether entrance, he pressed back, eager, almost desperate for its invasion. He pushed back against his lover, grunting as he felt Sam's cock enter his ass.

Sam murmured, "Hot boy. You want it bad, huh? You need it bad."

"Yes, yes! Fuck me. Do it," Donovan responded, any fear of discovery by curious neighbors completely forgotten as Sam filled him, holding him by the hips to guide himself in all the way.

Together they rocked, their cries of ecstasy mingling in the fine clear air of the tropical morning. Donovan felt Sam's hand close over his cock as his shaft thrust inside of him. He felt Sam's lips gliding over his neck as he bent forward to kiss him. Donovan knew at that moment he was happier than he'd ever dreamed possible. He felt completely fulfilled. It wasn't only the perfect, delicious, edgy sex, it wasn't only this amazing stretch of beautiful beach—as secluded as their own island, it wasn't only the fact he was with the one person with whom he had ever connected on any meaningful level. It was all of those things and it was more.

Together they rolled to their sides, Sam's strong arms wrapped around his lover as he whispered, "I love you."

"I love you, Sam. With all my heart."

He finally truly understood with every fiber of his being—love was the key. In the end nothing else mattered, nothing else had ever mattered.

About the Author

Claire Thompson has written numerous novels and short stories, all exploring aspects of Dominance & submission. Ms. Thompson's gentler novels seek not only to tell a story, but to come to grips with, and ultimately exalt in the true beauty and spirituality of a loving exchange of power. Her darker works press the envelope of what is erotic and what can be a sometimes dangerous slide into the world of sadomasochism. She writes about the timeless themes of sexuality and romance, with twists and curves to examine the 'darker' side of the human psyche. Ultimately Claire's work deals with the human condition, and our constant search for love and intensity of experience.

Claire welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Claire Thompson

A Lover's Call

Bird In a Cage – *with J.W. McKenna*

Closely Held Secrets

Club de Sade

Continuum of Longing

Crimson Ties

Face of Submission

Golden Boy

Golden Man

Jewel Thief

Outcast

Pleasure Planet *anthology*

Sacred Blood

Sacred Circle

Secret Diaries

The Seduction of Colette

Slave Castle

Slave Gamble

Turning Tricks



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com