

A photograph of a man's profile, shirtless, looking out over a tropical beach. In the background, another person is lying on the sand near the water's edge. The sky is blue with some clouds.

Out for Christmas

Amelia Elias

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Amelia Elias

Dedication

To SMS. Your bravery and strength are an inspiration. I'm so proud of you for being who you are, without fear. This story's for you, with all my love.

Chapter One

Bright golden sunshine kissed crystalline waters as waves rushed the beach. White foam frothed around the feet of sunbathers and laughing families. Not a single cloud marred the perfect blue sky. Light glistened off bare skin and shimmering sand. It was a sun-worshiper's wet dream come to life.

Zach wished he had never come here.

Ever since he'd first learned that in Australia, Christmas happened at the height of summer instead of the depths of winter, he'd dreamed of spending the holidays lounging on the beach. Snorkeling on Christmas Eve and grilling steaks on the patio for Christmas dinner. He'd been waiting for this vacation, two weeks on Australia's beautiful Gold Coast, literally his entire life.

He'd just planned on having a bride with him on his honeymoon. As it was, he was all alone in this lavish honeymoon suite.

Of course, the solitude was supposed to allow him to nurse his broken heart in peace. He was finding that solitude was boring as hell when his heart didn't feel all that broken. It wasn't something he planned on admitting to anyone, no more than he planned on explaining exactly why his blushing bride had been stricken with an acute case of cold feet three weeks before the wedding. Honestly, he was still struggling to come to terms with it himself.

Honestly? The fact that he was thinking about it at all proved he wasn't nearly drunk enough. No way did he plan on watching another perfect sunset alone without significantly more "tinnies" to help drown out the thoughts.

Zach sighed and upended his beer—empty. Again. He dropped the can atop the growing pile in the trash basket and blindly rummaged in

the ice bucket for another. Afraid he might be becoming too much of a regular at the hotel bar, he'd bought a six-pack to enjoy in the peace and privacy of his room. Surely he hadn't already finished them all.

No luck. He looked over, dug a little deeper, still came up empty-handed. Out of brews. He was buzzed, but nowhere near numb. This was just getting better and better. He supposed he'd just risk a few disapproving glances and hit the bar again tonight.

Jamming his feet into a pair of rubber flip-flops that had definitely seen better days, he searched for his wallet. Finally he found it under a pile of dirty T-shirts. Grimacing, he shoved it in the back pocket of his khaki shorts.

This unexpected return to bachelorhood had truly revived his inner slob.

Refusing to think about it, Zach quit the room and rode the elevator down to the bar. Six days into his stay, he couldn't find the pool without following the signs and he still wasn't positive if the hotel even had a café, but the bar? He could walk to the bar in his sleep. Might even have done so a time or two. He even had a favorite barstool, one at the far end that offered an unobstructed view of the bartender.

The *television*, he corrected himself hurriedly. Why the hell would a straight man be looking at the bartender, anyway?

What did he care if the bartender's dark blond hair sported the same sun-kissed highlights Zach's fiancée had spent such a pretty penny to obtain, or that it just slightly curled over the back of his collar? Zach hadn't even noticed his tan, or the smile-lines around his deep green eyes. And he certainly hadn't entertained a single thought about how well the bartender filled out a pair of slacks.

Zach groaned and rubbed his forehead. What the hell was wrong with him?

The bar was mostly empty when he walked in. A glance out the glass doors showed why—the beach was packed. From time to time a patron would order a drink and take it out on the beach in a frosty plastic glass. Sunset painted the sky in brilliant red and orange hues, casting golden

rays over surfers riding the day's last waves. The twinkling Christmas lights strung above the doors were the only reminders of the holiday.

He slid onto his favored barstool and glanced at the bartender, whose back was to Zach as he poured a frothy white concoction into another plastic glass. A pink paper umbrella and several cherries topped the drink before he handed it to the waiting customer. A curvy young woman in a miniscule white bikini gave him a dazzling smile as she accepted it.

Zach took his time gazing at her as she paid for her drink. Her breasts were perfect handfuls, round and pert, barely covered by the twin triangles of her bikini top. A sparkling diamond nestled in her navel, accentuating her smooth, flat belly. Golden from the sun, her skin looked soft as velvet. When she turned to walk back out to the beach, Zach got an eyeful of her firm ass bisected by her thong.

Now that's what Zach called a white Christmas to remember.

But as he watched her sashay to the doors, drawing the gaze of every male in the room, Zach felt...nothing. He didn't feel even the slightest urge to follow her. His cock didn't so much as twitch.

Maybe he was going impotent. A shudder worked down his spine. It wasn't something any man wanted to think about, but at least it would explain a few things. Besides, he could always get a few of those little blue pills if he had to. He sighed and returned his gaze to the bartender, his desire for a beer overpowering his reluctance to face the other man.

And froze as disappointment stunned him. This wasn't his bartender.

Tonight's bartender wore a nametag, which read "Louis". As he approached Zach's end of the bar, it was clear that his "highlights" were merely streaks of silver in his blond hair. Louis was probably on the far side of fifty, but his body was as toned as a man half his age—but he wasn't anything near as muscular as the other bartender.

And just when had Zach started making such an intensive study of other men, anyway? His mind tried to return to the day Lisa had left him, but he forced the thought away. That had been an aberration, nothing more, no matter what she said.

Louis was staring expectantly and Zach realized he'd asked for his order.

"He drinks Heineken," another voice answered before Zach regained his composure. "Give me the same, Lou."

"Coming up."

He barely registered Lou's reply as the man who had occupied far too much of his thoughts lately slid onto the neighboring stool. Dressed in low-slung swim trunks and an open Hawaiian shirt, the sight of him hit Zach like a punch to the stomach. His gaze dropped to the bartender's bare chest before Zach could stop it, and the stirring below his belt blew his impotence theory clean out of the water.

When he realized he was staring, he shook his head sharply and forced himself to look the other man straight in the eye. "Thanks," he said, and was relieved to hear his voice sounded rock-steady.

The newcomer smiled. Zach was momentarily sidelined by the sight of those full lips curving, parting to display even, white teeth before he realized the other man was holding out his hand.

"No problem. I thought you might show up tonight. Mitchell Grey. Call me Mitch."

Zach shook. Mitch's hand was big, his palm slightly callused, and the contact set butterflies loose in his stomach. It was increasingly difficult to keep his gaze from straying again. "Zach Myers, from LA," he replied, telling himself these urges must be some strange side effect of all the beer he'd been drinking lately.

Was it his imagination, or did Mitch grip his hand just a shade too long?

Imagination or not, Zach found himself reluctant to let go first. Mitch's smile broadened a bit before he dropped Zach's hand. "Nice place, LA. Got a sister there. So how long are you staying, Zach?"

Louis returned before Zach could answer and set two frosty bottles before them. He shook his head when Zach reached for his wallet. "No charge. Call it a frequent flyer discount, mate."

Louis's tone was totally devoid of criticism, but Zach's stomach knotted anyway. He was suddenly aware just how much time he'd spent sitting in this very spot. Since he'd arrived, he'd slept and drank, nothing else. He forced a smile and a nod of thanks, hyperaware of Mitch and wishing he'd made a better first impression.

Mitchell sipped his beer and cocked an eyebrow at him. "Seen much of the land of Oz?" he asked as though reading Zach's mind.

He felt the back of his neck heat with embarrassment. "No," he admitted. "Not yet, anyway."

"Well, there's more to the Gold Coast than this bar." Mitch's smile took the sting from the gentle rebuke. "C'mon outside. I've seen you for the last six days and you haven't hit the beach once." He rose and walked to the glass doors, not even glancing back to see if Zach followed.

He did, of course. That magnetism he'd been busily rejecting for the last six days was in full force right now. He could no more have ignored Mitch's invitation than he could've ignored gravity.

A blast of heat washed over his skin as he followed Mitch through the doors. His flip-flops sank in the sand. Kicking them off, he dropped them beside the door and let the warm sand bake the soles of his feet. He took a deep gulp of beer, relishing its icy path down his throat, a delightful contrast to the heat of the evening. God, this was fantastic.

Mitch had stopped a few yards away and was watching him intently. The sunset behind him framed his silhouette in fiery colors. The contrast hid his expression. "Nicer than sitting in the room, eh?" he said, then took a swig of his own beer.

"Yeah, it's fantastic." He crossed the distance between them and stopped beside Mitch. The sound of the surf, the seagulls, the laughter and chatter of the sunbathers... It was everything he'd imagined when he'd planned this trip, only a thousand times better. He dropped his head back and took a deep breath, then stumbled a little when his head spun. "Whoa. Think those beers just hit me."

Mitch nodded, taking another sip from his bottle. "So, Zach from LA, why are you spending Christmas in my bar instead of out here on the

beach, ogling the scenery?” He gestured with the bottle, indicating all the bikini-clad beauties taking advantage of the last of the day’s sunshine along the beach.

The question should’ve sobered him up. Instead, Zach sat down on the sand and sighed with pleasure at the warmth seeping through his shorts. Mitch had led him a fair distance away from the noise of the crowd and Zach soaked in the peace. “If I never see another woman again, I’ll die a happy man,” he said, ignoring the scantily clad women and watching the waves slap the sand instead.

“Ahh.”

Mitch sat down beside him and let the silence stretch out. Instead of being awkward, the lull in the conversation soothed Zach’s nerves. The sunset slowly faded before Mitch spoke again. “You know, one of the things they teach us barmen is how to listen to tales of woe. Wanna try me?”

Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe it was the calming sound of the rushing surf or the way the warm sand cradled his body in perfect comfort. Whatever the reason, abruptly Zach *did* want to talk about it. “My fiancée dumped me three weeks before our wedding. She caught me looking at someone else.”

“Sounds a mite extreme to me.”

Zach took a deep breath and braced himself for this near-stranger’s disgust and rejection, but still forced the words out. He felt as though he *had* to say the words at least once. “It was a man. Her gardener, how’s that for a cliché? She caught me staring at him and jacking off.”

“Ahh.” That single syllable carried no disgust, no rejection. Mitch didn’t even sound surprised. “I’ve noticed you staring a time or two myself. It’s no fun in the closet, mate. How about you step out for a bit?”

Chapter Two

“What?”

The word exploded out of Zach’s mouth before he could hold it back. He couldn’t have heard that right. *Step out of the closet?* He wasn’t *in* the closet—hell, he wasn’t gay! That afternoon when Zach had watched Lisa’s gardener trimming her hedges with his shirt off, that had been a fluke, nothing more. Okay, so he’d touched himself—what man hadn’t jacked off from time to time? There was nothing wrong with him!

Mitch’s smile didn’t waver despite his overloud response. “I said me and some mates are having a barbeque tomorrow night. Why don’t you stop by for a bit?”

Zach stared for a moment. No, he hadn’t said a damn thing about a barbeque...or had he? Had Zach’s own paranoia and the week of drinking caused him to hear something so very different from what was said?

He shook his head and pressed the heel of his hand to his temple, wondering if this was what it felt like to lose his mind. “Yeah,” he made himself reply. “Yeah, I might stop by. Better than sitting in that room by myself for another night.”

The bartender slapped him on the back, looking satisfied. “Good, mate. Hoped you’d say that. Just walk down the beach tomorrow at sunset until you see the lanterns—we used to have a bonfire before they outlawed ‘em. Bring some brews if you want, but you don’t have to. Just show up and we’ll take care of the rest.”

No answer seemed necessary, so Zach just nodded and lay back on the sand. They watched the sunset fade in silence. It was one of the most

peaceful moments Zach had experienced in far too long and he let himself get lost in it, enjoying the warmth of the sand beneath him and the silent presence of Mitch beside him. Strange invitation aside, the barman seemed like a decent sort of guy.

It seemed like no time at all had passed before Mitch nudged his knee. "C'mon, you'd better get back before you fall asleep out here."

"I'm not falling asleep," Zach started to protest, but the words got lost in a massive yawn. He gave up and nodded before sitting, delaying getting to his feet. The heat from the sand had relaxed his tight muscles and he stretched, reveling in the looseness of his body. "God, this place is fantastic," he said as he let his arms drop.

Mitch nodded. "Wouldn't want to live anywhere else, me'self."

"Let's hang here just a few minutes more before we head back," Zach said, not quite ready to abandon this tranquil spot. It was the first time in weeks that he'd really felt relaxed.

The soft sound of the waves on the sand filled the night. The gentle warmth of the air surrounded them with an illusion of privacy and solitude. Mitch couldn't blame him for not wanting to give it up just yet. It was a perfect evening, and he could practically feel the stress leaving Zach as they sat there in silence. He reminded Mitch so much of himself a few years ago. Not in looks, and not in behavior.

No, it was his eyes. Zach looked at him with eyes shadowed with loneliness, and Mitch was completely positive that he was unaware of what they showed the world. More eloquently than any words, they gave away his insecurity, his fears, and the traces of a desperation that Mitch understood only too well.

Mitch remembered feeling that way, years ago. Remembered the fear of what his family would think if they knew his secret. The fear of the reactions of friends, coworkers...hell, even strangers. How could he face what he was, go through the agony of coming out? But then again, how could he not do it and keep living the lie that felt like it was killing him from the inside out?

There was no doubt in his mind that Zach wrestled with the same fears right now.

Mitch leaned back, out of Zach's sight line, so he could observe the other man at his leisure. Tall and lean, Zach had sported a golden tan when he'd arrived six days ago. It had faded noticeably during his self-inflicted confinement, but the sun-bleached highlights in his dark hair remained. There were faint lines around his dark eyes, a pattern that testified to long days spent squinting against the brightness. This man obviously loved the sun and the outdoors.

Mitch watched him raise his beer and take a deep drink, catching a glimpse of calluses on the side of his palm and thumb. He wondered what they were from—weights, boating, working on his home? The movement caused Zach's lurid Hawaiian shirt to gape, exposing his chest. Mmm, mmm, hard muscles and just a dusting of dark hairs. The man was a hard-body, not muscle-bound like a gym addict, but built with muscles that clearly came from real work. Mitch took a drink of his own beer and surreptitiously adjusted his shorts to hide his own growing interest.

Full dark had fallen before either of them broke the silence. "Probably should be heading back," Zach said, and although he tried to hide it, a hint of wistfulness came through. "Your girlfriend's probably wondering what happened to you."

Mitch grinned. He couldn't help it. A man with more experience could have found a more subtle way to find out if Mitch was single and straight, but Zach's very clumsiness was endearing. "No girlfriend, and no desire to have one. No woman ever holds my strings, mate."

* * *

Those words lingered in Zach's mind as he left his hotel room the next evening. Mitch had occupied his thoughts almost all day, and he was getting annoyed with his own obsession.

Annoyance, however, didn't make the questions go away. What exactly had Mitch meant by that remark? Was he gay, or was he merely one of the few men who could control a relationship? In Zach's experience, women often held the reins and steered the relationship, but Mitch was undeniably charismatic and attractive. Perhaps he could keep a woman fascinated enough that he was the one calling the shots, not her.

Or maybe the Aussie really wasn't into women at all...

And why the hell was Zach still hung up on this train of thought when he'd just told himself he wasn't going to think about Mitch anymore?

Zach shook his head to clear it and walked through the bar to the beach. It was another perfect evening, hot and clear, scented of the sea and the faint coconut hint of sunscreen from the many bodies taking advantage of the gorgeous weather. He'd actually gotten up early and taken a walk down the beach that morning before most of the holiday revelers were out. The solitude of the nearly empty beach was incredibly soothing, as were the cool breezes from the ocean contrasting with the hot bitterness of his morning coffee on his tongue. It had been one of the best mornings of his life, exactly the sort of thing he'd dreamt of for years.

And he might never have experienced it if Mitch hadn't gently brought him out of his self-imposed exile yesterday. Gratitude and something more filled his chest in a hot wave when he thought of the bartender. Ever since he'd returned to the hotel after his walk, he'd been anxious for the evening to arrive. Even more than experiencing the sunrise, barbequing on the beach had been one of his main dreams about Christmas on the Gold Coast, after all.

Really, that was why he was excited. Not because Mitch would be there, quite probably wearing those hip-hugging swim trunks again.

The beach in evening might have been a different world entirely from the lonely stretch of pristine sand he'd walked at sunrise. Zach took his time strolling down the shore, both to enjoy the warmth of the sand even

through his thongs and to quiet his not entirely unexpected case of nerves. He'd given up talking himself out of his anxiety hours ago and didn't let himself think too much about it now. It was enough just to exist in this moment without anticipating the evening ahead.

Just as Mitch had promised, Zach soon saw the glow of lanterns in the distance. Soon he heard the strumming of a guitar and the pleasant murmur of talk and laughter. It certainly sounded like a party. He quickened his steps, but then paused, suddenly conscious of his empty hands. Should he have brought something? Mitch had said he didn't need to, but wasn't it rude to show up without anything? They hadn't seen him yet, maybe there was still time to run back to the hotel and grab a six-pack at the store down the lane—

“Hey, Zach! Good to see you, mate, c'mon over!”

Mitch's shout stopped that thought in its tracks. He was walking out of the surf like Adonis rising, water slicking back his hair and trickling down the muscles of his chest and abs. And he *was* wearing those swim trunks, riding low on his hips, exposing the flat plane of his belly and the hint of a dark gold trail of hair vanishing beneath them. Zach found a smile as he returned Mitch's wave. Walking forward again, he tried to ignore the new surge of butterflies in his stomach and the much less welcome rush of heat further south.

The glow brightened as he crested a sand dune and the barbeque was revealed below. Ringed by merrily burning tiki torches decorated with tinsel, several beach chairs and coolers surrounded a charcoal grill. A folding table was set up beside the grill, holding chips, buns, and condiments of all sorts. The scents of barbeque, citronella, and the sea blended into the unmistakable perfume of beach parties everywhere.

The familiarity of it was welcome. He'd been so off-balance over the last month, he could use a bit of the familiar.

Mitch grabbed a beach towel off one of the chairs and rubbed it over his chest and hair. “Glad to see you,” he said as he tossed the towel aside. “Grab a beer. Burgers'll be ready in a bit, unless you want one rare.”

"I'll wait," Zach replied. Although he liked his steaks rare enough to moo, he'd never much cared for rare burgers. One of the other men reached into a cooler and offered him a frosty can. "Thanks," he said, accepting it. Just what he needed—a beer or two would drown those annoying butterflies soon enough. "I'm Zach."

"Steve," the man supplied with a grin.

"Oh, yeah," Mitch said. He grabbed a can for himself and pointed around the group with it. "Intros, forgot that. Right, Steve's minding the coolers, there's Second Steve making a mess of that tomato. Don't point that finger at me, you wanker, I know where it's been. That's Andy at the grill. Mike's off swimming there. He's here with Jason—bloke with the sunburn. Then there's Pete and Marty, the one with the guitar. Did I get everyone?"

There was a chorus of "hey there" and "g'day" and "glad to know you" as Mitch introduced everyone. Zach knew he wouldn't remember every name, especially because he'd lost the thread of the introductions in the middle.

What had Mitch meant when he'd said Mike was "here with" Jason? Surely he hadn't intended to imply they were... together. Not like a couple.

Just what the hell kind of party was this, anyway?

He swigged his beer to hide his sudden misgivings. Maybe he hadn't imagined that "out of the closet" comment on the beach last night.

And then again, maybe he was making a mountain out of a molehill. Still, of all the beach parties he'd attended in his life—and living in Southern California, he'd certainly been to a fair few—this was the first he'd seen where there were no women in attendance at all.

By the time Andy proclaimed the burgers done and Zach accepted a patty approximately the same size as the foam plate, Zach's confusion about Mike and Jason was gone. They were indeed a couple, and no one seemed to think it was the slightest bit odd.

Mike made Jason's burger, adding spicy mustard and extra pickles with confidence. Jason accepted the plate and dropped a casual kiss on

his partner's whiskered cheek. No one else in the group spared them so much as a glance. Zach knew he was staring at them, but he couldn't seem to stop.

All right, Los Angeles wasn't exactly the Bible Belt. In fact, Zach couldn't think of any city that was less repressive. He'd seen plenty of gay couples. Honestly, he'd never given them much thought back home—he firmly believed that what went on in the bedroom was no one else's business. But then again he'd never...well, never seen them up close like this. He couldn't seem to look away. He felt like a voyeur, like he was seeing something rare and wonderful and at the same time, strange and even a little bit disturbing.

He felt...envious. And he didn't particularly want to look at that very closely.

Instead, he concentrated on Mitch. The bartender grabbed his own burger and squirted a huge blob of ketchup onto it. He skipped all the other condiments and bypassed most of the sliced vegetables before layering on several thick slices of tomato.

When Mitch grabbed not a handful, but an entire bag of ketchup-flavored chips before sitting down on the sand beside him, Zach couldn't help but laugh. "Got a thing for tomatoes, I see."

Mitch grinned. "Only veg I can stand," he admitted. "So when I eat 'em, I try to get all I can in one sitting."

Zach laughed again and bit into his own burger. There was just something about meat cooked over a real fire that no amount of added seasonings or liquid smoke could ever mimic. A trickle of juice ran down his chin and he wiped it with the heel of his hand. Mitch pressed a napkin into his hand and he smiled his thanks, mouth still full.

His eyes went back to Mike and Jason again—Jason stole a chip from Mike's plate and Mike retaliated by dropping an ice cube down the back of Jason's swim trunks. Everyone laughed at Jason's shout of outrage.

"They've only been together two months," Mitch murmured, seeing the direction of his gaze. Several of the others were laughing and tossing

ice cubes at the couple as Jason rubbed sand in Mike's hair. "They're still a bit giddy with it."

"I don't mean to stare." The words were out before Zach fully intended to speak.

Mitch shrugged. "No worries. Just thought I should let you know not we're not all so obvious about it. Seems like it's on your mind."

That simple sentence hit Zach like a thunderbolt. He looked around the circle again, noticing who sat together, which men seemed to hold each other's gaze longer. "You mean everyone—" he started, and realized he had no idea how to end the sentence. He took another bite to cover his confusion and hoped the dim torchlight wasn't enough to show the heat on his cheeks.

Everyone was...what? And did that include Mitch?

Mitch finished for him. "Is everyone here gay? Mostly, apart from Second Steve. He's bi, currently single." Mitch gave Zach a penetrating glance that almost distracted him from the shock of knowing that Mitch was indeed gay. "You, I might guess as bi-curious?"

His tone made it a question, one Zach wasn't quite sure how to answer. Bi-curious... He'd never really thought about that. He hadn't heard the term before, but he didn't need to ask what it meant. Still, he hadn't imagined there could be a middle ground between gay and straight. Somehow, the realization that there was such a thing as bi-curious, and that here was a group of men who wouldn't judge or be disgusted if Zach was, stilled the persistent nervous flutter in his gut as the beer had failed to do.

And curiosity seemed like the best way to label these weird urges he'd been unable to repress lately.

He didn't look at Mitch to see if he was waiting for an answer. Still, he felt the urge to give one and struggled to swallow his overly large bite of hamburger. "Honestly? I...don't really know."

Then he did turn to glance at Mitch and was relieved to find him smiling. "If you'd like help figuring it out," he murmured, "come walk with me."

Chapter Three

No one in the group commented as Zach and Mitch tossed their empty plates into the trash bag and walked off down the beach, farther from the hotel lights. Zach had finished his beer but hadn't grabbed another one, and he regretted not having something to do with his hands. His swim trunks didn't have pockets to cram his hands into. He found himself compulsively clenching and unclenching his fists and tried to force himself to stop the movement. It gave away his nervousness completely.

Mitch glanced over at him and smiled slightly. "Want a swim?"

He latched onto the suggestion eagerly. "Yeah."

Kicking off his flip-flops, he tugged his T-shirt over his head and dropped it atop his shoes. Mitch was already barefoot and shirtless and didn't wait for Zach before jogging into the surf. Zach plunged in after him.

The water was warm, soothing. He ducked under a wave and swam out, enjoying the feel of the water sliding down his body. How had he managed to spend a full week on the Gold Coast without once getting in the ocean? He turned, spotted Mitch's blond head a few yards away and swam toward him.

The other man smiled as Zach stopped beside him. It was shallow enough for his feet to touch the sandy bottom. If Mitch hadn't given him that gentle wake-up call, making him aware of how he was wasting his time here... Zach returned the smile and took a breath to tell Mitch how much he appreciated the invite to come here tonight.

And never got a chance to speak a word. Mitch was suddenly right in front of him, hands on Zach's shoulders, and Zach was too stunned to even protest as Mitch kissed him full on the mouth.

It was the most shocking moment of his life. Mitch's mouth was firm, sure against his own. The faint prickle of whiskers teased Zach's upper lip. Mitch didn't try to part his lips, didn't attempt to deepen the brief kiss, but electricity shot straight down Zach's spine anyway. He felt a brief sting as Mitch nipped his lower lip, started to part his lips to experience more of this unexpected pleasure, and then it was over.

His hand went to his lips instinctively as his brain finally caught up with the events of the last few seconds. *He had just been kissed by another man—and by God, he'd actually liked it.*

More than liked it, if his sudden hard-on was any indication.

Mitch released his shoulders and floated a bit away, giving him space. He didn't seem embarrassed or disconcerted at all. "Best to get the first one out of the way like that," he said, his mouth—that mouth that had just been on Zach's, teasing and nibbling—still curved in a ghost of a smile. "Gets the shock over fastest. Gonna punch me or anything?"

Zach shook his head, still in a state of awed confusion. Kisses had never done much for him before, not even with his fiancée. This, however...this was what he'd always thought a kiss should feel like. The spark of desire, the way every thought had been wiped clean from his mind. Finally he found his voice. "I...um, I didn't expect to like that." Even to his own ears, it sounded stupid. Those lame words didn't come close to describing his true reaction to that unexpected kiss.

Mitch's ghost of a smile bloomed into the real thing. The dark water surrounded them like a warm blanket, isolating them from the rest of the world. Moonlight glinted in Mitch's eyes. "I had a feeling you might," he said. He swirled his arms in the water, drawing nearer and floating back again. "Next time it's your turn."

Zach didn't let himself hesitate. Reaching out and grabbing Mitch by the forearm, he pulled the other man through the water until he was right in front of him. Despite his words, Mitch met him halfway.

Their mouths met, fused. This time neither of them held back. Zach shuddered at the first brush of Mitch's tongue against his. Unsure where to put his hands, Zach held onto Mitch's shoulders, but the Aussie had no such hesitation. He wrapped one arm around Zach's waist and cupped the back of his head with his other hand. He quickly took control of the kiss and Zach let him, eagerly following his lead. One kiss led seamlessly into another, and yet another. Zach's cock throbbed with arousal, his balls drew up tight against his body and he was stunned to realize that he was on the verge of orgasm from just kissing this man.

The faint scratch of Mitch's stubble against his cheek and the taste of beer on his tongue were new experiences, erotic in their novelty. Mitch groaned, a purely masculine sound. His bare chest vibrated against Zach's with the noise, sending another frisson of desire racing down Zach's spine. God, never had a kiss affected him like this!

Endless minutes later, Mitch pulled away and sucked in a great gasp of air. "Damn, mate," he groaned, just as breathless as Zach, "when you decide to try something new, you don't dick around, do you?"

Emboldened by Mitch's clear arousal, feeling a buzz that definitely hadn't come from the beer, Zach let his hands slide down the other man's arms. "I thought this definitely qualified as dicking around."

For a moment, Mitch just stared. Then he threw back his head and laughed, a full-throated laugh that seemed to heat the already warm night around them. Zach joined in, and the humor didn't disrupt the erotic mood. This was incredible. He let go of his fears and his hesitation, suddenly determined that he would just enjoy this moment. The acceptance. Mitch had been right—taking the plunge, getting that first kiss done before he could talk himself out of it, had freed him.

And that second kiss? It defied words. He didn't know what was going to happen next, and right now, he didn't care. All he wanted was more, and here, no one would judge him for taking it.

Finally, Mitch released him and started swimming lazily to shore. Zach followed. The slow swim should have given his erection time to ease, but the warmth of the water sliding sensually over his skin only

heightened his arousal. Watching Mitch rise from the sea, water sluicing down his back and dripping from his hair, made Zach want to trace the path of the droplets with his tongue. He followed Mitch up the beach to his discarded shirt and flip-flops, aware of his cock pushing against the front of his shorts but not making any effort to hide it.

A glance showed that Mitch was in a similar condition. Knowing he'd made Mitch hard was erotic all by itself.

And Mitch caught him looking. He grinned when their eyes met and Zach felt the back of his neck heat, but he didn't look away. "What now?" he asked, speaking before he was certain what he wanted to say.

Mitch ran his hands through his hair, squeezing water out in another spray of droplets. "Well, not to borrow a cheesy pick up line, but the phrase 'your place or mine' comes to mind."

Zach laughed again. He scooped his shirt from the sand and used it like a towel on his own hair. "Yours?" he said while the shirt still hid his face. He was pretty sure he was blushing and wasn't eager for it to be seen.

Warm fingers curled around his wrist, stopping the slightly over-enthusiastic drying of his hair. Zach let Mitch pull his hand away and met the Aussie's serious green eyes. "You sure about this, mate?"

His voice seemed stuck in his suddenly tight throat. *Go with it*, he told himself firmly. This was something he had always wondered about, something he had never let himself actually consider doing. He'd waited so long, had never thought he would ever have the chance to explore another man. When would he ever get the courage or have this kind of freedom again? "I'm sure," he said, and if Mitch heard the catch in his voice, he didn't comment on it.

"Come on, then. My Jeep's just over there."

The two men jogged up the beach, into the light. The serious moment had finally helped Zach's cock to subside a little, but he still carried his shirt and sandals in front of him self-consciously. Luckily, Mitch's Jeep was parked near the beach in a public lot and within minutes, they were driving through the night.

This was the first time Zach had seen the city since arriving a week ago and taking a taxi to the hotel, but he could hardly concentrate on his surroundings. He kept catching glimpses of Mitch's profile, strong and masculine, decidedly sexy, and every time he did, his thoughts scattered to the four winds. They stopped in front of a little apartment complex minutes later and Mitch killed the engine.

Zach's unreal feeling of freedom was fading with each passing second. As he followed the bartender to his apartment, the night suddenly seemed to be full of windows, each one of them watching. Judging.

What the hell was he doing?

Mitch unlocked his door and, the misgivings growing stronger, Zach followed him inside. A moment after the door closed behind them, Mitch vanished into the kitchen and he soon returned to press a cold beer into Zach's hand. "You're thinking," he said sternly. "Stop it."

Zach tried to laugh and failed. The lighthearted humor he'd felt in the ocean was gone. The bottle was already open and he drained half of it at one go, determined to drown his nerves. Mitch watched him steadily as he swallowed.

"You don't want to do this," Mitch said into the silence. "It's cool, you know. We can just hang, no strings. Maybe there's an American football game on telly or something."

Zach panicked as he saw his chance to explore his curiosity about Mitch, about his reaction to those incredible kisses, vanishing fast. "No," he said so quickly that he almost choked on his last swallow of beer. "No, I'm not backing out. I just..."

"You've just never done this and you've had time to think about it," Mitch finished for him. He crossed the room and gently took the beer from Zach. "But if you really do want to play a bit, let's see what I can do about that pesky thinking."

Zach closed his eyes, his heart pounding with an intoxicating mixture of desire, fear and anxiety. Keeping his eyes closed made it easier, made it seem less strange.

Mitch caressed his face for a moment before clasping Zach's hands in his. "Come with me," he murmured, tugging Zach farther into the apartment. "And do me one favor."

"Name it."

One finger tapped Zach's cheek until he gave in to the silent demand to look at Mitch. "Don't close your eyes."

Chapter Four

Zach swallowed hard as Mitch pushed him down onto the sofa. Could he possibly have asked for anything harder to do than that?

And Mitch clearly knew what that request meant. With his eyes wide open, Zach couldn't hide, couldn't pretend, couldn't do anything but live in this intense moment and accept whatever emotions and fears that came his way. He had no defenses against them.

He expected the Aussie to sit down beside him, but Mitch didn't. Sinking to his knees at Zach's feet instead, he braced his hands on either side of Zach's thighs and leaned in for a kiss. The position forced Zach to part his legs to allow Mitch close enough to kiss. Even as he moved to accommodate the other man and meet his mouth, Zach shivered with the unexpected vulnerability he felt.

Mitch didn't kiss him as he had in the ocean, hard and hot. This time he nibbled, coaxed. Seduced. His closed lips teased and caressed, moving away whenever Zach tried to angle his head to demand more, dipping back for another teasing brush when Zach started to pull away. It was sexy as hell, but it wasn't anywhere near enough.

Finally, frustration and arousal overcame his nervousness and Zach caught Mitch's face in his hands, trapping him when he would've pulled away yet again. With a low growl, Zach took the lead and kissed Mitch hard. When Mitch's lips finally parted and Zach was able to sweep his tongue inside, he could've sworn he heard the other man chuckle.

He ignored it, allowing himself to get lost in sensation. God, it was sexy to kiss a man like this! No worrying about getting lipstick smeared all over his mouth or catching an earring by accident when he ran his fingers through Mitch's hair. There was only taste, and heat, and the

confident, utterly sensual sweep of tongue against tongue. Zach's cock throbbed like a long hot coal, the head brushing his belly as he leaned still farther forward, trembling like a virgin when Mitch's palms slid up his thighs.

Long, hot, endless minutes later, Mitch broke the kiss, breathing as harshly as Zach. "Helluva mouth on you, mate," he groaned against the bare skin of Zach's chest an instant before his hot tongue swirled around one taut nipple.

The electric jolt of pleasure shot straight to Zach's cock. Mitch showed him no mercy, nipping and sucking, laving the hard little peak with his tongue before switching to the opposite side. Zach let his head drop back and squeezed his eyes shut, trying desperately not to come in his shorts. Damn, he'd never been so hard, so hot, so damn turned on by anything in his life.

A sharp bite on his biceps brought his head up fast. Mitch licked the spot he'd bitten, holding Zach's gaze. "Eyes open."

The lust laid bare in Mitch's gaze made Zach quake with desire. Mitch's smile was more than a little wicked as he returned to the nipple, worrying it with his teeth before sucking it hard. Zach's hips thrust upward and the friction of his shorts against his overheated cock almost did him in. "Goddamn," he groaned. "Slow down or I'll never last—"

His protest died as Mitch untied the swim shorts. "Lift your hips," he ordered, and Zach was only too happy to obey. The cool, damp material was only adding to his torment. He helped work them down and had just started wondering if more kissing would help him keep his cool when Mitch simply leaned down and engulfed the head of Zach's cock in his hot, wet mouth.

God, he wouldn't last a minute, and for the life of him, he couldn't bring himself to tell Mitch to stop. His mouth was the most erotic thing Zach had ever felt in his life. Tongue flicking around the corona before Mitch sucked him deep, almost swallowing him whole... Zach heard the hoarse moans coming from his own throat and didn't care, couldn't look away.

Mitch's head between his thighs was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen in his life. His world became pure sensation—Mitch's short blond hair brushing his belly, his stubbled cheek lightly abrading his thighs, his teeth teasing the throbbing vein on the underside of his cock with torturous little bites. When that incredible mouth sucked him deep again and Mitch cupped his balls, rolling them in his palm, it was all over. Zach came hard, groaning with the most intense orgasm of his life, shooting down the Aussie's throat and coming all over again at the deep moan of pleasure Mitch gave as he sucked him dry.

And then Mitch licked all the way around his balls and his still-hard cock, cleaning up every last trace of his come.

When Mitch finally lifted his head, Zach couldn't look away. There was no mistaking the genuine pleasure reflected in his eyes. Zach's thighs were shaking so badly that he was surprised the entire couch wasn't vibrating, too. He knew he should say something, anything, but Mitch rescued him by kissing him again.

This time the flavor was new—still the masculine taste of Mitch, but now saltier with the traces of his own come. It was incredibly arousing. Unbelievably, his cock twitched, hardening again despite the mind-blowing orgasm he'd just had. Suddenly aware that Mitch still wore his shorts while he himself was completely naked, Zach reached for Mitch's waistband.

But Mitch caught his hands, stopping him before he could unfasten the shorts. "Bedroom," he said, his voice a gravely rumble. "You can do anything you want to me in there."

Zach didn't need to be asked twice. Still holding Mitch's hands, he allowed himself to be led down the short hall to the bedroom, hyperaware of the bulge in the front of Mitch's shorts and the sway of his own hard cock as he walked.

The bedroom was decidedly masculine, a fact that turned Zach on even more. No frills here, no lace, and definitely none of the pink crap he was used to seeing in his ex-fiancée's bedroom. Mitch's bed was a huge expanse of mattress and dark, rumpled sheets, sitting directly on the

floor. Zach couldn't tear his eyes away from it. Couldn't stop picturing Mitch tangled in those sheets, magnificently naked, cock hard and waiting for him.

Then Mitch guided his hands back to the waistband of his shorts. "I think this is where you left off, isn't it?"

Zach wasted no time unfastening the shorts and pushing them off Mitch's hips. Then he froze, transfixed, staring at the first aroused adult cock besides his own that he'd ever seen up close. Mitch's cock was thick, a little shorter than his own, rising proudly from a trimmed patch of golden hair above his heavy balls. Absolutely gorgeous. As he watched, it jumped, the thick vein running down the underside visibly throbbing.

A deep groan broke Zach from his fascination. "Damn, mate, sexy as it is to see you looking at me like that, touch me already!"

Zach chuckled at the note of strain in Mitch's voice. Releasing the grip he hadn't realized he still had on the shorts, he slid his palms up Mitch's thighs toward that gorgeous cock. The tremble he felt in the heavy muscles thrilled him. Finally reaching his goal, Zach cradled those heavy balls in one hand as he ran his other palm up the length of Mitch's cock.

It was intoxicating to touch another man this way. Mitch's hands suddenly dove into his hair and pulled him into a ravenous kiss. Zach couldn't remember ever feeling so aroused, or so free. *This* was what he wanted, what he had secretly desired for years, and now his fantasy was a reality. And by God, no one was judging him for it. No one was criticizing him for touching Mitch this way.

Instead, with each stroke, each caress, Mitch moaned his approval. His hungry kiss and the trembling of his body against Zach's spoke of nothing but desire and need. There was nothing wrong about this. In fact, nothing had ever felt more right in his life.

His cock brushed Mitch's and they both hissed in a sharp breath. Acting on impulse, Zach broke the kiss and looked down, watching himself cup both their cocks in his hands, pressing them together and stroking them both at once. Mitch's head dropped back as his hips gave

involuntary little pumps. The sensation of the head of his cock pressing against Mitch's, rubbing with each caress, was incredible. Mitch's nipples were hard little peaks and Zach dropped his head to lick one and torment it as Mitch had done to him.

An instant later, Mitch wrenched himself away and took a shaking step back. "Goddamn," he groaned, breathing hard. "You're a natural, mate."

Zach smiled, his own breath coming fast. "I've always gone after what I want."

Mitch kissed him again, hard and fast, before reaching for his bedside table. "Enough foreplay," he growled, taking something out of the little drawer, his back to Zach. "Let's fuck."

His heart gave a little leap at those words. It was almost enough to make him come again. No woman had ever said anything so blatantly sexy to him. When Mitch turned and handed him a condom and a bottle of lube, it didn't even occur to Zach to be nervous. His misgivings had been left on the couch, sucked out of him by Mitch's incredible mouth.

"Just tell me how you like it," he replied in a voice that didn't sound remotely like his own as he ripped open the condom and rolled it on.

Mitch crawled onto the bed, but he didn't stay on all fours. Zach was surprised. Every time he'd had anal sex before, his partner had been in that position. But Mitch positioned himself on his back, legs stretched wide, his cock heavy against his muscular belly, and scooted forward on the bed so his ass was at the very edge. The position was incredibly hot, leaving Mitch open to his gaze, his body laid out before Zach like a feast. His thick cock and heavy balls were a temptation too strong to resist, and Zach bent to lave a quick circle around Mitch's head.

"You don't need to be gentle," Mitch said, groaning again as Zach slid his lubed fingers over his ass. "I don't think I'll last a minute no matter what."

Zach smeared more lube over his cock before putting the bottle aside and dropping to his knees. His own cock was aching again, straining for release. "Good, because I know I won't."

And then he grasped Mitch's hips and pressed against his ass. Almost at once, the tight muscle relaxed to let him in. He watched the head of his cock disappear into the tight clasp of Mitch's ass and had to freeze to keep from coming right then and there. Mitch's groan of approval as he grabbed his own knees and pulled them up, opening himself wider, didn't help Zach regain control at all, but a few moments later he dared to move again. He eased a little deeper, ready to back off if Mitch showed any sign of pain or discomfort at his invasion.

Suddenly, Mitch tightened his ass, squeezing Zach hard. "I told you, don't be gentle," he said as his inner muscles held Zach tight. "I can take anything you dish out. Fuck me!"

That was the last straw Zach's restraint could take. Surging forward, burying himself all the way to the balls, Zach moaned at the feel of being buried inside his lover. He thrust hard and fast, watching the pleasure on Mitch's face, watching his own cock disappear with each thrust. He let go of one hip and grasped Mitch's cock, stroking in time with each surge forward. When Mitch's ass squeezed him again as he groaned out loud, Zach came hard, still stroking his lover's cock, watching Mitch come as his own cock jetted.

Finally, shaking hard, almost unable to move from the power of his orgasm, Zach carefully pulled out and dropped the condom in the nearby trash can before collapsing on the bed beside Mitch. Neither of them spoke, but the silence was comfortable. All Zach needed to hear was Mitch's harsh breathing, as fast as his own. No words were necessary.

Soaking in the feeling of rightness, Zach closed his eyes and tumbled headlong into sleep.

Chapter Five

Zach woke and stretched, disoriented for only a moment when he opened his eyes and saw the back of Mitch's blond head beside him on the pillow, just visible in the dim dawn light. The memory of last night came back in a rush, stiffening his cock. What they'd done together—fucking, exploration, experimentation, whatever he wanted to call it—had been incredible. He reached down and stroked himself once, unable to resist.

Mitch rolled over at the movement, eyes still closed. His hand slid over Zach's hip and gently cupped his balls. "Want some help with that?" he murmured.

Zach moved his hand aside, giving silent permission for Mitch to do whatever he wanted. Mitch rubbed his balls, stroking them before gently squeezing, but didn't touch his cock. Zach reached out and dragged Mitch closer for a kiss, more than willing to start his day with another round of fantastic sex.

But unlike last night, Mitch didn't seem to be in any hurry. Exploring Zach's body with slow, sweeping strokes of his hands, he kept the kiss at the same slow pace. Zach let his hands wander, too. The broad expanse of Mitch's shoulders was a temptation he couldn't resist, and didn't try. His fingertips traced the indentation of Mitch's spine, sliding down to that tight ass that had given him such incredible pleasure last night.

Mitch finally broke the kiss and smiled down at him. "You ready to try something new today?" he whispered as his fingertips dipped between Zach's thighs and traced a teasing circle around his anus.

Zach instinctively stiffened. Mitch wanted him to do *that*? Last night, he would've wholeheartedly agreed with anything, but this morning...

The Aussie seemed to read his mind. “You can’t imagine how good it feels,” he said, leaning down to run his tongue along Zach’s collarbone. “We’re all taught that real men don’t ever do it, but give it a try, mate. You won’t be sorry.”

Slowly, Zach forced himself to relax. Mitch was right. The subliminal training of a lifetime rebelled against receiving anal sex, but there was no doubt that Mitch hadn’t faked his pleasure last night—men just weren’t able to do that. And Zach certainly didn’t think the bartender was less of a man for what they’d done last night. Who was here to judge him, anyway? If Zach could enjoy kissing a man, holding a man, why shouldn’t he be able to enjoy everything else?

Several more long kisses later, he parted his thighs slightly, giving Mitch more access. “What do I do?” he whispered. His nervousness probably showed, but he didn’t care. He trusted Mitch not to do anything he didn’t want.

Mitch pulled away with a broad smile. “For now? Just lie back and let me take care of you.” One sweep of his arm cleared the bed of the bedspread, and the cool air against Zach’s hot skin made him shiver. At some point, Mitch had gotten the lube again, and Zach watched him squirt a generous amount onto his fingers.

He didn’t have time to get nervous. Mitch shifted on the bed and a moment later, he engulfed Zach’s cock in his mouth. Zach groaned and fisted his hands in the sheet beneath him. God, he’d never known anything like this man’s hot mouth, his incredible tongue. When Mitch shouldered his thighs apart to lick and tease his balls, Zach opened his legs eagerly for more.

One warm, slippery finger teased his anus as Mitch continued to lick him, and this time, Zach didn’t even think of tensing up. The soft, slick caress was more arousing than he’d thought it could be. It felt almost like a second tongue, teasing him there while Mitch paid meticulous attention to his balls.

When that single digit slid inside, Zach instinctively stiffened, clenching his cheeks tight. Mitch responded by deep-throating him,

driving every last thought clean out of Zach's mind. By the time he remembered to breathe, Mitch's finger was all the way inside, sliding gently in and out in a rhythm that felt startlingly good.

And then Mitch pressed that finger forward slightly and hit a spot that made Zach shout out loud with a sudden and totally unexpected urge of pleasure. Mitch chuckled around his cock, rubbing that amazing spot, and the combined sensations were almost enough to send Zach straight over the edge into orgasm.

An instant before he came, everything stopped.

"Goddamn it, Mitch!" Zach cried hoarsely. "What the hell are you doing?"

Mitch chuckled again. "Trust me," he said. Then he bent and blew a hot breath over the hypersensitized head of Zach's cock as he pressed that incredible place inside him again.

It went on and on, endless waves of ecstasy that never quite reached the final peak. A second finger joined the first, and he was stunned to realize that the added stretch wasn't the least bit uncomfortable. Zach knew his hips were rocking in time with the movements of those fingers inside him and couldn't make himself stop. God, why had he never known how good this felt? Why hadn't anyone ever told him about that magic spot inside his ass? He thought Mitch might've put in a third finger a moment later, but the Aussie was licking his balls again, and Zach found he couldn't concentrate on anything as simple as counting to three.

By God, Mitch hadn't lied. Why the hell did so many men fear this?

He crested close to the peak again, felt his balls draw up tight, prepared for the orgasm of his life, closer than Mitch had let him get yet...

...and again, Mitch backed off. The fingers disappeared, that magical tongue vanished, and something else pressed against his ass. Something thick, hot and blunt.

"Ready?" Mitch whispered, already pressing forward with a slow, steady pressure as his still-slick hand closed around Zach's cock.

“Shit, yeah,” he groaned. There wasn’t a single misgiving in his mind. All he wanted was that orgasm that he kept being denied.

He felt the head of Mitch’s dick press inside him and despite his surety and the strength of his arousal, he couldn’t stop himself from gasping. The sensation was so intense, so incredibly unfamiliar despite how much he’d enjoyed the penetration of Mitch’s fingers moments before. Mitch stopped with just his head inside, giving Zach time to adjust as he slowly stroked Zach’s cock with his slippery hands. After a few moments, Zach felt his body relax again and Mitch pressed forward once more.

It wasn’t anything like he’d imagined it would be. Mitch murmured to him, caressed his body as well as his cock, as he slowly eased deeper inside. There was no pain, but the intensity of the pleasure and pressure had Zach moaning.

“Still good?” Mitch asked again and again, pausing whenever it became too much for Zach. “Just tell me when it’s good and when it’s not, mate. Tell me if I need to back off. You’re in charge of this.”

Mitch’s constant reassurance, his stroking hands, helped Zach to finally take all of his cock inside. They froze that way for a moment, both groaning. “Tell me what you feel,” Mitch demanded in that low, sexy growl.

For a moment, Zach couldn’t think of words to describe it. “Full,” he finally said, and was astonished to hear the tremble in his own voice. This position felt so intimate, with Mitch able to see every expression that crossed his face, but it was all right. Better than all right, and getting still better with each passing second. “But good. Damn, Mitch, I... I think I want you to move.”

His tone made it a question, and Mitch correctly read his lingering hesitation. “Slow and easy,” he promised, starting to withdraw as slowly as he’d pressed inside.

The return stroke was easier, as if Zach’s body had grown accustomed to the invasion. When Mitch’s cock found that magic place inside him again, Zach arched on the bed with the electric wave of

pleasure. Mitch rocked a little faster, rubbing his cock against the spot with each thrust, increasing the deep stimulation until Zach wanted to howl. He felt Mitch's body stiffen as his thrusts became a little harder, felt his cock twitch as he started to come, and the feeling of Mitch coming inside him was enough to finally, finally send Zach over the edge to orgasm. Mitch kept rocking against that incredible spot and the orgasm extended to new heights, making Zach writhe and groan as he came endlessly.

Mitch pulled out and collapsed beside him, pulling Zach into his arms. Zach was so utterly blown away by the experience that he could barely move when Mitch kissed him, but Mitch didn't seem to mind.

"You all right?" he asked when he broke the kiss, still holding Zach close and rubbing his hands up and down Zach's shoulders and back.

"Yeah," Zach said. His words were slurred, as if he were drunk. "Oh, hell yeah. That was...damn."

Mitch laughed and dropped another kiss on his forehead. "Eloquent praise, that," he teased. "Sleep, you look like you've been knocked for a loop. You can have a shower later." Zach gratefully obeyed, savoring the aftershocks of pleasure still rocking his body as he dropped off almost instantly.

When he awoke, he was alone in the huge bed and daylight streamed through the window. He stretched and rolled over, expecting to be pretty sore from this morning's sex. Surprisingly, he didn't feel more than a barely-noticeable twinge back there. As he sat up, he noticed that his swim shorts and T-shirt—laundered and folded—were on top of Mitch's pillow, along with a towel and washcloth. He carried the stack to the bathroom and sighed with pleasure when hot water sluiced over his body.

He couldn't remember ever feeling better in his life. His body ached a little, but the soreness only reminded him of amazing sex. As the smell of coffee and bacon drifted into the bathroom, Zach smiled with pleasure before the realization broadsided him.

He wasn't bi-curious. In fact, if he never screwed another woman as long as he lived, he wouldn't miss it. He was...gay.

And somehow, it was all right.

Chapter Six

The next few days passed in a kind of blurred haze for Zach. Every possible moment was spent with Mitch. When he was working, Zach kept him company down at the bar—but unlike the first few days he'd spent in Australia, he didn't get drunk. He didn't need to. Just being around Mitch was enough to make him feel lightheaded even without alcohol.

After Mitch's shifts ended, they would take long walks on the beach or drive around in the moonlight, talking effortlessly about anything and everything. Zach shared his struggle to build his own business, making a name for himself as one of the foremost builders of custom and stunt hang gliders in the United States. In return, he learned about Mitch's own journey out of the closet and was stunned to learn that his lover had even been married for a few years. The divorce had been matter of fact. They'd had no children, and after Mitch confessed that he was gay, his wife had signed the divorce papers and left without another word.

"Don't even know where she is now," Mitch said, staring up at the sliver of a moon. "Hope she's found some macho man with a ten inch dick to satisfy her. I don't hold any grudges."

Zach brushed his palm over the front of Mitch's slacks. "Hard to believe anything else could satisfy her after this," he teased.

Mitch laughed with him. "Shame about the kids, though," he said after a few moments. "I'd love to have a few rug rats underfoot. What about you?"

"I..." Zach's surprise blanked his brain for a few moments. "I guess I never thought about it too much. Now that I'm not marrying Lisa, I suppose I just assumed I wouldn't have kids."

“Why not? Just because you’re not het doesn’t automatically mean you can’t be a father. Yeah, I can’t adopt here in Oz, but there’s ways of getting around everything, mate. My sister lives in the States and I could move there. There’s always the overseas adoptions, too.”

“You’ve obviously thought about it a lot.”

Mitch shrugged. “Yeah, I have. I’ve always thought I’d adopt one or two little ones, when the time was right.”

That conversation stayed with Zach through their lovemaking that night—always at Mitch’s apartment, since employees of the hotel were strongly discouraged from “mixing” with the guests—and kept him from falling asleep long after Mitch’s breathing evened out with sleep. Kids... just the idea of them brought a strange mixture of conflicting emotions surging in his chest. But talking about them with Mitch was almost a tangible symbol of permanence.

Tonight was Christmas Eve, he realized with a jolt of shock. A time for family, for friends, for children and promises. And he was boarding his flight back home to Los Angeles in less than forty-eight hours.

He snuggled against Mitch’s back, the two of them fitting together like spoons. He didn’t want to leave, but he couldn’t stay. There were orders to fill and work to be done back in LA. His parents were there, and his friends. They would all worry if he wasn’t back when he was scheduled to return, and after his sudden break up with Lisa, they were already worried enough.

Zach sighed and closed his eyes, savoring the warmth of Mitch’s body against his, wishing he could freeze this moment forever. Coming here, taking the plunge and exploring what it felt like to have a relationship with a man, embracing this side of his personality that he’d repressed for so long... It had been incredible, absolutely incredible. Mitch had been wonderful, perfect in almost every possible way. Zach had loved every second of his time on the Gold Coast and would hold these memories close forever.

And suddenly he realized he was thinking of Mitch in the past tense. He was already letting go, preparing to go back to LA and pretend none of this had ever happened.

To dive headlong back into the closet.

Something deep inside him rebelled at the thought. Still, when he imagined going home, seeing his buddies, his parents—for God’s sake, his father—with Mitch at his side...his skin crawled. How would they react? Would they be like Lisa? The look of disgust on her face as she’d wrenched the engagement ring from her finger and thrown it at him was branded in his memory. Would they reject him, humiliate Mitch with their cold disapproval? He squeezed his eyes closed tighter, trying to force down a sudden surge of nausea at the horrible mental images.

Could he go through that? More than that—could he ask Mitch to do the same, to go through it all again with him? Mitch had told Zach about his own struggles coming out. He’d lost a lot of friends, and although his parents had passed away before he admitted his sexuality, he’d had a long road with his sister before she’d accepted that she couldn’t pray him back to “normalcy”. Was it fair to put him through that again?

But the thought of leaving Mitch behind and pretending this last week had never happened hurt like a gaping wound in his chest.

It was a long time before Zach slept, holding Mitch as if he’d never let go.

* * *

Christmas Day dawned bright and hot. Zach reached for Mitch as soon as he woke, kissing him hard, desperately. He couldn’t get enough, couldn’t touch enough, couldn’t give his lover enough pleasure or take enough for himself. His caresses almost frantic, he slid down the bed to take Mitch’s cock in his mouth.

But Mitch sat up and grasped his shoulders, stopping him. “Hey, easy there. What’s the matter, Zach?” he asked, and the genuine concern in his eyes was Zach’s undoing.

He was horrified to find himself on the verge of tears. He struggled for a moment, trying to find words to express his turmoil, but nothing came out. Mitch wrapped his arms around him and held him hard.

"It's all right," he said, kneading the muscles of Zach's shoulders, his back. "Whatever it is, it's all right."

Zach pressed his face against Mitch's neck, feeling the morning stubble rough against his closed eyelids. "I don't want to lose this," he finally choked out. He could feel his body shaking, heard the tears in his own voice, and was appalled at showing such weakness.

But Mitch didn't seem disgusted. He kept rubbing Zach's back, holding him as he struggled not to cry, not to unman himself any more than he already had. When Zach finally managed to get himself under control again, Mitch didn't release him.

"I know," he said, his voice as serious as Zach had ever heard it. "I know, mate. It's not easy to go back where people know you. I've been there. And I can't tell you that it gets easier, because it doesn't. But it's your choice to make, to tell or not to tell. I'm not happy that you're leaving tomorrow, either, but I want you to know something. If you ask me to come with you, I will."

He must have felt Zach's shock in the sudden stiffening of his body, because Mitch pulled back a little and smiled slightly. "I can bartend anywhere, you know, but don't think I'm pressuring you one way or the other. Coming out isn't something to be taken lightly, and you need to do it for you, not for me. It's an option, me coming home with you. That's all. All right?"

Zach nodded. Those were words he hadn't even let himself dream of hearing. Mitch didn't seem to need him to reply, though. He leaned down and kissed him, a gentle kiss that nonetheless conveyed the same passion as Zach's earlier, furious seduction. "Now let's finish what you started," he murmured, and Zach willingly fell back onto the bed with him.

Much later, after a shared shower that had lasted long enough to fog up the mirror, they dressed minimally in deference to the heat and made

breakfast. Zach was a hopeless cook, but Mitch had taught him how to work his gourmet coffeemaker and Zach busied himself with that while Mitch cooked up a pair of perfect, overstuffed omelets. The quiet, comfortable domesticity of the scene tugged at Zach's heart. God, he wanted to keep this forever!

And he realized that at some point, he'd fallen in love with his sexy Aussie lover.

The lack of surprise he felt at his revelation was amazing. Yes, he loved Mitch, had probably loved him since their first night together. And that made him all the more eager to give him the little envelope he'd hidden in his bag a few days ago. Zach spilled a little coffee on himself on purpose so he could sneak back into the bedroom under the pretense of changing his jeans.

After he rejoined Mitch at the table, coffee and omelets steaming before them, he could scarcely contain his excitement. He felt like a kid expecting his first Christmas present. He couldn't wait to show Mitch what he'd brought, but he forced himself to eat and carry on a normal conversation until their plates were empty.

Then, before Mitch could take their dishes to the sink, Zach took the envelope from his back pocket and slid it across the table. "Merry Christmas," he said, unable to hold back a grin.

Mitch grinned back as both his hands disappeared under the table. There was a sound of tape ripping free from the wooden underside, and then he lifted a little paper-wrapped box and tossed it to Zach. "Same to you."

Zach laughed out loud. So much for surprises. "You first."

Mitch took the envelope and tore it open. The paper he withdrew was the heavy, creamy stationery supplied at the hotel—Zach hadn't been able to get proper sketching paper—but this was just a symbol, anyway. He watched his lover stare at the drawing he'd created of a sleek, sapphire-blue hang glider soaring over the ocean, a tiny figure of Mitch holding onto the crossbar.

Mitch seemed lost for words for a moment. “Wow,” he said at last. “Never knew you were such an artist, Zach.”

“Well, I have to be when I create new prototypes,” Zach replied. “But it’s not just a pretty picture. Turn it over.”

Mitch did and read the words Zach had penciled on the paper aloud. “Redeem for your own custom glider and lessons at Myers ProFlight, Los Angeles. Holy shit, mate, you’re giving me a hang glider?”

“Merry Christmas,” Zach repeated, almost giddy with happiness. His grin felt like it was about to split his face in half. The emotions on Mitch’s face were everything he’d hoped for when he’d sat down to sketch the glider in his hotel room days ago. “I’m going to start working on it when I...when I fly back.” The words were hard to say, but he pressed on. “I can ship it to you here or you can come learn to fly there, your call.”

Mitch reached across the table and squeezed his hand hard, still staring at the paper. “This is incredible. Thank you, Zach.” Then he looked up, his eyes shining a bit too brightly as he blinked fast. “Now your turn. Open it up.”

Zach didn’t need telling twice. Never a careful package opener, he ripped the paper away and opened the leather-covered box inside to reveal a gorgeous pocket watch with a built in compass.

Mitch spoke as Zach lifted it from the box. “To help you find your way,” he said softly, and when their eyes met, Zach knew he wasn’t the only one who had fallen hard.

“Come to LA with me.” The words were out before Zach had fully considered them, but he didn’t bother trying to take them back. Didn’t *want* to take them back. The knot of nerves in his stomach tried to choke him, but he forced it away. “You can be my assistant or something. A consultant. What do you say?”

The smile slowly faded from Mitch’s face. He withdrew his hand and stood, carrying his empty cup to the coffee pot. Instead of refilling it, though, he just stood and stared down into the carafe, his back to Zach.

The warm mood vanished as though it had been turned off by a switch. Zach stood, too, taking a hesitant step closer. “Mitch?”

Mitch took a deep breath and let it out on a sigh. “No, Zach,” he said, so quietly Zach almost couldn’t hear him. “No. I won’t go to LA with you.”

Chapter Seven

“What?”

That single word seemed to take all the air out of the room. Zach had to struggle to draw in another breath. Surely he’d heard that wrong. “But—but you said, if I asked, you’d—”

Mitch whirled, and his eyes blazed with anger. “Yes, I said I’d go if you asked,” he growled. “As your *lover*, Zach, not your bloody assistant or consultant or whatever nice fucking title you come up with. I’ll go to be with you, but I won’t hide. I won’t lie. No one’s ever going to put me back in the closet. Not even you.”

Zach’s mouth opened, then closed again. He couldn’t think of a damn thing to say. “But I—and they—oh, hell.” He couldn’t form any kind of sentence that made sense. *There has to be a middle ground*, he wanted to say. *There has to be some way I can keep you without... without...*

Without coming out. He forced himself to finish the sentence in his mind, at least, even if he couldn’t bring himself to say it aloud.

Because he knew that Mitch had a right to be angry. Zach hadn’t tried to pretend they weren’t a couple during his time here, hadn’t acted like they were just friends. He’d treated Mitch like a boyfriend, not a buddy, and he hadn’t cared who saw them. It wasn’t fair to Mitch to change all that just because they were in a different city, or because Zach wasn’t ready to be honest with his friends and family about their relationship.

And Mitch had told him about his struggles when he’d come out. It wasn’t right to ask Mitch to go back to the lies and secrecy now that he’d been brave enough to show the world who he truly was. He’d put up with

a lot of shit, and the last person who should ask him to put up with more was his own lover. The back of Zach's neck heated and he knew he was flushing with shame.

"I'm sorry, Mitch," he said, staring down at the compass watch in its box on the table. "You're right. I was an ass to say that."

He heard Mitch's long sigh, and then his footsteps as he came back to the table. He put his hand on Zach's bare shoulder and Zach covered it with his own, grateful for the contact. "Our time's too limited now to hold a grudge," Mitch said gruffly. "Come on, go get a shirt on. Me mates are doing another grill on the beach and you're invited."

Zach nodded without a word. Mitch kissed him briefly before releasing him to pick up their dishes. Zach went back to the bedroom, the compass watch heavy in his hand. Its ticking seemed unnaturally loud. His heart heavy in his chest, he couldn't help but count the hours until his flight left in the morning.

The beach barbeque was everything Zach had always imagined when he'd planned this Christmas trip to the Gold Coast. They played volleyball and rugby in the sand, and Mitch good-naturedly razed him for being lousy at both. He retaliated by spraying his lover with beer, and the others cheered them on as they mock-wrestled and rolled into the surf. There was plenty of food and beer, and enough laughter to make Zach's sides ache and his face hurt from grinning.

These weren't just Mitch's friends. They were a family, a loud and obnoxious but completely accepting family.

"You're gonna break his heart, you know that?"

Zach jumped a little. Somehow, Jason had walked up beside him without making a sound. He thought briefly about telling Jason to mind his own business, but he'd seen how these men cared for each other. They were brothers. What affected Mitch *was* Jason's business. "I'm trying not to," Zach said, watching Mitch playing rugby with several others. "It's...it's just complicated."

"Yeah," Jason said, and it wasn't said with derision. A wealth of sadness laced that single word. "But it's the people outside who are

complicated, mate, not the ones you love and who love you. Your real friends and family can deal with anything. Trust me, we've all been where you are, and we all survived. You will, too."

Zach nodded, but he wasn't sure what he should say. Jason wasn't belittling his confusion—far from it. But he wasn't offering the magic words that would make it all better either.

There just weren't any.

Mitch ran over, laughing and sweaty, half his body coated in sand, looking so good that Zach wanted to pounce him in front of God and everyone. Jason laughed, still staring at Zach's face, and he felt himself blush. "Mitch, I think it's time you took this hot stud home before I have a go at him myself," he said, clapping Zach on the shoulder.

Mitch wrapped an arm around Zach's shoulders in a possessive gesture that was strangely thrilling. "Hands off if you want to keep 'em," he shot back. "C'mon, Zach, let's leave these losers with the clean-up duty."

The others jeered and threw things at Mitch. They all shook Zach's hand goodbye, and he found himself suddenly reluctant to leave. As much as he wanted to spend his last hours in Australia wrapped in Mitch's arms, these men had offered him an unhesitating acceptance that soothed him like a warm blanket. It was all the more precious because he fully understood how rare it was.

"Thanks," he said, his throat suddenly tight as they wished him a safe flight tomorrow. "Thanks, guys."

Mitch drove them back to his apartment as night fell. Zach couldn't quash a sense of déjà vu from his first night with Mitch. As on that night, neither of them spoke, but there were no second thoughts now, no nervous anticipation of what would come next. Only a sense of time rushing away from them.

They made love slowly, taking their time touching and kissing as though trying to memorize each other. When it was over, they clung together and didn't speak for a long time. Zach closed his eyes, stroking Mitch's hair, until he couldn't take it any longer.

"If you came to LA with me..." he said, but then his voice trailed off. He just didn't know how to finish the sentence.

Mitch kissed him softly. "I'll come as your lover, Zach. Nothing else. I'm sorry."

Zach's heart constricted painfully, making his chest feel several sizes too tight. "I'm trying, Mitch. I swear to God, I'm trying. It's just..."

"I know."

It was a long time before Zach could bring himself to break the silence again. "I love you. I don't want to lose you."

"I know," Mitch said again, rubbing absentminded circles on Zach's chest. "I love you, too." After that, there were no more words spoken, but neither slept.

When Mitch's alarm went off early the next morning, they rose silently and dressed. Zach wanted to say something, do something to convince Mitch to come with him, but he couldn't yet promise that he was ready to come out. And while Mitch didn't pressure him to do it, Zach almost wished he would. Wished he would do or say anything to show that he was aching inside as much as Zach was.

The drive to the hotel seemed to take forever. Zach was surprised when Mitch followed him up to his room for the first time. "Decided to risk the wrath of the employee/guest fraternization police?" Zach said, attempting to tease a smile from him.

"Yeah, I'm feeling brave," Mitch replied. He looked around the room while Zach tossed the last of his things into his suitcases. "Doesn't seem like it's only been two weeks, does it?"

"No." It felt longer, while at the same time, it seemed much shorter. Time didn't seem to be behaving properly. Zach felt like he'd known Mitch forever and still hadn't had nearly enough time with him. "I'll try to come back as much as I can," Zach said, and regretted the words almost as soon as they left his mouth. He didn't want to settle for that, a few snatched days with Mitch here and there. Didn't want Mitch to think Zach considered what they'd shared a mere vacation fling. He wanted more.

“C’mon, you don’t want to be late and miss your plane,” Mitch said, bridging the awkward moment by reaching for the closest suitcase. “I’ll take this one, you get the other.”

Checking out didn’t take long. Zach signed where the receptionist indicated, handed in his card key, and lifted the suitcases again while Mitch pulled his Jeep around. After stashing his suitcases in the back, Zach got in and buckled up. Soon they were on the highway, speeding toward the airport.

Somehow the trip seemed much shorter now than it had in the taxi when Zach had first ridden to the hotel. Mitch held his hand the entire way, and Zach was grateful for the contact. They parked and entered the terminal, unable to hold hands now because of the suitcases, and Zach wished they could. Right now, he didn’t give a damn who saw them or what they might have thought. He just wanted as much of Mitch as he could get before he had to get on that damned plane.

Mitch stayed beside him through the check-in line, but he jammed his hands into his pockets after they put the suitcases on the belt that would take them out to the plane. Zach frowned. Refusing to allow the withdrawal, he tugged Mitch’s wrist until he took his hand out, then laced their fingers together. “I’m not ashamed of you,” Zach murmured at Mitch’s look of surprise.

Only a few people looked askance at them as they walked hand in hand to the security checkpoint. Zach ignored them all and tightened his fingers around Mitch’s as they drew closer to the place they’d have to part. Finally, Zach was next in line to pass through the x-ray machine.

“Guess this is it, then,” Mitch said. He released Zach’s hand and shoved his back in his pockets. “I’m glad you came, Zach.”

“I am, too. More than I can tell you.”

Then Zach surprised them both by leaning over and kissing Mitch full on the lips. “You have my number. Call me. Reverse the charges, I don’t care. All right?” Mitch nodded, and Zach turned away to empty his pockets into the little bin beside the security checkpoint so Mitch wouldn’t see the tears in his eyes.

He hesitated when he pulled the compass watch from his pocket and glanced back over his shoulder at Mitch to find him looking at the watch, too. "When I find my way," he said, aware that his voice was choked with emotion and not caring who heard it, "I'll be back for you." Then he put the compass watch in the bin and rushed through the metal detector, trying to wipe his eyes without being too obvious about it.

Mitch didn't leave the airport until after he'd watched Zach's plane take off. He didn't know exactly what he was waiting for. It wasn't like he really expected Zach to get off the plane and fling himself into Mitch's arms, declaring he couldn't live without him. The man had a life in Los Angeles, one he couldn't just throw away to take a permanent vacation in Australia with his gay lover. Life just didn't work that way.

Reality refused to go away, no matter how much anyone wanted it to. That was one thing Mitch had learned the hard way years ago when he'd been where Zach was now, agonizing over whether or not to come out. It was no good wishing things were different. No one had ever changed just because Mitch wished for it. Even love had to bow to the dictates of real life, jobs and leases and family concerns. "Love conquers all" just didn't take into account the reality of bills.

The dose of common sense didn't do much to stop the hollow, burning ache in his chest, though.

He watched through the tinted airport windows as Zach's plane grew smaller and smaller, finally vanishing in the distance. The look in Zach's eyes as he'd sworn to come back tormented Mitch.

It won't happen, Mitch told himself savagely, finally turning away from the windows and striding out of the terminal. He was Zach's first lover, his first adventure into the gay world. He'd come here on holiday and had a hot affair with the hotel bartender. People did it all the time and it didn't mean a damn thing. It was a vacation fantasy, one that didn't have the slightest impact on real life. Just because Zach fucked him didn't mean Mitch was anything more to him than a little fun.

It was probably for the best that Zach hadn't agreed to come out, because Mitch knew he really would've gone to Los Angeles if Zach had. There was no way it would really have worked out. They would only have been delaying the inevitable, and Mitch would've wound up ten thousand miles from home when the end came. Really, the best thing for Mitch to do would be to find a willing man and get laid, get the taste of Zach off his tongue and move on as quickly as possible.

Mitch got into his Jeep, caught a lingering whiff of Zach's cologne and couldn't make himself continue the charade. Zach's anguished, haunted eyes rose in Mitch's mind again, short-circuiting his bitter thoughts. "When I find my way, I'll be back for you," Zach had promised in a voice strained with emotion.

It hadn't been a meaningless fling, not for either of them. He rested his head on the steering wheel, gripping it so tightly that his knuckles ached. He couldn't make himself go on trying to convince himself it had been anything less than the most incredibly natural, wonderful relationship he'd ever had.

He loved Zach and hadn't fought for him. Never had Mitch wanted to pressure someone to come out of the closet like he'd wanted to push Zach, but he loved him too much to do that. Mitch hadn't lied when he had said that Zach should come out for himself, not for him. He'd done the right thing by resisting the urge to beg Zach to do it. But damn it all, why did doing the right thing have to hurt so fucking bad?

Mitch banged his forehead against the wheel, wishing he could take back the last few hours, live them again. Do it all differently.

But there was no going back. It was too late now. Zach was gone, and Mitch couldn't shake the feeling that he'd just watched the best thing that had ever happened to him vanish into the clear blue sky.

Chapter Eight

As soon as the plane took off, Zach knew he'd made a mistake. God, that had always been his problem—as soon as it was too late, he could admit he was wrong. Damn it, why had he ever left Mitch behind?

All right, he was afraid. There it was, the bald-faced truth of the matter. He was afraid his friends would spurn him, his parents would scorn him, that everyone he knew—hell, even strangers—would look upon him in disgust once they knew he was in love with another man. But he lived in freaking *Los Angeles*. It wasn't like gays were particularly shunned in California. In fact, it was one of the most open and accepting places he'd ever been.

And as for his friends... If they couldn't handle the fact that he loved Mitch, were they truly the solid, valued friends he'd always thought they were? Even if they did decide they couldn't be friends with Zach if he was gay, it didn't have to be the end of the world. Mitch had told him that he hadn't known a single one of the men who'd thrown the beach barbeques before he'd come out. Zach didn't want to lose his buddies, but it wasn't like he couldn't make new friends.

His parents, however...that was another matter. Zach was an only child and he knew how his parents dreamed of grandchildren. His mother's hints hadn't been particularly subtle when he and Lisa had been engaged. He knew that they'd be disappointed at the very least if—no, when—he told them he was gay. Perhaps even devastated.

His stomach clenched, but he forced himself to keep thinking about it, not let his mind switch to something easier to face. All right, so they'd

be disappointed. They wouldn't like it, and might even try to argue him out of it. But would they disown him? He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the cold window, remembering his childhood, his teen years. His parents were strict, but never outrageously so. When he'd quit college halfway through earning his engineering degree to found his custom hang glider manufacturing business, his father hadn't liked it one bit. He'd been worried that Zach would lose everything and wind up jobless, without a degree, and he had argued vehemently against it.

But he'd come to the Grand Opening. He'd even smiled proudly that day, hugged Zach and told him that he'd do whatever he could to help make Myers ProFlight a success. "We just want you to do something that makes you happy," he had said, squeezing his shoulder as his mother nodded beside him. "If this is it, then we'll support you, son."

Being gay, however, was a little different from opening a risky business venture.

Then his thoughts returned to Mitch. He saw his lover perfectly in his mind's eye. The sun-kissed highlights in his hair, the faint smile lines around his eyes. His long legs, rippling with muscle as he ran down the beach during that impromptu rugby game. His mouth.

His kisses.

Zach opened his eyes, his decision made. He had always longed to find someone to love, who would compliment him in every way and give him the happiness he had always seen in his parents' eyes when they looked at each other. He'd found that person, and then he'd been a fool and walked away. No, worse than that—he'd gotten on a blasted airplane to fly to the other side of the world.

He'd made a stupid mistake, but he damn well wasn't going to leave things this way.

He pulled out the compass watch and groaned. There were still seventeen more hours before he could land in LA and make it right.

* * *

By the time Zach's plane landed back in Brisbane, he felt like every inch of his body had been beaten with a stick. He no longer had any clue what time it was, or even which day, for that matter. His stomach churned with a combination of airline food and nerves, and all he wanted was to get off the damn plane and stay off it for as long as possible.

It had been twenty-three long hours since he'd landed in Los Angeles. The first thing he'd done was call Mitch, first at his home number and then on his cell. When he couldn't get him on either line, he called the hotel and asked for the bar. Mitch wasn't there, either. Unable to reach him and not knowing any of the phone numbers for his mates from the beach parties, Zach had tried again and again for over an hour. The compass watch, still set to Gold Coast time, said it was four in the morning. Surely Mitch would be home at that hour.

Finally he gave up. Mitch must be screening his calls, refusing to talk to him. Zach didn't let it discourage him. Instead, he went through customs and claimed his bags, chafing at the delay, before going straight to the ticket desk and buying a seat on the next flight to Australia.

Calls were easy to ignore. A jet-lagged man banging on the door, however, might just prove a slightly greater challenge.

So here he was, stumbling off the airplane to get his passport checked yet again. The customs agent looked twice at him, and Zach knew he must look like hell, but they let him pass. The first thing he did, even before checking for the gate of his connecting flight to Coolangatta—the closest airport to the Gold Coast—was to turn on his cell phone and try yet again to call Mitch.

He was desperate to hear Mitch's voice. During the last few hours in the air, nightmare visions had haunted Zach, all the horrible things that could've happened to his lover. What if Mitch wasn't screening Zach's calls? What if he'd wrecked on the way back from the airport or something? Gone swimming and drowned? Surprised a robber in his apartment and been shot? Zach knew he was getting slightly hysterical with worry, jet lag and sleep deprivation, but he couldn't seem to stop shaking as the phone rang and rang.

Finally, after striking out at Mitch's home number and getting no help from the hotel bar again, Mitch finally answered his cell. "Zach?" he said, without even bothering to say hello. "Where the hell are you, mate?"

The rush of relief that swamped Zach at the sound of Mitch's voice momentarily made his knees weak. "Finally! What do you mean, where the hell am I?" Zach said, closing his eyes and leaning against the wall. "Where the hell are you? I've been trying to reach you since... Oh hell, I don't even know what day it is, I'm all turned around. I thought...well, never mind what I thought. Have you been avoiding my calls?"

Mitch laughed. Even over the staticky connection, that laugh eased the knot of worry that had taken up permanent residence in Zach's chest ever since he'd been unable to reach Mitch. "Mate, I've been on a bloody airplane for fucking ever," he said. "And I've been trying to get *you* to answer your phone since I landed two hours ago."

Zach's mind stuttered to a halt. Airplane? Mitch had been on— "Oh, shit, this is unreal," Zach said, starting to laugh. "Don't tell me—you're in LA, right?"

"Yeah, I'm in LA, and getting sick of this bloody airport. You gonna come pick me up or what?"

Zach laughed harder. He couldn't help it. "Oh, God, Mitch," he finally wheezed when he could catch his breath. "I'm in Brisbane!"

There was a moment of silence, and then Mitch groaned. "Bloody fucking hell," he groaned, then started to laugh too. "What now?"

Zach wiped his eyes, noticing his fellow passengers looking at him askance. "You stay put, and I'll come back to you," he said, ignoring the soreness of his body. The last thing he wanted was to take yet another damned flight. "I mean, I think my ass is now permanently molded to the shape of an airplane seat anyway. You can stay at my house, I'll call my mother to come let you in."

Mitch's laughter trailed off. "Your mother?" he echoed, sounding worried. "What are you going to tell her?"

"For now, I'm going to tell her you're my friend," Zach said, correctly interpreting Mitch's worry. "I don't think I should tell her over the phone."

I'll have a talk with them—with everyone—when I'm back, and after I've had some rest and I'm no longer too jet-lagged to see straight."

There was no humor in Mitch's voice at all now. "You're sure? You can't take it back once it's out there, mate. I didn't come here to pressure you."

"Very sure." Zach ran a hand over his face, trying to push the fatigue away so he could say the right thing this time. "Look, I love you. That's the most important thing. I'll find a way to...to come out. I meant what I said at the airport—I'm not ashamed of you. I don't want to hide you away or lie about what you are to me, but I don't want to tell my parents over the phone. I want to do it in person. That's the only reason I'm going to tell her you're my friend, not my partner. Is that all right?" he added, suddenly unsure as he remembered Mitch's reaction in the kitchen.

"Ah, Zach, you're killing me," Mitch groaned. "It's more than all right. I...I came to apologize. I pushed you hard the other day, when you first asked me to come with you. You'd changed a lot for me already, and I was asking you to do even more. I came to meet you halfway. I won't go back in the closet, but if you aren't ready, we can be discreet. My sister lives here, you know, and I can stay there or whatever. The main thing is that I love you too, Zach. If you need time before you can say the words to people, I'll wait." He cleared his throat as if banishing the heavy emotions. "Now get your tight ass back on that plane. I'll be waiting in your bed."

Despite his soreness and exhaustion, Zach's cock twitched at the mental image of Mitch stretched out on his king-sized four-poster, gloriously naked and hard for him. The realization that Mitch had flown across the world for him, that they would be together again soon, filled him with elation. "Hold that thought," he commanded, his voice a note huskier than usual. "I'm coming as fast as I can."

"Well, you're not coming yet, but you will be," Mitch growled in that sexy, aroused voice Zach had grown to love. "And don't count on it being fast."

About the Author

Meet Amelia Elias, mother of ten (okay, so most of her 'kids' have four legs and a tail), home health nurse (the gooey stuff is ever so much fun!), and author of many stories (most of them written to shut up those persistent voices in her head, though new ones always arrive to take their place). Amelia is slender, buxom, graceful, plays classical piano, speaks 17 languages, is always immaculately dressed, and is titled nobility on an oilrig off the coast of England.

And the nobility thing is actually true.

Amelia feels like a vacation from the day-to-day grind can cure a multitude of ills, so she writes about everything from genies in a bottle, to gods and goddesses, to gorgeous vampires and hot, sexy Fae. Her stories are set in such locations as Olympus, two versions of an alternate Earth, vampire-owned nightclubs, and the really, truly crazy ones happen in the real world. (Although reality definitely need not apply.)

Some look at the widely varying stories Amelia creates and say she can be a bit scattered with her writing. Amelia disagrees, arguing, "No, not at all! I am very focused and...and... Wait, do you have a pen? I just got a great idea for a romance between a shape-shifting ghost and an alien!"

Keep up with Amelia by joining her mailing list at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/AmeliaEliasGroup> or visiting her website, www.AmeliaElias.com!

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*Scott and Keegan have both known their share of manipulation and abuse.
Can they rise above the heartaches of their separate pasts
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Eros Rising

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Available January 16, 2007 from Samhain Publishing

Part of the Hearts from the Ashes collection

Scott Jasper needs a change in his life. Stuck in a dead-end relationship with a man who manipulates and uses him, Scott wants out but hasn't found the one thing to motivate him to leave. Until the night his partner takes him to local gay swinger's club Ganymede's Grotto, where Scott meets the man who might just be The One.

Keegan Rourke—a.k.a. "Eros," the most popular stripper at Ganymede's Grotto—has been burned before. Determined never to let another man rip his heart out, Keegan doesn't let anyone get close enough to love him. Until Scott comes along, offering Keegan the gentle, unconditional love he's always needed but has never experienced.

For Scott and Keegan, the road to lasting commitment isn't a smooth one. A lot of roadblocks stand in their path—Scott's trepidation about his own dominant tendencies, Keegan's abusive past and resulting fear of intimacy. Can they can rise above past sorrows and find their happiness in each other's arms?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Eros Rising*:

The Saturday night before Valentine's Day, Scott walked up to the front door of Ganymede's Grotto with a brand-new membership card in his hand. "Hi Patrick," he said, grinning at the tall, gangly young man at the window. "How are you?"

"Gettin' by," Patrick drawled in his honey-thick accent. He nodded toward the card in Scott's hand. "Finally joined up, huh?"

Scott laughed. "I figured I might as well, since I'm here nearly every day anyhow. It wouldn't be fair for me to keep taking advantage of Keegan like that, coming in as his guest all the time."

After that first afternoon and evening as Keegan's guest at Ganymede's Grotto, Scott had begun to spend more and more time there. Stopping in for a couple of hours after work had become a habit. He knew all the staff now and had been more or less adopted by Earl, who fussed over him more than his own parents ever had.

At first Scott had tried to pretend that he kept going there to get away from Logan's increasingly erratic behavior. But he couldn't lie to himself for long. Ganymede's Grotto was a nice club, clean and friendly with a laid-back, no-pressure atmosphere, but it wasn't a place where he would have normally spent so much time. He went there to see Keegan, and everyone knew it.

Scott continued to stubbornly insist he felt nothing but friendship for Keegan. Even he was having trouble believing it anymore.

"It made Earl pretty happy that you joined, I bet," Patrick observed, taking Scott's card to scan it. "He's been dying to sign you up ever since day one."

Scott raised his eyebrows. "Really? Why? Is it my incredible good looks, or my enormous bank account?"

"Smart-ass." Patrick handed Scott's card back. "Keegan likes you, and Earl spoils that boy rotten."

"Keegan's almost thirty," Scott said, putting his card back in his wallet. "Hardly a boy, and definitely older than you."

"Maybe, but he looks way younger." Patrick grinned at him. "Speaking of Keegan, he says come back to the dressing room, he wants your opinion on what costume to wear for his show tonight."

Scott's heart tried to jump right up his throat. He swallowed it back down. "Oh. Okay. So he's, um, he's not being Eros tonight?"

"You know he changes his act around now and then, just to keep things interesting. You've seen some of his other acts." Patrick chuckled. "Man, when are you gonna make a move already? You know he'd be putty in your hands, right?"

The blood rose in Scott's cheeks, because he *did* know it. "Come on, Patrick, don't."

"Yeah, I know. Logan." Patrick shook his head. "I'm not sayin' a word, man. Have a nice night."

"You too. See you." Scott pushed the door open and escaped into the welcoming dimness of the club.

Making his way through the already crowded bar to the tiny dressing room behind the stage, Scott smiled and spoke to the staff and a few of the members he'd gotten to know. He thought, not for the first time, that he should thank Logan for bringing him here that night. He felt comfortable and accepted here, even though he never did anything but sit at the bar and talk to Keegan. *And watch him strip*, Scott reminded himself.

The thought was enough to tighten Scott's balls. He bit his lip and forced his mind away from the memories of Keegan looking like a debauched angel in that obscene G-string and those huge white wings.

When he reached the dressing room, Scott tapped on the door. "Keegan? It's me, Patrick said you wanted to see me."

"Yeah, c'mon in," Keegan called, his voice muffled.

Scott eased the door open, slipped through and closed it again before looking at Keegan. When he did, he burst out laughing. "What the hell are you doing?"

Keegan's blue eye glared at him over a strip of black lace. "Shut up and help me, I'm stuck."

Still snickering, Scott strolled over and walked in a circle around Keegan, trying to make sense of the tangle he'd made. "What is this, a dress?"

"Yes." Keegan wriggled in a way that had Scott adjusting his crotch, and managed to get an arm through one sleeve. "It's not a tear-away, and it's really fucking tight. Could you just straighten it out in back there? Then maybe I can get it all the way on."

Scott obediently tugged on the tangle of black fabric wound around Keegan's back. Heat flared in his belly when his hands brushed Keegan's skin. He longed to slide his arms around Keegan's slender waist and pull him close, bend and kiss the curve of his pale shoulder. He satisfied his

urge to touch by tracing his fingertips over the naked, pale blue pixie tattooed on Keegan's back.

Keegan laughed and turned around, slipping his other arm into the sleeve and yanking the dress down. "You feeling up Blue Boy's cock again?"

"No," Scott said, truthfully for once. He'd been fascinated with the tattooed pixie's frighteningly large erection ever since he'd first gotten a good look at it. "I was feeling up his fangs this time."

"Yeah, well, that's another erogenous zone for him, I hope you know." Keegan faced the mirror, eyeing his reflection critically. "So what do you think? Should I put on make-up and be the Goth-Chick-With-A-Dick, or be lazy and drag out the devil costume?"

Scott considered. "I kind of like what you've got on. But how do you get it off again if you had this much trouble getting into it?"

Keegan grinned. "Tear it off."

"Oh." Scott groped behind him for the chair he knew was there and hung on for dear life. "Yeah, do that."

"Hot idea, huh?" Keegan rotated his hips in a slow, teasing motion, tongue flicking at his lip ring. "I can only rip the dress in half once, but it was only two bucks at the thrift store, so it's no big deal."

The mental image of that tight little black lace mini-dress ripping away to reveal Keegan's sleekly muscled body did not a damn thing to reduce Scott's arousal. Before he could think of what he was doing, Scott stroked a hand down Keegan's lace-clad chest.

*A mask, imbued with Sint Holo's mischief and magic,
brings to life the past—which could destroy the future.*

Cafe Noctem

© 2007 Willa Okati

Available January 16, 2007 from Samhain Publishing

Part of the Hearts from the Ashes collection.

Sint Holo, the Snake Man of Cherokee legend, is up to his mischievous games again. He lives to cause trouble, and there's no better time than Valentine's Day to toy with a few hearts.

Nicholas and Grey have been lovers for almost a year now, but all is not well in paradise. They have more than a few issues to work out around this time of year, and in their turmoil the Trickster sees his opportunity. Sint Holo has a game in mind for the two of them to play—whether they want to or not.

Caught up in the magic of Celebration de la Vie, the two lover must outwit the trickster so they can celebrate their life... together.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Cafe Noctem*:

Grey reached for a bottle of lubricant sitting on their bedside table and clicked it open, squeezing a healthy dollop of cherry-scented gel onto his fingers. "Raise your legs," he instructed. "Rest your feet upon the blanket—good." He paused, gazing intently at Nicholas. "Do you know how beautiful you are to me?"

Nicholas let his legs fall apart, baring himself to Grey's view. He reached down and began to fondle his own cock in silent challenge. "The story," he demanded softly. "Go on."

"You almost make me forget my place."

"Then let me remind you." Nicholas swiped up a drop of pre-come and brought it to his mouth, tasting his own saltiness. "Clever Fox prepared himself for battle, knowing Thorn would be a tricky opponent."

Grey swallowed. "Yes...yes. Clever Fox armed himself with bow and arrow, with spear and with knife, with magic prepared for him by the

medicine man, and..." Grey's fingers began to stroke the lubricant into Nicholas' hole... "Paint. He decorated himself as a warrior, even though he had no claim to that status, because he was going forth to do battle."

Nicholas arched underneath the touch, his mouth falling slightly open as Grey's clever fingers manipulated the hundreds of nerves in his opening. Fingers slid inside him, working him open, making him ready. He would have been able to take Grey if he had simply coated his own cock and slid straight inside, after having made love with this man so many times, but to be treated like a prince from a fairy tale made the encounter take on an entirely different turn. From the look on Grey's face, heavy-lidded, with lips parted, he was enjoying this as much as Nicholas.

"Finish the story," Nicholas prompted as Grey began to scissor his fingers. He writhed on them, unable to help himself. He felt so empty without Grey inside, but soon enough—soon enough. "What did Clever Fox do next?"

"He went on a long journey, through woods and plains, down valleys and up mountains, across streams and over bridges, until at last he came to the maze of thorns where Blue Sky lay imprisoned, asleep." Grey reached for the lubricant again, smiling when Nicholas moaned at the loss of the fingers inside him. "He knew then that his journey had only been the beginning. Now he was about to face the real challenge."

"And did he?" Nicholas asked breathlessly, watching as Grey applied shimmering slick to the fullness of his cock, the cinnamon-colored skin taking on a deep, rosy shine. "What happened next, Grey?"

"Part your thighs further for me—yes, just that way." Grey moved closer, lifting first one and then the other leg over his shoulders. The tip of his cock pressed against Nicholas' stretched hole, not quite entering, not yet. "Clever Fox tried to cut down the thorns with his ax, but they were too hard." He pushed slightly. "He tried to part the way with his spear, but the tangle was too thick." He pushed again. "He even lit an arrow on fire and shot it through the tangle, hoping to burn the branches, but no luck."

With a gasp, Grey pushed inside Nicholas. He drew in a ragged, lusty breath as Nicholas did, feeling himself being stuffed to bursting with

Grey's cock. His head spun from the sensation of being fucked and from the story, as if someone were burning mesquite and sage, the scent filling his nose. Reaching up for Grey, he asked, "And what then? Tell me, Grey, what then?"

White knights don't always come in human form.

With Love

© 2007 J.L. Langley

Available January 16, 2007 from Samhain Publishing

Part of the Hearts from the Ashes collection

All Devlin wants to do is find a good new home for his business and his pack. He's not looking for any complications, but he finds something he never expected—a mate. A mate with a whole lot of energy who attracts trouble like a magnet.

Laine Campbell never means to get himself into hot water, but everything has a way of getting tangled up between his feet. He needs more than just a mate—he needs a savior.

When Dev turns up at a pack get-together, Laine finds both. The two werewolves have an instant attraction, but the pack Alpha is determined to keep Laine for himself. Dev soon learns the only way to protect his mate is to fight, not just for the top spot—but for his life.

Just one small problem. His accident-prone mate is determined to help him...

Enjoy the following excerpt for *With Love*:

It was nice. Dev had such good hands, strong but gentle. Laine's cock began to swell despite his piss-poor mood.

Laine had always had a healthy sex drive, but with Dev around? He couldn't remember ever coming as much as he had in the last twenty-four hours.

Dev nibbled on Laine's neck as he worked Laine's shirt up and off him. Immediately, Dev's mouth found his nipple rings. The man was obsessed with his rings. Not that Laine was complaining, of course. He arched his back, pressing his chest into Dev's face.

"Mmm." Dev tugged the ring with his teeth, rolled Laine under him and stood up.

Laine groaned at the loss. Why was Dev stopping?

Dev unbuttoned Laine's pants and pulled them off his hips. He tapped Laine's hip and dipped his head. "Further up on the bed, Lainey."

Excitement raced through Laine. He scooted up into the middle of the bed like he was told. He loved that commanding voice, that tone Dev got when he expected Laine to comply. And comply he did. God, he loved domineering men. As long as they were also compassionate and fair. Someone who wouldn't take advantage of those weaker...someone like Dev. Dev took charge and made the decisions so Laine didn't have to. He could relax and concentrate on pleasure and pleasing. Laine loved to please, it's why he was such a great Omega. Or rather why he *would* be a great Omega if he had the right Alpha. Ugh, he didn't even want to think about Alphas...

"None of that." Dev shook his head. "You aren't allowed to think of anything right now. You are only allowed to feel." Dev crawled on to the bed, grabbed one of Laine's hands then the other. He positioned them both over Laine's head, holding them to the mattress.

Laine shivered, his cock getting even harder.

Dev chuckled and gently kissed Laine's lips. Laine tried to deepen the kiss, opening his mouth, even flicking Dev's lips with the tip of his tongue, but Dev pulled back.

"You like being held down?" Dev asked.

Laine nodded and a tiny whimper escaped. His hips pushed up into the air. Oh God, even the air on his prick felt good.

"You will tell me if you want me to let go."

Laine nodded again. "Just touch me."

"You really aren't in a position to be demanding things, Lainey." Dev winked.

The man was an evil tease. "Please, Dev?" Laine pleaded, gazing into those deep chocolatey brown eyes. Dev's face blurred. Laine blinked and Dev was sans color.

"Fuck, I don't know what's sexier, you begging or your eyes shifting." Dev used the thumb on his free hand to open Laine's mouth. He dipped forward and ran his tongue over the ends of Laine's canines.

Laine whimpered and bucked his hips, his whole body a tingly ball of sensation. He was close to blowing without Dev even touching him. He wanted to kiss Dev, to get in on the action, but he couldn't. It just felt too good. He closed his eyes, relaxing into Dev's ministrations, just lying there with his mouth open letting Dev have his way. Oh, it felt so good. Who would ever have thought someone caressing your teeth with their tongue could be such a turn-on? Not that it ever took too much to turn Laine on. His gums tingled. "Uhh..." His balls drew closer to his body and both his top and bottom canines lengthened. Laine gasped, his eyes flew open as Dev leaned back.

Dev's eyes were also lupine. He grinned and dipped his head to capture a nipple ring. He sucked and licked at Laine's nipple while his free hand wrapped around Laine's throbbing prick. He started tugging, jerking Laine off.

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