

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

The Perfect Cover

ISBN 9781419913952

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Photography and cover art by Les Byerley.

Electronic book Publication December 2007

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THE PERFECT COVER

Claire Thompson

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Chapter One

"Cut the crap, Gerald." Robert, large and beefy, with a full head of sandy blond hair, barked a laugh. "What Gerald's trying to say, Ryan, is you are one hot little package. Eye candy for the guests, good enough to eat." He smacked his lips and smiled wolfishly.

Ryan felt his face heat and forced a smile in return. Since he was there under false pretenses, he knew he'd better watch his step. Although the question was never expressly asked on the application, Ryan was pretty sure it was assumed anyone applying for a job at a gay resort was by definition gay. And while Ryan had nothing against homosexuals and had in fact even had the occasional sexual fantasy involving another man, he considered himself as straight as the day was long.

"Thanks," he managed, hoping to steer the interview to more comfortable territory. "I really appreciate the opportunity to get to know more about the resort and what my job might be, if I get it that is." He smiled what he knew was his best charming grin, a dimple appearing in each cheek, his green eyes sparkling. Gerald and Robert smiled back, leaning toward him like plants seeking the sun.

"Here's how it works," Gerald said. "We'll hire you on a provisional basis for the first two weeks. Your trial period as it were. If you do a good job and the guests like you, you stay. If you do anything indiscreet, like try to sell drugs to our guests or practice unsafe sex..." Gerald paused. "Are you okay, Ryan? You look flushed."

"Gerald, I think we may have an innocent on our hands. We better lay this out more clearly for him. I don't want to waste time with some wide-eyed newbie who squeals at the first offer of cock from a guest."

"Here, have some water, Ryan. You look positively ill." Solicitously Gerald poured a glass of cold water from the silver pitcher on the table between them and handed it to Ryan. He drank, ordering himself silently to get a grip.

Clearing his throat, Ryan said, "I'm fine really. Just a tickle in my throat." Uneasily he wondered if he were in over his head.

Gerald accepted his explanation and continued. "We're impressed with your credentials and your excellent references."

"But mainly with how you look in a bathing suit," Robert interjected as Gerald directed a frosty glare his way.

Turning back to Ryan with a tight smile, he continued. "Your main duties would be to serve food and drinks to the men at the cabanas you're assigned to and on the beach, bring them fresh towels, get something from a guest's room they forgot, things like that. You're expected to put in six hours a day, six days a week. The schedule varies

depending on where and when you're needed. What you do on your own time is up to you. Swim, scuba dive, snorkel, go fishing, use the weight room, enjoy the beach, even leave the island if you wish. The resort's yacht ferries guests and employees to and from Barbados twice a day. Meals are free from any of our three dining facilities—there's an employee canteen at each one or you're welcome to eat at any of the outdoor cabanas when they're open. You'll stay in a staff bungalow with a roommate, but you each have your own bedroom and bathroom." He paused and said, "How's that sound to you?"

Ryan couldn't help being impressed. There had to be a catch. "That's all I do?" he asked. "Just serve drinks and get towels and stuff?"

"It's not so much what you *do*, though that is important," Gerald replied. He paused and stared up at the ceiling as he formulated his response. Looking back at Ryan, he said, "We strive to create an atmosphere at Club Eros of beauty and luxury. This resort club is for men who pay good money to come together for some serious fun. They expect royal treatment by a staff of gorgeous young men. As an employee, you are part of that atmosphere—an essential part. Club Eros," he intoned, his voice reverent, "is a paradise for the senses."

Robert interrupted. "Which is Gerald's flowery way of saying your primary job is to look hot for the guests. You wear a Club Eros Speedo during day shifts and shorts or jeans and a tank top on the evening shift. You keep that gorgeous body of yours fit and tan and you make our guests think you exist solely to please them. You are part of the package that is Club Eros. White sand, blue water, luxurious accommodations, discretion and privacy for those who wish it, plenty of public play for the more adventurous, and last but most certainly not least, buff boys in bathing suits that leave little to the imagination. That's where you come in. Think you can handle that, pretty boy?"

Ryan felt uncomfortable under Robert's intense gaze. He felt his neck heat and hoped he wasn't blushing. The job was too good to turn down, and since the hotel he'd been working at had been sold and his job eliminated, it wasn't as if he had a lot of opportunities at the moment. He figured this would be a kind of paid vacation with only the small, rather unsettling detail that everyone around him was gay and he was supposed to be "eye candy" for the guests.

Yet Ryan liked a challenge and enjoyed trying new things. He was reasonably comfortable around gay men and certainly had nothing against them. Would he be able to pass? He'd been hit on by guys before at bars and had been able to sidestep them pretty easily. How much tougher could this be?

What the hell! What was life without adventure? "Sure," he answered, flashing his dimpled grin. "When do I start?"

* * * * *

Sean Evans gave a wistful glance around his bungalow. Soon it wouldn't be just his any longer. Gerald had told him they were interviewing a promising candidate that

morning and if hired, he would room with Sean. Sean didn't welcome the news. He was a loner by nature, somewhat reclusive and even a little shy.

He enjoyed the freedom living alone afforded him but each December it was the same—a new roommate was brought in for the duration of the season. Invariably they were handsome hunks with very little going on upstairs. Usually they were obsessed with their bodies and appearance, spending their free time sunbathing or working out. He knew some of them took the job with an eye on finding a sugar daddy among the guests who would sweep them away to a life of luxury. Sean found himself unable to pretend an interest in the latest *GQ* magazine cover or how much the guy could bench press. Even the super good-looking ones bored him after the first week or so.

Unlike the seasonal staff, Sean lived year-round at the resort, keeping its three pools and eight hot tubs sparkling clean. He had part-time help from a steady, reliable guy named Connor, who worked in maintenance when not on pool duty. He did fly home to New York several times a year for an extended visit with his parents, but by the time the two or three weeks were up, he was always itching to get back to the island.

During peak season, the owners scrambled to beef up the staff to maintain the resort's policy of a two-to-one guest-to-staff ratio. They never had a shortage of applicants but they liked to keep "new blood" for their guests—men who came not only for the Caribbean getaway but to find new young studs to amuse themselves with. Most of the employees were only too eager to oblige.

While Sean had nothing against casual sex with strangers, it wasn't his thing. He felt love should be a part of the equation. He'd had his fair share of meaningless one-night stands when he was still exploring his sexuality as a teenager, but at twenty-seven it no longer held much of an allure. He'd had a few serious relationships but they always fizzled out after a while—he'd simply fall out of love or realize he'd never really been in it in the first place. Sometimes he wondered if he'd ever find the man of his dreams.

The phone on the end table rang. "Hello?"

"Sean. Robert here. We just hired a new guy. His name is Ryan Weston and Gerald is riding over in the golf cart with him as we speak. Just wanted to give you a heads-up on your new roommate. He's a hot little number."

"Now? They're coming right now?" Sean felt his stomach sink. In a few minutes some muscle-bound young stud would come swaggering in as if he owned the place. He'd give Sean that once-over gaze as he took his measure, deciding if he liked what he saw. Sean had honey blond hair streaked with thick swaths of bleached gold from his hours in the sun. His eyes were a disarmingly pale blue, or so a lover had once told him, the contrast to his tan face making them look even bluer. He wasn't especially tall, maybe five feet ten inches, but every bit of him was solid muscle. He didn't think of himself in terms of being good-looking or not. It didn't occur to him.

He knew the true love he was waiting for wouldn't care what he looked like—they would connect on a deeper level. He felt in his bones someday that man would appear

and he would know him in an instant. His heart would stop for a split second as the universe caught its breath, waiting to click back on while Sean and his soul mate locked eyes. Nothing would matter then but their love. Sean chuckled to himself. He knew he was a hopeless romantic, but that was his business.

* * * * *

"Here we are. This will be your home away from home for the next four months." Sean heard Gerald's familiar tenor outside his open window. A quick knock on the door and it was open before Sean could even say, "Come in". "Oh Sean," Gerald called out in a singsong voice, "come meet your new roommate. Oh, there you are. I couldn't see you in the shadows. This is Ryan. Ryan Weston." He turned to Ryan. "Sean's very quiet. Don't think he's snubbing you – it's just his way."

"Gerald," Sean interjected, annoyed he was already being labeled. Ryan stepped out from behind Gerald. He was tall, his hair falling nearly to his shoulders in thick waves of dark golden blond. His face was so handsome it was almost pretty. It was definitely a masculine face however, with a few days' sexy dark blond stubble on his cheeks and chin. His eyes were a clear emerald green. Sean was reminded of Brad Pitt in his long-hair phase, though Ryan was even better-looking. He stepped forward, thrusting out his hand in welcome.

Ryan gripped his hand and smiled the most beautiful smile Sean had ever seen. "Ryan Weston. Pleasure to meet you, Sean."

Sean suddenly felt dizzy. Ryan's scent seemed to envelope him like a seductive mist – part sandalwood, part lemon, part pure masculine sensuality. When their hands touched, Sean felt his skin tingle under the gentle but firm crush of Ryan's fingers. When their eyes met, he felt as if his heart stopped for a split second.

After a moment they dropped hands, Sean feeling dazed. He felt heat emanating from his chest into his face. His mouth was dry, his palms sweaty. He knew he was staring into Ryan's liquid emerald eyes but he couldn't seem to help himself. Finally he managed, "Welcome to the island, Ryan. Let me know if I can help you get settled." He had to get out of there before he did or said something really stupid. He looked at his watch and said in a somewhat forced voice, "Oh, I didn't realize the time. I have to adjust the pH in one of the swimming pools. See ya round."

* * * * *

"The island's divided into what we call service segments." Matt, the bartender, was shirtless, his bulging chest muscles and shoulders glistening with oil. He stood behind the bar at one of the many open-area cabanas set up along the shore. "If you notice those markers," he pointed toward the sand where wooden posts had been placed at intervals, bright-colored flags flying from them, "they're color-coded. When you start work, you'll be assigned to the guests in the red segment. You check on them from time to time to freshen their drink, take a food order, rub in a little suntan oil, get them a

fresh towel, et cetera. It's okay to stop and visit but not for too long. If they try to monopolize you more than five minutes, you politely explain you're on duty but you'll look for them when you get off your shift."

As Ryan surveyed the area, he noted there were about thirty men lying on towels or beach chairs along the shore. Another twenty or so were seated at tables near the bar and a few more were relaxing in hammocks gently swaying in the breeze. "See those two guys walking around? Jan's the tall, blond babe—he's from Sweden. Mark's from Tennessee or something, not sure. Can't understand a word he says." Matt, whose accent was pure Brooklyn, laughed. "Anyway, they're assigned to this section this week too. You rotate so the guests get a fresh view." He laughed again, giving Ryan a once-over that nearly made him blush. Matt was handsome in a burly, wrestler sort of way, his muscle-bound frame evidence of someone who was a little over-enthusiastic with the free weights.

Ryan accepted the tall glass of fresh pineapple juice poured over crushed ice. "Thanks," he said, taking a sip before he set it down on the bar. He noticed a bowl filled with brightly colored packets the size of a quarter with the Club Eros logo stamped in gold on each one. At first he assumed they were some kind of snack before he realized they were condoms. He'd seen similar bowls in the lobbies of the restaurants and near the pools as Gerald had taken him on a tour of the grounds.

Matt followed his gaze. "Free for all the guests. For staff too." He wagged his eyebrows suggestively and leered at Ryan. "Though those won't fit *me*. I need the *el grandes*." He grinned widely as Ryan hid his own reaction behind his glass of juice.

* * * * *

Sean was sitting at the kitchen table writing a letter to his parents when he heard Ryan at the front door. "Hello," Ryan called out. Sean saw him through the kitchen doorway as he came inside, two large suitcases in tow. He had returned to Florida for a few days to collect his things and make whatever arrangements he needed to. Sean had known he was expected back today but he hadn't known when.

"In here," he called out, his heart rising in his throat at the sight of Ryan's handsome face turning toward his.

"I got my stuff." He indicated his suitcases with a jerk of his head. "Which room is mine?"

"I'll show you." Sean stood, his letter forgotten. As he came out into the living room, Ryan's alluring scent again accosted him. He felt his cock rise, pressing against his denim cutoffs. He swallowed and moved past Ryan, averting his body as he did so.

"This is your room. You can personalize it if you want. They don't care what you do as long as you keep it clean while you're here and leave it how you found it when you go." A brilliant sunset was taking place just outside the open window, casting the room in a golden light. There was a full-size bed in one corner, two sitting chairs, a writing desk and a bureau. Everything was rattan, painted white. The walls were a pale

blue, the large throw rug on the gray stone floor a deeper shade of blue. The room had a large walk-in closet and a full bathroom.

"Wow," Ryan said, doing a slow turn. "This is way nicer than my crummy apartment back in Palm Beach. A guy could really get used to this."

"Well, don't. You'll be gone before you know it." Sean's words came out harsh and he bit his lip, flushing. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that like it sounded."

Ryan glanced at him, no sign he'd taken offense. He heaved his suitcases onto the bed. "I'm supposed to report for duty tomorrow morning at eight o'clock sharp."

"You're assigned to red this week, right?" Ryan nodded. "Well, watch out for Matt, the bartender. He's a nice guy and all, but give him an inch and he'll take a mile. He's famous for seducing the newbies and you're just his type. Blond and pretty with—" Sean snapped his mouth shut. He'd almost said out loud what he'd been thinking—*an ass made for fucking*. He finished lamely, "Uh, green eyes. He loves green eyes."

Ryan replied affably, "I'm not worried. But thanks for the warning." Sean felt almost dizzy as Ryan smiled at him. Again the feeling assailed him as it had when they'd first met that Ryan's heart already belonged to him and his to Ryan. Could this really be the one at last? Mentally he shook his head. It was probably just an infatuation. He'd meet it head-on so he could get over it that much faster. "It's dinnertime. Would you like to grab a bite?"

Ryan nodded. "Yeah, that'd be great. I don't really know my way around despite Gerald's whirlwind tour the other day." He patted his flat abs. "I'm hungry too, now that you mention it."

Over a sumptuous meal of lobster tails and barbequed shrimp, Sean asked casually, "So do you have a significant someone back on the mainland?"

"Me? No. I was dating this g—" Ryan began to choke and took a swig of his beer. "Sorry, something got caught in my throat. What were we talking about?"

"I asked if you were seeing someone."

"That's right. Nope. Free as a bird. No ties. How about you?"

Sean shook his head. "Still waiting for that special someone to appear." He tried to make his voice light and nonchalant. He couldn't help but stare as Ryan dipped a chunk of lobster into melted butter and raised it to his lips. He had to fight the impulse to lean over and lick the butter from Ryan's lips before sliding into a deep, passionate kiss. He felt an erection hardening in his shorts at the thought of kissing Ryan, of running his fingers through that long blond hair, of kneeling before him to take his cock into his mouth... He realized Ryan was speaking.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I said this lobster is delicious. I'm full but I can't stop eating."

Sean shook his head, willing his amorous thoughts to scatter. "All the food here is great. You have to watch it or you'll get fat. Can't have fat eye candy!" Ryan laughed, a big open sound that made Sean grin.

"So what do you do to stay in such great shape?" Ryan asked. Sean felt himself warming inside at the compliment couched in the question, though he told himself the guy was probably only being polite.

"I swim and do some deep-sea diving. I love the water. I love to swim in the ocean just after sunrise. It's like swimming in liquid gold."

Ryan grinned. "A poet, huh? That's a nice image...liquid gold." Sean found himself flushing with pleasure.

They ate in comfortable silence for a while until neither could take another bite. When they were done, Sean suggested they take a walk around the island to help Ryan become more familiar before his first day on duty.

As they strolled, Ryan asked questions about the resort. Sean, usually a man of few words, found himself rambling on, eager to connect, to impress, to please. He shared funny stories about drunk guys doing stupid things in the pools, delighted when he elicited a laugh. He resisted a strong impulse to reach out and catch Ryan's hand in his own.

Ryan didn't seem to have that hard edge so many of the guys who came to work the peak season did. He wasn't on the make, his eye always seeking the man who wore the most gold and dropped the most cash. Several very good-looking guys had openly eyed him, naked admiration on their faces as they took in his long, strong body, his broad shoulders, the curve of his perfect ass and well-muscled thighs, but Ryan hadn't even seemed to notice.

Finally, they made their way back to the bungalow as the moon rose over the waves. Sean wanted to take Ryan by the shoulders and kiss him square on the mouth. He didn't dare. While Ryan had been friendly, Sean hadn't sensed any sexual interest. As they entered the bungalow, Ryan said, "Well, thanks for spending time with me. Gerald warned me you're something of a loner. I hope I didn't drive you insane."

"No! God no," Sean said too energetically. Embarrassed, he backtracked. "That is, it was my pleasure. I'm glad you're here. I hope you'll like it. Anything I can do for you, anything at all, just say the word."

"Thanks, Sean. That's very nice of you." He yawned, stretching his arms over his head as Sean drank in the beautifully sculpted triceps, nearly moaning with desire. "Well, I'm really tired. I guess I better unpack and get situated. I think I'll turn in early. I'm usually a restless sleeper in a new bed. Might take me awhile to fall asleep."

Emotions battled in Sean's head—part of him wanting to grab Ryan and throw him to the ground—caveman style—part of him urgently warning himself not to do anything stupid or rash. The thought of Ryan's possible rejection would destroy him. How was it possible to feel so intensely after just one casual evening together?

He hoped none of his crazy feelings were showing on his face as he forced himself to say, "Good night. I probably won't be here when you wake up. I like to clean the fountain pools before the guests arrive. We'll connect later in the day, okay?"

Ryan's mouth slid into a dimpled smile as Sean's heart lurched. Despite his promise to himself, he took a step toward Ryan as if drawn by a force he couldn't control. But Ryan was gone, disappearing behind his closed bedroom door.

Sean sank on the couch, trying to sort out his jumbled thoughts. Could this really be it? He'd always imagined this was how it would happen. He would see Mister Right and know in his gut he was the one. Yet he realized now his fantasy had always included the other guy responding in kind. The world would stop for *both* of them as they moved together in a perfect embrace. The jolt of recognition would spark in two pairs of eyes as two hearts swelled with longing. Yet that hadn't happened. Or had it?

Could it be Ryan was playing it as cool as Sean was? After all, he was reasonably sure he'd kept his naked desire cloaked with nonchalance and friendly chatter. Maybe Ryan was equally as skilled at keeping his feelings under wraps. Maybe he was as careful about looking before he leapt as Sean.

He heard Ryan's shower turn on and couldn't help but imagine him naked—his body lathered with soap, his cock and balls waiting to be worshipped by a lover—by Sean. He could see himself in his mind's eye kneeling under the spray with Ryan, lovingly rinsing his erect shaft before sliding his lips over its girth, reveling in his masculine perfection. Sean's cock rose hard in his shorts, bulging up toward his belly. He stroked it through the denim, groaning softly as he thought of the naked man in the next room.

He wondered what kind of men Ryan liked. Would he find someone like Sean appealing? Someone who pretty much kept to himself, preferring a sunrise over having sex with strangers at the play parties that took place every night on the island? Or would Ryan turn out like every other roommate he'd had, eager to leap into the sexual fray, wondering silently or sometimes aloud why Sean was such a stick in the mud?

Sean sighed. Who was he kidding? Fairy tales only came true in fairy tales. Ryan probably was attracted to guys like Matt—big galumphs with necks thicker than most men's waists. Shit, he'd probably steered Ryan right into the guy's arms with his warning.

Sean put his head in his hands, knowing he was obsessing, unable to stop himself. He couldn't remember having this reaction toward anyone before. Sure he'd been attracted, but not like this. He thought back to the moment when they'd first met and their eyes locked, green melting into blue as the world paused to take note...

Sean went into the kitchen and poured himself a large glass of chilled white wine, hoping to calm himself or at least dope himself sufficiently to sleep. He took his wine into his bedroom and set it by his bed. He was just about to wash when there was a knock on his door. "Come in."

Ryan opened the door, his expression sheepish. "Hey, I'm sorry to bother you but I need your opinion. Does this thing look okay? I feel ridiculous in it. Normally I wouldn't be caught dead in one of these."

"Ah," Sean breathed before he could stop himself. Before him stood a blond god wearing only a bright red Speedo with the words Club Eros in gold across one hip. His package was cupped in red, bulging between strong thighs. His smooth, tan chest was broad and strong, the little brown nipples standing at attention in the cool breeze blowing through the open window. Sean's mouth actually watered and he had to swallow to keep from choking. He felt his face heat as his cock leapt to attention. He turned slightly to hide his erection and cleared his throat. "Sure. Looks great. You're going to have to fight them off with a stick." He tried to grin.

Instead of looking pleased by this remark, as Sean would have expected, Ryan looked rather worried. "What's the matter? You a virgin or something?" He laughed at this absurd remark, but it only served to make his new roommate's expression cloud even more. Ryan furrowed his eyebrows and turned away. Sean was suddenly curious. What was the guy afraid of? Surely with his looks he was well used to fending off attacks from all sides. "You okay?" he asked.

Ryan's face smoothed though his smile seemed a little forced. "Sure, yeah. Why wouldn't I be okay? Just newbie jitters, I guess. Want to make a good impression."

"Ryan, you would make a good impression in a potato sack. I wouldn't worry for a second. Even in this place full of Greek gods, you're going to outshine them all. If I know the clientele here, and believe me I do, you're going to have your pick of sugar daddies and beautiful boys. They won't be able to keep their hands off you." *Nor will I*, he thought desperately, *nor will I*.

Again the worried pucker appeared between Ryan's eyebrows. Something was odd here. For some reason Sean didn't believe it was "newbie jitters". He didn't pry however. It was clear Ryan wasn't prepared to share whatever was troubling him.

"I'm not here to find a sugar daddy!" Ryan asserted in an affronted tone. "I'm here to work and enjoy this tropical paradise."

"Okay," Sean said slowly, "I didn't mean to offend." Curious Ryan hadn't even mentioned the bevy of handsome available men he hoped to meet and seduce or be seduced by. In a place like this, that was usually uppermost in everyone's mind. Sean was most decidedly the exception. The place was rife with sex—the nightly parties invariably ended in sexual free-for-alls. Everyone paired off, sometimes with several men in a single night and nobody batted an eye. Surely Ryan wasn't so naïve as to be unaware or uninterested.

Unless... Sean shook away the sudden idea trying to press its way into his head. No, no way. He tried not to stare at Ryan's crotch but didn't succeed, his eyes sliding downward of their own volition. Ryan dropped his hands in front of himself and Sean looked away. "Well, good luck tomorrow," he offered.

"Thanks," Ryan answered, "I'll need it."

Chapter Two

Ryan set tall, frosted glasses with lime wedges perched over the rims in front of the two men. His first day had gone smoothly so far. He'd fetched towels, cut dozens of lemons, limes, oranges and pineapples for the drinks Matt would prepare over the course of the day, brought drinks and snacks down to sunbathers on the beach, wiped down all the tables in his section and allowed himself to be complimented and admired by the guests.

"Jack, I do believe I've died and gone to heaven. Look at the angel they've hired to serve us drinks and take care of our every need!"

The man called Jack answered, "I hope it's not heaven. I don't think what I have in mind for this golden hunk of manhood is permitted in heaven!" He laughed and caught Ryan completely by surprise as he cupped his ass and squeezed it playfully.

Without thinking Ryan jerked back angrily. It was one thing to have them leer, but no one had said anything about touching! "What the—" he caught himself and tried to calm down.

Jack laughed. "Skittish little colt, aren't you? From the looks of you I'd say you should be quite used to being adored." His voice became less playful as he added, "A word of advice, if I may. Reactions like that aren't going to get you many tips, my lad. One would almost think you didn't like having that gorgeous ass of yours fondled, hmm? Could that be?"

Not by a sixty-year-old queen, I don't, Ryan thought to himself as he flushed. Unsure how to handle the situation he didn't respond at first. He'd observed Jan and Mark being fondled and petted but he'd assumed they invited it. Finally he said, "I'm sorry. You startled me. I didn't mean to be rude."

"Don't be so hard on the boy," his partner said. "It's his first day, for heaven's sake. He'll get used to us dirty old men in no time." He turned to Ryan, who stood uncertainly between the two seated men. "My name is Clarence. What's yours, darling?"

"I'm Ryan."

"Pleased to meet you, Ryan. I look forward to getting to know you. *Really* know you. Perhaps later you could stop by our bungalow. It's number seven. We nap at three. We've got a huge bed, darling. Open invitation." He smiled, his thin cheeks creasing. "We tip very, *very* well." As if on cue Jack picked up a money clip resting on the table and pulled a crisp bill from it. He set it on the table as Clarence watched Ryan with narrowed eyes. "Go on," he urged. "Take it. A little token of welcome to the island of love." The two men laughed. Ryan looked down at the money—it was a hundred-dollar bill.

By two o'clock Ryan's first workday was over. He headed back to the bungalow to change. As he dressed, he found himself preening in the mirror, turning this way and that to see how he looked. He shook his long hair away from his face only to have it fall forward again. He laughed at himself. "Jesus, Weston, you turning gay after only one day?"

He knocked lightly on Sean's bedroom door, which was closed. There was no answer. "Damn," Ryan said softly. He'd been hoping to talk to Sean about what he was expected to tolerate around here. He knocked again and then gently turned the handle. No one was in the room. The bed was made, everything neat and tidy.

Ryan thought of his own room, the bed a rumpled mess, his clothing tossed in a corner. His alarm hadn't gone off and he'd barely made it out of the bungalow in time. He hadn't wanted to be late on his first day! He returned to his room and straightened it, folding his clothes and pulling the batik blue cotton quilt over the sheets.

He sat on his bed, wondering what he should do next. He'd been snacking on cheese, crackers and fruit all day, which was plentifully available at the bar, so he didn't necessarily need lunch. He realized he didn't even know Sean's hours, though he did know he was in charge of the pools and hot tubs.

He thought about his new roommate. Everyone kept saying he was aloof and kept to himself, but he'd been very friendly and talkative with Ryan. He had worried at first he wouldn't know how to act with a gay man, but Sean had put him totally at ease. He hadn't tried to hit on him, which was a relief, since as roommates that could be very awkward. Ryan really liked Sean so far—he appeared easygoing and relaxed, not on the make like everyone else seemed to be. Ryan realized he was very lucky to have him as his roommate. At least in the bungalow he wouldn't have to always be watching his back—or his ass! He could be himself. Well, not entirely. Or could he?

Ryan wondered if he dared confide in Sean. Then at least he wouldn't have to pretend he was gay 24/7. Would Sean freak out? Ryan grinned to himself. This wasn't a situation most straight men found themselves in—trying to decide whether to come out of the closet or not!

Ryan left the bungalow in search of Sean. He found him at the Olympic-size pool with a high dive at one end. The other two smaller pools at the resort were really wading pools with fountains bubbling at their centers, filled with men swathed in suntan oil drifting lazily on rafts, tropical drinks in hand.

Sean was vacuuming the pool when Ryan approached. He was wearing the requisite Speedo, bright yellow against his tan flesh. His body was compact and strong, his back muscles flexing as he pushed a gleaming silver pole slowly through the water. Several men were swimming laps in the center lanes, a few others reclining in lounge chairs watching them.

Sean lifted his head at that moment, spotting Ryan. He waved and smiled and Ryan headed over toward him. "Hi, Sean. Took me awhile to find you."

Sean wiped his forehead with a small towel he had thrown over one shoulder and lifted the pole out of the water, setting it down next to the pool. "Good timing. I was just about to take a break." He gestured for Ryan to follow him as he walked toward a cabana several yards from the pool. Moving behind the small bar, he retrieved two bottles of cola and handed one to Ryan. They sat at a table beneath the shade of a large blue-and-white-striped umbrella.

"So did you survive your first day?" Sean took a long drink from his bottle.

"I guess," Ryan answered. "The work's easy, if a little dull. Time went pretty fast though, with all the fetching and carrying."

Sean looked at Ryan's shoulders, which were reddening over his tan. "Better use more sunscreen. The sun's hot down here, though you don't realize it as much with the sea breeze. Even with a good base tan like yours, you can get a serious burn."

Ryan looked down at his shoulders and lightly touched the skin. "You're right. I'll have to be more careful." He took a drink of the cold soda and realized he was a little hungry after all. "Say, what are your hours anyway? Any chance you'd like to grab some lunch with me?"

"I work when I want." At Ryan's impressed expression, Sean grinned self-consciously and added, "I mean, I get my job done. Connor's great at covering for me whenever I need it, but I take a certain personal pride in making sure everything is up to standards. I actually work more than the required thirty-six-hour workweek, but I stretch it out over seven days because I like to keep my pools crystal clear at all times. With all the crap these guys smear on themselves that isn't always so easy. I give swimming lessons from time to time too, and show the guys who are interested how to snorkel. I also maintain the pool grounds. It's a lot of work but I really enjoy doing it. It's peaceful and quiet. Gerald and Robert respect my desire to work alone. As long as I get it all done, they don't really care."

"That's pretty cool. You've been here a while, huh?"

"Five years. I remember *my* first day. My first hour here some guy grabbed my butt and said he wanted to fuck me silly. I know I turned ten shades of red."

Ryan laughed. "That happened to me! Well, the grabbing part. I almost punched the guy out!"

"You what?" Sean looked worried.

"I didn't of course. I don't want to lose my job before I've even started."

"Tell me what happened."

"How about over lunch?"

Sean started to respond but the sound of someone calling him distracted him. "Sean! I'm ready for that lesson you promised, mon!" A dark-skinned man with dreadlocks came toward them, his accent thickly Jamaican.

Sean turned helplessly toward Ryan. "Sorry, guests first, you know the drill."

"Yeah, sure, no problem. I'll catch up with you later." Ryan was surprised at how disappointed he was. Sean was the only person he felt comfortable talking to so far.

Sean stood and called out, "Coming, Peter!" Turning back toward Ryan, he said, "Let's meet in an hour or so back at the bungalow. I'll take you to my favorite part of the island. We'll sit, relax with a few beers and you can tell me all about your day."

Ryan brightened considerably at this. "You got it," he said.

* * * * *

Sean took Ryan to an undeveloped part of the island. "They haven't built out this far yet. Someday they'll probably claim this last bit of true paradise, but for now they've let it be." They had to park the golf cart and walk the last three hundred yards or so through sand dunes and brush to reach the rocks overlooking the beach. "I come here when I don't want to be found." Sean began to scramble up the rocks, carrying a backpack cooler with the beers and a rolled-up blanket on his back.

Ryan moved more slowly behind him, less sure-footed. He would have rather sunk down on the warm sand beneath the shade of a palm tree. Yet when he heaved himself up to where Sean stood waiting for him, he saw the appeal. Though the rocks he'd climbed had been craggy and rough, this one had been sheered flat. The smooth stone looked almost polished and the view of both the ocean and the island was amazing.

Sean rolled out the blanket and they sat on opposite sides, the cooler between them. He unzipped the insulated lid and took out two beers, handing one to Ryan. Leaning back on one elbow, he sighed happily. Ryan watched him as he drank, thinking how relaxed he looked. He wished he felt as at ease. Tucked in his shorts pocket was the hundred-dollar bill those guys had practically forced him to take. He pulled it now and tossed it onto the blanket.

"What's that? Pretty hefty payment for a beer!" Sean laughed.

"I got that today. A tip I guess you'd say."

Sean nodded, clearly impressed. "Not too shabby, my man. You must be doing something right. Something really right!" He laughed and added, "I thought you said you were uncomfortable with the overtures. But a tip like that tells me you did more than just bring drinks to somebody."

Ryan frowned. "No, I didn't! Nothing. Frankly, I don't know what the hell I was supposed to do. I mean, they were pretty overt about it. They said to come by their bungalow at three and get in their bed with them! Then they pulled out that money. It was like they were paying me in advance to have a *ménage à trois*. I didn't want to take it—I didn't want to give them the wrong impression. But they literally forced me to—shoving it into the waistband of my bathing suit and telling me it was bad form to refuse a tip." Ryan drew his hand over his forehead. "I don't think I handled it very well. Jesus, I'm probably going to be fired by the end of the week."

"Calm down and tell me exactly what happened," Sean said. Ryan recounted his interaction with Jack and Clarence in some detail. He found himself getting worked up about it all over again as he recalled the scene and how he'd felt like a piece of meat.

Sean smiled gently. "I don't think you'll be fired, Ryan. You're just finding your feet here. It takes some getting used to, all the groping and innuendo that goes on. Though I must say, if you don't mind my being so blunt, I'm surprised such a little thing like that upset you. Surely you've been to the clubs and all. A guy like you, I would have thought you'd be used to being manhandled. I mean, with your gorgeous bod and that long blond hair." Ryan's cheeks began to redden and he looked away toward the sea.

Unable to hide the exasperation in his tone, Sean continued. "You know what guys are like, come on! And this *is* a sex club. You need to get that through your head, Ryan. While *you* may not be here for the sex games that go on, ninety-nine point nine percent of the staff and all of the guests are! That's what they're paying for—the chance to be openly gay and openly sexual in a safe, luxurious environment. That's what you signed up for. Surely you understood that."

Ryan nodded miserably. He *had* understood it, at least intellectually. He'd been sure he could handle it too. But the thought of being expected to show up at those old guys' bungalow for sex was too much. "I didn't want their damn money! Now I'm afraid they expected me to be there and I didn't show."

"No, no," Sean said quickly. "I'm sure they didn't expect that at all. It was just an invitation—they were feeling you out. Some of the guys would leap at the chance. A lot of these older men are really loaded. I'm talking millions. That hundred was just a tease. They'd throw a lot more money your way for sex."

"Well, that's a relief, I guess. If that was the tip for bringing them cocktails, I'm gonna be rich at the end of this gig!" He gave a weak laugh.

"You can definitely do well if you play your cards right. Some of the guys hook up with these sugar daddies like I was saying last night. It's one reason there are so many applicants, even though the pay isn't that great. A young guy like you could end up set for life—for a price of course." Sean looked away.

Ryan regarded him curiously. "What about you? You're a good-looking guy. You know the ropes around here. Why haven't you found yourself a sugar daddy and retired to a life of pampered ease?"

"Not my style," Sean said roughly. He took a breath. "Sorry, didn't mean to snap at you. No offense toward any of the guys who choose that, but it's not for me. I want," he paused and looked intently at Ryan before turning abruptly away again. In nearly a whisper he said, "I want to be in love. To fall head over heels for the man of my dreams and have him feel the same way about me. All this bed-hopping and group sex stuff is fine for a while but it's hollow, you know? It demeans what I think love should be. Pimping yourself for a nice bed in a fancy house is not my idea of happiness."

Ryan nodded. "Mine either." He opened a second beer and drank it as he pondered what Sean had said. In fact, he held a similar view of romantic love. While he had

enjoyed sex as much as the next guy, he'd never felt the intense passion he imagined a true romance would engender. He'd always just assumed it was because he'd yet to find the right woman.

He couldn't help asking, "If it's not for you, what the hell are you doing living year-round on an island where ninety-nine point nine percent of the people, according to you, don't share your romantic viewpoint in the slightest? How will you ever meet this perfect person of yours if you live 24/7 with a bunch of sex-crazed pleasure-seekers?"

Sean laughed but the laugh was hollow. He was quiet for a while and when he finally spoke, his tone was thoughtful. "That's a good question. If I'm totally honest, I think I've been hiding here. I've got a reputation for being aloof or shy, if you like. I don't go to the parties or pick up guys. I do have a few friends here, but I'm not intimate with anyone on the island. I tell myself it's because they aren't my type, which is true. But sometimes I think I don't give anyone a chance to find out if they're my type or not."

He stopped, staring hard at Ryan until Ryan looked away, embarrassed without knowing why. Sean continued. "I've been waiting for this ideal—this romantic ideal to appear out of nowhere and sweep me off my feet." He snorted and grinned self-deprecatingly. "Stupid, right? The guy of my dreams would probably end up being straight."

Ryan grinned, wondering if this were the moment to confess his secret. He didn't quite have the nerve. Instead he reached for another beer as Sean asked, "What about you? You seem almost naïve about what goes on around here and distinctly uncomfortable. Forgive me for harping on the same theme, but someone as good-looking as you surely has been around. Even if you weren't interested in casual sex, you had to have spent your entire adult life fighting off men by the handful. So what's the real deal? Why do you act like a scared little teenager when some guy makes a harmless pass at you?"

Ryan downed the last of his third beer. The alcohol made it easier to say what was about to come out of his mouth. The warmth of it burned like a little furnace in the pit of his stomach. "Because," he said softly, "I'm not gay."

Sean sat dumbfounded for perhaps thirty seconds. His brain simply refused to process what he'd just heard. Ryan was leaning toward him, clearly anxious for his response. "You heard me, right? I'm not gay! I didn't say anything because I really wanted the job. Once it's out, I'll be out too."

Though he felt his own world crashing around him like shards of a broken dream, Sean tried to focus on the pain in Ryan's voice. He sounded so woebegone Sean couldn't help but feel sorry for him. He forced himself to gather his wits and offer some kind of solace. "You've passed so far," he said.

"Yeah, by the skin of my teeth! Even if you don't say anything—"

"Of course I won't say anything!" *I don't want to see you go! Even if all I can ever do is look at you*, he thought as he said those words aloud.

"Well, thanks. I appreciate that. But how long can I hold out the way I'm going? They're gonna catch on to me. Somebody will. Maybe Clarence and Jack already have."

"No, no way. You've only been here one day, for god's sake. Newbie jitters, just like you said." He reached over to pat Ryan's knee but withdrew his hand at the last moment. "We'll figure something out, don't worry."

* * * * *

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," Sean kept repeating as he rocked back and forth on the edge of his bed. "God, Evans, how could you have been so fucking stupid?" Of *course* Ryan was straight! The second he'd said it, Sean realized he'd known it all along but had refused to see it. He hadn't wanted to admit it. What a joke! How ironic to think he had finally found the man of his dreams, rooming in the same bungalow, but as unattainable as if he lived on Mars.

Sean barely remembered how he managed to get off those rocks and back to the cart. He was in a daze as they drove back to the bungalow. As soon as he could, he got away from Ryan, pretending he had to finish some work on one of the hot tubs. He stayed away until he was reasonably sure Ryan would be asleep. He knew he would have to face him sometime, but not tonight, not yet.

"Okay, you can handle this, you know you can," Sean murmured to himself. "It's not that different from before really. You were content to take it slow, just become friends, let romance blossom if that was in the cards, be cool about it if it wasn't." *Liar!* He knew he was fooling himself. Yes, he had planned to take it slow—to feel Ryan out, to give them a chance to get to know one another. But from the moment they'd met their connection had been special, or so he had thought. He had secretly believed in his heart of hearts eventually it would all work out. It had to, to fit into his fairy-tale notion of true love.

Sean sighed. If he didn't feel so utterly bereft, it would almost be funny. He had had any number of opportunities to hook up with guys over the years, some of them as good-looking as Ryan, though none, not a one, had leapt into his heart as Ryan somehow had. He could have had his pick of sugar daddies too. Some of the older men liked his quiet, patient ways. He was always respectful but never took offense at their advances. He understood as Ryan did not that it was all meant in fun—a part of the package deal that was Club Eros.

As he leaned back against his pillows, exhausted in mind as well as body, an idea began to slip its way into his brain. *We'll figure something out...* If Ryan presented as part of a couple, he'd be cut more slack. Sure, the guests would still pinch his ass and make the obligatory passes, but that was just part of the job. No one would expect him to participate in play parties or openly flirt with the guests or staff if he was seriously involved with someone.

Even as a plan formed in Sean's mind, he knew it was a bad idea. If not for Ryan for himself. Imagine the sweet agony of *pretending* to be Ryan's lover, all the while knowing there wasn't a chance in hell he'd ever be anything more than Ryan's beard. On the other hand, it would be job security for Ryan and keep him close—the perfect cover. Which meant Ryan would be able to stay through the season. Sean realized he couldn't bear the thought of losing Ryan, even just this bud of a new friendship he already cherished. He wondered...was this a lesson of romantic love—willingness to sacrifice knowing there was no reward for him in the end?

He grinned to himself in the dark, aware of his penchant for the dramatic. What a horrible sacrifice, to have to hold Ryan's hand in public, to be forced to dance with him at the weekly dances, leaning against Ryan's chest, his arms wrapped around his narrow waist as they moved slowly to soft music... Sean put his hands behind his head and stared out at the moonlit ocean lapping gently against the shore outside his open window. The play of silver over the dark sea mesmerized him as it always did and finally he slept.

The next morning Sean was waiting for him when Ryan came into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. They exchanged greetings, Ryan looking distinctly glum. Sean had rehearsed in his mind what he was going to say, trying to imagine Ryan's reaction. Now he plunged in with, "Remember I said we'd work something out?"

"Yeah," Ryan perked up a bit. "You come up with something?"

"I might have. If you're game that is. I think we could pull it off."

Ryan poured cream into his coffee. "Fire away. I'm all ears."

"Okay. You're afraid you're going to be busted for being straight, right? You're afraid it'll be awkward and obvious if you continue refusing the advances you're sure to keep getting. Here at the resort, guys who pair off and make it clear they're an item are pretty much left alone unless they want to include others in their play. If you're comfortable with it, I'm willing to pretend you and I are lovers. Then you have the perfect cover for refusing the advances of others without seeming like a stuck-up snob or worse," he lowered his voice in a dramatic stage whisper, "straight."

Ryan laughed. "It's a great idea, Sean, and I'm willing to go along if it lets me stay in paradise a while longer! How would it work? How are we gonna pull it off?"

Sean felt his heart flutter. To be able to touch him, to kiss him, to hold him... *Don't get carried away*, he warned himself. *It's going to be an act, nothing more and it won't be the same as if it were real. He'll merely be tolerating me while I torture myself with unrequited desire. Will I be able to stand it?* Aloud he said, "Don't be so quick to agree, my friend. You need to think it over first. Just saying we're a couple isn't going to cut it if you want this to work. We're going to have to act the part. That means holding hands in public or walking arm in arm, dancing at the parties, spending time together. You might feel uncomfortable with all that physical contact."

Ryan sobered and squinted his eyes in thought. Sean realized he was holding his breath as he waited for Ryan's answer. He honestly wasn't sure if he wanted it to be yes or no.

"I think I can handle it," Ryan said with a touch of apprehension. "As long as you're sure it's not too much of an annoyance for you. I know you like to keep to yourself. This might be a real imposition for you."

"Trust me," Sean said softly. "If it is, I'll let you know."

* * * * *

The next day after work Ryan grabbed the novel he was reading, sunscreen and a thick beach towel and headed down to the shore. Men were scattered over the sand on towels or in beach chairs beneath large umbrellas. Ryan chose a spot and situated himself on his towel.

"You're Ryan, right?" Ryan nodded as he peered up at an African-American man with a finely sculpted face holding an armful of fresh towels and a shoulder bag filled with ice and bottles of soda and beer. He saw the gold Club Eros logo printed across the hip of the man's high-slung bikini. The man smiled wide. "I'm Ted. I work the afternoon shift. This is my second season."

Ryan stood and extended his hand. "Nice to meet you, Ted. I just started but it's great so far. Talk about perks!" He waved his hand out toward the expanse of soft sand and blue-green sea.

Ted must have assumed he was talking about the men as he responded, "God yes! Seems like every guy is sexier than the one before. I feel like a kid in a candy store when I come here. I get more offers in one day than I do in a year back home in D.C." He gazed intently at Ryan and said softly, "How 'bout you, Ryan? Do you like your meat dark?"

"Oh, uh," Ryan stammered. At that moment Matt, the bartender and their immediate supervisor, suddenly loomed behind Ted.

"Hey, Teddy boy! Don't you see those two gentlemen trying to get your attention over there? You have thirsty guests! Quit yakking with the new guy and get back to work."

Ted grinned broadly at Ryan and winked. "Later," he said beneath his breath as he loped away.

Matt approached Ryan's towel as he sat back down. Ryan sighed inwardly, wondering what had possessed him to think it would be relaxing on the beach. Matt sat on the sand next to Ryan. Though he didn't particularly like the muscle-bound look, Ryan couldn't help but stare at Matt's bulging shoulder, chest and arm muscles.

Matt smiled slyly and brought his arms up over his chest, fists pointing downward in a weight lifter's pose. "Like what you see, huh? I was Mr. Hawaii three years running."

"Very impressive," Ryan managed.

Matt dropped his arms and said, "You've done a good job so far. I think you're going to fit right in. Some advice though. You don't have to be so formal with the guests. They like a little flirtation, a little teasing. Especially the older guys. Makes 'em feel sexy, you know. A guy like you wouldn't give them the time of day in a different setting, but here we aim to please, if you get my drift." He reached over and stroked Ryan's thigh, his eyes glittering in the bright sun. Ryan swallowed, not daring to pull away.

Instead he reached for the sunscreen. "I better put more of this on," he said to distract Matt. "Don't want to burn." He opened the bottle and squirted lotion into his hand. He began running it along his arms and shoulders, reaching around himself to his back.

"Here, let me do that," Matt grabbed the bottle. "You're missing a bunch of spots. Lie down and let me do it for you."

Again not knowing what else to do, Ryan lay down on his towel, cradling his head in his arms. He recalled Sean's warning about Matt... *Give him an inch and he'll take a mile. He's famous for seducing the newbies and you're just his type.* He couldn't help the slight flinch as Matt's thick fingers began to rub over his back, smearing the cool lotion into his skin.

"Hmm," Matt murmured, his voice deep. He spread his large hands over Ryan's shoulders, palms pressing down as he moved in sweeping strokes toward his ass. "You are one fine specimen, my friend," he said, his voice ripe with lust. "I wonder if you could handle what *I've* got to offer. What do you say, eh, Ryan?" As he said this, Matt's hands slipped down to Ryan's ass, kneading the flesh beneath the bathing suit.

Ryan rolled over abruptly, aware he was blushing as he struggled to come up with a response. Someone else spoke for him. "He probably could, Matt," Sean's voice hovered from just behind Ryan. "But he's not going to. Ryan's already taken."

Matt stared up in open-mouthed surprise and Ryan turned around to see Sean standing behind him, his hands on his hips, his face in shadow as the sun shone behind him. His hair and body were wet, a small towel slung over his shoulder. He held snorkeling gear in one hand. "He's *what*? I know you're rooming together, but you sure didn't waste any time, eh?"

"Why do you think he's rooming with me? Ryan and I go way back. How do you think he got this job? I'm the one who told him about it. Right, Ry?"

Relief poured through him as he grinned up at Sean and said, "That's right. We go way back."

Matt stared from one to the other, his expression still dumbfounded. "Sean, I've been here three seasons. How come I didn't know you had a significant other on the mainland?"

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Matt. But now that you know, you should also know I'm a very possessive guy. So hands off!"

Matt stood, laughing. "Okay, okay." He held his hands out in a gesture of surrender. He shook his head, grinning. "Will wonders never cease. Sean Evans has a lover! And here I thought you just might be straight!" He guffawed and winked at Ryan.

Ryan smiled up at him, wishing he'd take the hint and leave. Matt lingered a while longer, watching as Sean settled himself next to Ryan, draping his arm over Ryan's shoulder in a proprietary gesture. Finally he said, "I better get back to the bar. Training a new guy. Catch ya later, boys."

As they watched him stride away, Ryan shifted a little and Sean's arm fell away. "Thanks, man. You saved my ass!" Ryan scooted around on the large towel so he was facing Sean.

Sean laughed. "Do you mean that figuratively or literally?"

Ducking his head, Ryan grinned, embarrassed by the joke. Instead of answering directly he said, "You weren't kidding about him making a move. How'd you know where to find me?"

"I didn't actually. I just finished giving a guy a snorkeling lesson and I noticed you as I was walking back. I'm surprised you chose this stretch of beach—it's one of the hot pick-up spots on the island. You lie down here, you're fair game."

"Now you tell me," Ryan said with a rueful grin. With a sigh he added, "Even with saves like that, I'm never going to make it here. I should just quit while I'm ahead."

"No," Sean said urgently, biting his tongue to keep from saying more. Ryan lay back on the towel, closing his eyes, his hands behind his head. Sean looked down at him, his heart catching as his cock twitched beneath his bathing suit. Ryan's thick, dark blond eyelashes shadowed his cheekbones. His lower lip was full and pouting, making Sean want to bend over and nibble it. He wanted to stroke Ryan's cheek with his fingertips and kiss his eyelids.

Sean knew he would have to be careful, very careful, treading the line between giving a good show for public consumption and not scaring off his new friend. He'd devised his scheme primarily as a way to be near Ryan and keep him from leaving the island, hoping against hope it would work. He truly did want to help him, to insulate him from the onslaught of hungry men he knew were already lining up for a chance with the hot new stud in their midst.

He lay down on the large beach towel, allowing his shoulder to touch Ryan's, something he wouldn't have dared to do without their new understanding. Ryan's skin was hot against his own, still cool from the ocean. After a moment Ryan shifted so they were no longer touching.

Sean stood, too restless to lie there. "I'm going in the water. Want to come?"

Ryan sat up. "Yeah. I haven't even been in the ocean yet, if you can believe it! I did take a dip in the pool early this morning before work."

"Well, let's go. The water's calm today and there are still a few more hours of sunlight." They stood together and began to walk between the sunbathing men. Once

they were past the breakers they began to swim. "If we go just a little farther there's a sandbar where we can stand up again," Sean said. He observed that Ryan was a strong swimmer, his back muscles sleek as he gracefully cut the water with his arms.

In a few minutes they reached the sandbar and stopped to catch their breath. Ryan was breathing hard, probably not used to the exertion of a brisk ocean swim. They turned and faced the shore a moment, dotted with bright umbrellas, before turning back. The water stretched out in ribbons of darkening blue toward the horizon.

Sean suppressed a sigh as he imagined the two of them gently buoyed by the salt water as they floated in each other's arms. As he waited for Ryan to finish catching his breath, he dove beneath the water, swimming in a lazy circle. When he finally resurfaced, Ryan was floating on his back, his eyes closed. "It's so peaceful. I could almost imagine there was no one else here. Just you and me out here in the ocean floating by ourselves."

Sean smiled. "I like to imagine that sometimes when I'm by myself on the rocks I took you to. I imagine the island is actually deserted—I'm the only one here with everything I need to have a serene and comfortable life."

"Would you like that though? I mean to be all alone? With no companionship?"

"No, I guess not. At least not forever. I would want someone with me. Someone I loved and who loved me back." He avoided Ryan's gaze, aware he was watching him. Instead he swiveled back toward the shore. In a brusque voice he said, "We'd better head back. The current will be against us on the way in so just take it nice and easy. Don't fight it. We're not in a hurry."

Together they swam back, walking through the water once it was waist deep. It was crystal clear with brightly colored fish flitting by their legs as they moved. Once back on the beach they headed to Ryan's towel. As they collected their things, Sean said, "Want to eat out tonight? It would be good to be seen together." He smiled hopefully.

Ryan grinned and nodded. As they began to walk along the beach, Sean leaned to Ryan and said, "Take my arm. Have to play the part."

Ryan looked alarmed at this suggestion. "Uh, I don't know. Do we have to?" Sean was hurt by this remark even though he knew that was ridiculous. Why should Ryan want to walk arm in arm with him?

He swallowed his pain and answered, "No, we don't. But remember, we have to look real or it won't work."

"No, you're right. I'm being stupid."

"Let's start with something easier," Sean offered. "We'll just hold hands as we walk." There were several couples strolling near them along the beach, some arm in arm but some just holding hands. They would fit right in. Ryan nodded, allowing Sean to take his hand. Sean permitted himself to gently squeeze it. He didn't permit himself to raise it to his lips and kiss it, though that was exactly what he wanted to do.

They seemed to fit together as they walked, their stride similar, the rhythm of their gait in sync. Ryan's hand felt so wonderful in his. He imagined sliding his arm around

Ryan's waist as he dipped his head to his shoulder. Yet for now just holding hands was enough. After all, it had to be enough.

The absurdity of the situation assailed him yet again. The man he knew he was falling in love with could never return his feelings. Why was he subjecting himself to this cruel charade, knowing that to touch Ryan only made him mad with desire? *Because the only thing worse than touching him would be not touching him*, he thought.

Once they were out of sight of most of the guests, Ryan pulled his hand away. Sean let him go.

Chapter Three

Two weeks came and went, and Ryan passed his probationary period with flying colors. Sean and Ryan continued their act in public, eating meals together, occasionally holding hands and admitting they were an item when questioned. In the privacy of their bungalow, Ryan was able to truly relax. Sean was so easy to talk to he practically forgot he was gay. They talked about anything and everything, sharing memories from their childhoods, their philosophies on life and even details about past relationships Ryan never would have shared with his straight buddies back home.

Along with being grateful to Sean for his willingness to keep up the pretense of their relationship, Ryan realized he was really coming to like him, perhaps more than he'd ever liked anyone in his life. Sometimes he even thought he felt something more, though he certainly never let it show and barely admitted it to himself.

But truth be told, if he examined his most secret thoughts and feelings, he found himself sometimes *attracted* to Sean. He wasn't sure if it was sexual attraction or just the fact he admired Sean on so many levels. Sean was so self-contained and quietly confident. He was very well read and was always quoting this author or that one, not to show off, but to add a different perspective or insight to whatever they were talking about.

Quite by accident Ryan discovered Sean was an excellent diver. One day he'd gone in search of him for something or other and came across him standing on the high dive, poised like a statue high above the water before he flew gracefully through the air in perfect form, barely causing a ripple as he met the water. He was also funny, especially when he mimicked some of the more over-the-top guests when he was telling a story, getting a lilt or accent just right. Ryan often knew who he was imitating before Sean said his name.

Just a few days ago he'd almost said something—almost admitted his strange attraction. Sean would discuss it seriously with him he knew, without taking offense. Sean was like that. Ryan continued to press the envelope in terms of trust, sharing a little more each time they talked about their lives and their dreams, and never once had Sean given him reason to be sorry. He never made fun of him or light of what he was saying as the guys he knew back home—including himself, he now realized—did.

Something held him back. Several times he thought he had seen Sean gazing at him with what looked like love in his eyes. Ryan knew he was probably imagining this since Sean always quickly looked away. Just in case, Ryan didn't want to fan any flames by admitting his own confused attraction. It wouldn't be fair.

Sean had convinced him they should make an appearance at the dance that Friday and as the day approached, Ryan experienced both anxiety and excitement. He kept

telling Sean he wasn't a very good dancer but Sean only smiled that little half smile of his and assured him everything would be fine.

Early Friday morning found Ryan and a redhead named Jordan sitting at Matt's bar slicing mounds of fruit in preparation for the day's tropical drinks. Matt was behind the bar, wiping it down with a damp cloth.

"So, Ryan, you going to the dance tonight?" Jordan asked. "We never see you two lovebirds at any parties. It's not fair, Sean hogging you all to himself." There was a pout in Jordan's voice but his eyes were twinkling. Jordan was even newer at Club Eros than Ryan, having just joined the staff a few days before. He had immediately made his interest in Ryan known. Once he found out Ryan and Sean were a couple, he'd graciously backed off, though he continued to tease and flirt.

"Actually I am. We are that is." Jordan's reminder made Ryan's stomach lurch, though in a way he was looking forward to going just to see what it would be like.

"Hey, that's great. Save me a spot on your dance card." Jordan grinned and Ryan gulped. It hadn't occurred to him other guys might ask him to dance! He mumbled something incoherent and ducked his head, focusing on the lime he was slicing.

They cut fruit in silence for a while until Jordan said, "I just *have* to ask. I've been waiting for you to spill the beans but you never say a word."

"About what?" Ryan asked, tensing.

"What's Sean like? You know, in bed. He's so good-looking in a beach bum kind of way with all that bleached blond hair falling into those blue, blue eyes that just look right into your soul. Come on, Ryan, you can tell us. Just me and Matt. Mum's the word, right, Matt?" He looked to the bartender for confirmation.

Matt grinned and nodded. "Yeah, I'd love to know too. Sean's always been a puzzle to me. He's had so many chances to hook up with some of the hottest guys around but until you came along, I thought he was made of ice or something."

Jordan encouraged, "Yeah, so come on, Ryan. Tell us! Is he hot? Does he do kinky stuff to you like tie you up before he does the deed? Make you lick his feet afterward to thank him? I can see Sean like that—so polite and quiet in public, a real Dom in the bedroom."

Jordan laughed and Matt guffawed along with him as Ryan felt his face color. They were both looking at him, clearly expecting an answer. Thinking fast, he shook his head. "A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell."

"Who said anything about kissing?" Jordan quipped, winking as he nudged Ryan's arm with his elbow. They continued to prod and tease him until Ryan finally offered a few innocuous details, claiming Sean was an excellent kisser and gave great massages. Happily, guests began to arrive at the cabana needing attention and both Jordan and he were relieved of fruit-slicing duty to attend to them.

As Ryan went through his day, he found himself going back again and again to Jordan's question—*What's Sean like in bed?* Ryan had seen so many guys making out on the beach and in the pool he was becoming used to it. What would have shocked him

back home barely made him bat an eye now. Men were always kissing and groping in public and no one thought a thing about it. Some guys on the beach even went so far as to fondle each other's erect cocks through their bathing suits as they kissed. That still made Ryan turn away in embarrassment.

Again the question floated into his head — *What's Sean like in bed?* Without expecting it, a sudden image flashed into his brain. He saw himself in bed with Sean, the two of them naked and locked in an embrace like the men at the beach. The thought of two hard bodies coming together, cocks rising to meet each other as their lips met for a kiss... *Jesus, Weston, cut it out!*

Ryan was shaken by the daydream, so vivid he actually glanced around furtively, as if someone might have somehow spied on his peculiar thoughts. He busied himself folding a huge pile of towels, ordering his overactive mind to take a nap.

* * * * *

"Wow, you look really sharp," Ryan said as he stepped out of his bedroom toweling his hair. Sean was already dressed for the dance in black leather pants that molded perfectly to his strongly muscled thighs and high, firm ass. His black tank top hugged his six-pack abs and broad chest, his white-blond hair falling like spun gold into his eyes.

He warmed to Ryan's praise and smiled. "Thanks. You look pretty hot yourself," he teased.

Ryan looked down at his tatty old terrycloth robe and grinned. "Yeah? Think I should wear this to the dance? Start a new trend?" He laughed but then frowned. "I don't know what to wear. I don't have any pants like *that*, that's for sure!" Sean felt his cock tingle under Ryan's gaze and sat on the couch, crossing his legs.

"Jeans are fine, though I haven't been to a dance in so long I don't even know what people are wearing these days. I used to go to them all the time the first couple of years I was here." He stopped to think a moment. "Anything goes really. You'll see everything from double-breasted suits to bathing suits, but most guys wear jeans or leather. Why don't you wear those white linen pants you have? You could wear a white tank top and we could be opposites, black and white."

"Okay," Ryan agreed, his dimples so adorable Sean had to bite his lip to keep from saying so. He was constantly biting off comments that sprang to his lips. He had promised himself he wouldn't make Ryan feel awkward when they were alone. He would not tell him he was longing to wrap his long hair in his fingers as he pulled him close for a kiss. He would never confess the detailed fantasies he had of him when he was alone in his room, his hand pumping his cock, Ryan's name escaping his lips as he came.

Night after night he dreamt about him, waking in a flush of desire, his heart pounding, his cock hard, his mind racing. He would fall back into his pillows with a

sigh as reality swept away the fevered dreams, his arm falling heavily to the empty side of the bed where Ryan should have been lying.

Sean had run through a gamut of feelings as he tried to cope with his secret love and the reality of a solid friendship that was building between them. He found himself able to open up and relax with Ryan in a way he had never been able to before. With other gay guys he always felt an underlying subtext—Is he hot? Does he think I'm hot? Is he going to make a move? Should I make a move?

Yet sometimes the silent price he paid—the endless yearning for a man he could never have—seemed almost too much to bear. But only almost. The alternative was worse, infinitely worse. When they held hands in public, Sean silently wished time would stop. Just holding his hand sent shivers of pleasure through Sean's body. And tonight! Tonight they would dance. Sean had convinced Ryan they needed to slow dance to make more of a public show. Whether or not this was true, he didn't care. He only knew he had to take Ryan in his arms. If the only way was on a dance floor crowded with people, then so be it.

Once Ryan was dressed, they decided to eat at one of the restaurants before heading over to the dance, which wouldn't really get started until around ten. Sean noticed Ryan seemed to be picking at his food, pushing it around his plate. "You got those newbie jitters again?" He grinned, recalling Ryan's assertion the first night he was only anxious about how he looked in a Speedo because of the newbie jitters.

Ryan looked up with a sheepish grin. "I'm not hungry I guess." When Sean tilted his head and raised his eyebrows as if to say, "Yeah, right," Ryan gave a small laugh and admitted, "Okay, so I'm nervous. I've been anticipating this evening ever since you suggested it a week ago and I keep having this recurring nightmare of getting out there to dance and looking like such a geek they'll all know I'm a fake."

Sean suddenly felt on the defensive. "Are you saying gay guys dance differently than straight guys? That we have some kind of special 'faggot' moves no straight guy could imitate?" Ryan flushed, his expression hurt as he looked down, making Sean regret his harsh tone. "Hey," he said gently. "I know you didn't mean it that way. I'm sorry I snapped." He resisted his natural impulse to put his hand over Ryan's. "Don't worry, Ry. It'll be fine. Just let yourself go with the music. And when we slow dance, I'll let you lead." Ryan swallowed so hard Sean could see his Adam's apple bob. "Relax," he said with a grin. "You're not going to the guillotine, it's just a *dance*, for god's sake! If you're that uncomfortable, we won't even go on the dance floor! We'll just hang around the bar."

"Really?" Ryan said, his voice hopeful. Sean felt a heaviness behind his eyes, as if tears wanted to force their way out. He realized he'd been clutching the idea so tightly of finally holding Ryan in his arms, the thought of having to let it go nearly broke his heart. *Think of him*, he admonished himself. *Just be there for your friend*. He took a deep breath, trying to make the best of it in his head. It would have been a mistake anyway to hold someone he could never keep, to touch someone who would never belong to him.

Forcing a smile, he looked up at Ryan and said as brightly as he could, "Sure. Just putting in an appearance will be enough. If you're done pushing food around your plate, we can go now." *And you can get it over with*, he almost said, bitterness for a moment making him reckless.

They entered one of the main buildings at the resort, which contained the largest of the three restaurants on the island, several large rooms for play parties and a ballroom. The dance was being held in the ballroom, though they hardly needed the poster displayed on an easel outside the doors to direct them. The loud thumping disco beat pulsing from within beckoned them like a tribal drum.

Sean took a breath, suddenly wishing they were back in the quiet of their bungalow drinking beers and talking about their lives or strolling along the edge of the water instead of about to enter the fray once again.

When he'd first come to the resort, he'd been as eager as any of the guys now prowling around the crowded room, sending out predatory vibes, in search of a partner—or two or three—for the night. It had felt exciting, even dangerous to pick up strangers or near strangers, pressing them against a wall for a kiss, crotches grinding as their tongues explored each other's mouth, alcohol fueling their passion.

He surveyed the room now, trying to see it through Ryan's eyes. The music was loud and fast, men moving on the dance floor to its steady beat. The dancing was wild, undulating, overtly sexual. Again he felt he had been unfair lashing out at Ryan about gay men dancing differently than straight men. It was his own sensitivity, he supposed, having grown up in a small town in upstate New York, forced to stay closeted by a repressed, reactionary bastion of narrow-minded, ignorant people.

"Let's get a drink," he said, amused as he watched Ryan's wide-eyed reaction to the scene right in front of them on the edge of the dance floor. Two men were dancing, wearing only leather thongs cupped over their cocks, their bare bodies sparkling with gold body paint. The men were moving in circles around one another, their heads thrown back, their pelvises gyrating.

Heads swiveled toward Sean and Ryan. Sean knew they cut a nice picture—one in black leather with a mop of hair that always fell over his eyes, the other in white linen, waves of shimmering gold tresses falling to his shoulders. He ached with pride to be seen with Ryan, almost forgetting for a moment they weren't really a couple.

As a stocky bald man of about thirty-five he recognized from the pool approached with a suggestive smile, Sean impulsively put his arm around Ryan, pulling him close. He didn't pull away, though Sean felt him stiffen. The man shouted over the din, "Can I get you two beautiful men a drink?"

"Sure," Sean said, letting his arm drop from Ryan's shoulders. He gestured for Ryan to precede him as they followed the man through the crowd toward the bar.

"Why'd you say yes?" Ryan leaned back to whisper, a worried expression on his face.

"His name is Tom. He's just being friendly. He's always at the Olympic pool, swimming laps. I've talked to him before—he's all right." Sean didn't mention Tom had been trying to get him into bed for the past two seasons. This cover wasn't only convenient for Ryan, he realized with an inward smile.

Sean introduced the two men and they placed their drink orders with one of the several bartenders behind a long, shiny red bar. As they waited for their drinks, Sean and Tom chatted about nothing much, Tom's eyes constantly sliding over to Ryan with a hungry expression on his face. Finally he said, "Sean, where have you been hiding this *gorgeous* creature? Tell me the two of you aren't an item! Or if you are, can I get the two-for-one package?" He laughed, reaching up to stroke Ryan's cheek.

Again Sean put his arm proprietarily around Ryan's shoulders and this time Ryan leaned into him. "Not for sale I'm afraid," Sean said in a bantering tone. He set his beer bottle on the bar and said to Ryan, "Wanna dance?"

Again Ryan's Adam's apple bobbed but he managed to say with some enthusiasm, "Sure!" Turning to Tom, he added, "It was nice to meet you, Tom."

"You *too*," Tom said with emphasis. "Save the next dance for me!" As they threaded their way through the throng, Sean wanted to reach back for Ryan's hand.

Instead he waited for him to catch up and said into his ear, "You okay?"

"Yeah. Let's dance." Together they moved through the men already on the polished dance floor until they found a spot. It was hard to tell who was dancing with whom as men swirled and gyrated around them. They began to dance, Ryan moving somewhat awkwardly at first, though he seemed to settle into a kind of bumping grind after awhile that actually looked kind of sexy.

They were still on the floor when the music faded into something slow and jazzy as the room darkened, lit only by the sparkling mirrored balls overhead. Ryan stilled, his expression an adorable mixture of terrified and, could it be, eager? Sean silently held out his arms, waiting to see what Ryan would do.

To his joy, Ryan moved toward him, wrapping his arms around Sean's waist as Sean circled his around Ryan's neck. *I'm in his arms!* How he wanted to drop his head to Ryan's shoulder and nuzzle into his neck. He still loved the way Ryan smelled—the sandalwood lemon of his cologne mixed with his own masculine scent, heightened at the moment by his exertions on the dance floor.

They moved stiffly at first, Sean barely able to follow Ryan, so distracted by his own thoughts and the feel of skin on skin. Ryan pulled him closer and Sean felt his heart beating as their chests touched. He tried to hold his lower body away from Ryan's, not wanting him to feel the erection he knew he was sporting beneath his tight leather pants.

They settled into a rhythm at last. Sean was surprised to find Ryan was actually a very good dance partner, leading Sean with increasing confidence around the floor, one hand pressed firmly at the small of his back to guide him. Sean let him lead, closing his eyes as he dared to drop his head very lightly to Ryan's shoulder. Instead of pulling

back as Sean had expected, Ryan actually leaned closer, their bodies making full contact for a moment.

Sean nearly gasped aloud as he felt Ryan's cock, as hard as his own beneath loose white linen, touch his belly. At once Ryan pulled back, his body stiffening as his movements became suddenly awkward. The song ended and Ryan dropped his arms, pulling away abruptly.

"I...I think I need some air," he said throatily.

Sean looked with concern at his friend. He was flushed, his green eyes bright, almost feverish. Quickly he led the way through the crowd, oblivious to the admiring stares of the men all around them. He got Ryan out of the ballroom and into the moist night air.

Ryan inhaled deeply and gave a weak grin. "Sorry," he said. "I don't know what came over me."

Neither do I, Sean thought, but I want to know. I'm dying to know. Aloud he said, "It can get really close—all those sweaty bodies packed in there like sardines. Anyway, we made our appearance." He smiled at Ryan. "How about a walk along the beach? We can always go back later if we want to."

"Sounds good," Ryan nodded.

A volleyball game was in process on the sand, lit by torches mounted high on bamboo sticks that bordered the court. Ryan and Sean watched the men for a while, four on each side, all young and strong, clad only in white shorts. Ryan appreciated that Sean hadn't pressured him at all about why he'd needed to leave the dance.

When they had stepped into each other's arms, he'd had a crazy impulse to lean down and kiss Sean, so strong he'd nearly done it. He didn't know what was happening to him. He wasn't gay! So why did Sean's arms feel so right around his neck, the curve of his body fitting perfectly against his own? He had pulled Sean closer, half expecting him to resist, but Sean had pressed against him, dropping his head to Ryan's shoulder, his hair tickling his neck.

As he led Sean around the floor, Ryan let the music take him over. As they moved, he forgot for a moment he was dancing with a man. He forgot they were supposed to be putting on a show for the consumption of others. He forgot he wasn't supposed to be enjoying the feel of Sean's strong, hard body against his. As his barriers slipped down, lulled by the music and the atmosphere, he'd pressed his body harder against Sean's, wanting to be closer still.

That's when he'd freaked. As his cock made contact with Sean's belly, Sean's cock was like an iron rod against his thigh. A straight man didn't get an erection by dancing with another guy! He'd honestly thought for a moment he was going to pass out. Air had whooshed from his lungs and he couldn't seem to draw in enough to breathe.

Sean was standing quietly beside him, watching the men play ball. Ryan turned to watch them as well, glad for a distraction to his whirling thoughts. Increasingly since

he'd been on the island, he found himself looking at men with the kind of critical interest he used to reserve only for women. He noticed the curve of a thigh, the shape of someone's eyes, the color and luster of his hair. Now as he watched the handsome young men leaping high in the air as they smashed the ball over the net, he appreciated their sensual grace and strength in a way he never would have before. What was happening to him?

Sean lightly tapped his shoulder, pulling him from his reverie. "Want to take that walk? Or would you rather play some volleyball?"

"What? Oh no, no. I'd rather take a walk." The moon was full, silver white against black velvet sprinkled with diamonds above them. They walked in silence toward the water. Even in the dark there were still men lying on the beach, most of them couples locked in an amorous embrace, oblivious to passersby.

As they reached the water's edge, they both slipped off their shoes. The cool, wet sand felt good between Ryan's toes. He realized with a small shock he wanted to take Sean's hand as they walked but he didn't quite dare. Whatever had happened on the dance floor still hung in the air between them.

When they'd finally walked far enough so no one was near, Sean said softly, "So...you want to talk about it?"

"About what?" Ryan said automatically.

"Okay," Sean said with his signature half smile. "You don't have to."

"What? Talk about what?" Ryan persisted, though he knew Sean was referring to their slow dance and his own intense reaction. He didn't know why he kept asking what Sean meant—it was almost as if he were pushing Sean to confront him.

Sean stopped walking and turned to face Ryan, who stopped as well. The moon shone softly on their faces, reflecting in their eyes. "Ry, something happened between us back there. I'm not sure I want to find out what's going on in your head. But at the same time, I've come to cherish our friendship. I can honestly say I've never had a friend like you. Part of that friendship includes being able to confide in each other. Even if it feels kind of scary. I am your safe place even if you don't realize it yet." His voice was soft and low and for some reason Ryan felt tears spring to his eyes.

Slowly he sank down to the sand, sitting cross-legged as he faced the ocean. Sean sat next to him, leaning back on his elbows as he stretched his legs. Ryan stared out at the water for a long time, watching the play of moonlight on the waves. Sean was quiet beside him, not pressing him to speak, for which he was grateful.

Finally Ryan ventured, "I've always considered myself straight. I've always only had girlfriends. I've never had a sexual encounter with a guy." He paused, trying to think how to put what he wanted to say. "But sometimes when I'm drifting off to sleep..." He paused again. "God, I've never told this to anyone." Ryan glanced at Sean, who gave him a small encouraging smile.

"Go on," he said softly.

"What happened tonight on the dance floor. I felt—" He broke off. God, why was this so hard? Just because he'd gotten a hard-on, that didn't mean he was gay. Did it? He didn't know anymore what to think. "Okay. I'm just gonna come out with it. I've had fantasies before. I've wondered what it would be like to...to touch a guy. To," he stopped and then resumed, his voice little more than a whisper, stunned at himself for his confession, "have sex with a man."

He glanced at Sean, who was still leaning back on his elbows, his eyes on the sea. He didn't seem horrified or amused by Ryan's confession. He just nodded and said, "Okay."

Ryan plunged on. "I took this job because it was a sweet gig but that wasn't the only reason. I was kind of—curious. I didn't really even articulate that to myself. I mean, I didn't say, 'I'm going to take this job so I can watch guys make out with each other' or anything like that." He stopped and looked at Sean, waiting for him to laugh.

Sean smiled gently. "Ryan, it's natural to have sexual fantasies that are different from what we do in real life. And we don't necessarily want to act on the fantasies we do have. What happened to you and me on the dance floor was natural. We were close, touching—it's no big deal. Don't make yourself so upset. It's okay."

Ryan relaxed a little and even managed a grin. Sean always had a way of making him realize the molehills he was trying to build into mountains were really after all just molehills. He realized he wanted to share more, to better understand these new, strange feelings. "When we were dancing," he admitted, "I...I liked it. I mean, it felt nice—better than nice. I know this is going to sound weird, but it felt *right* somehow. I didn't feel gay. Or even straight for that matter. I just felt good. Does that even make any sense?"

"It does to me," Sean said. They were both watching the waves undulate, lightly slapping the sand a few yards from their feet. "I don't really think anyone is totally gay or totally straight. I think we get shaped by expectations. Boys and men are discouraged from expressing natural feelings of love toward one another, at least in our society. My personal belief is everyone is bisexual to some degree—everyone, even the staunchest homosexual or the most rabid homophobic hetero."

He sat up straight and said, "Imagine sexuality as a line," he drew a line with his finger in the sand between them. "On one end you have 'straight as an arrow'." He drew an arrow at the end of the line. "On the other end you have guys who acknowledge and embrace their love and sexual desire for other men." He drew a circle with an arrow coming out of it, the universal sign for male. "Guys who identify themselves as gay are on this end. Their orientation is so strong they break free of society's mandate that love is only something that can happen between a man and a woman."

Ryan was listening intently, aware Sean was about to say something that would change his life, though he didn't yet know what it was, at least not consciously. "Most so-called straight guys would place themselves here." Sean tapped the damp sand on the straight arrow end of the line. "But in fact they fall all over the continuum. Here," he

pressed his thumb in the center of the line. "And here, and here, and here." Soon the line was dotted with thumbprints.

"So you're saying," Ryan said slowly, "maybe my feelings are natural, given that I'm probably not at the straight arrow end of the line, even though I never thought of myself as gay."

"You got it. That's exactly what I'm saying."

Ryan stared hard at Sean, who gazed back at him calmly. "But wouldn't I *know* that? I mean, even if I never acted on it, wouldn't I know if I had sexual feelings toward guys?"

"I don't know, Ryan. Denial is a powerful force, especially when an entire society engages in it. You say you've had fantasies sometimes when you're alone in the dark. Tonight when I was in your arms—" Sean broke off, looking away. "You tell me, why don't you? Where do you fall on the continuum?"

Ryan swallowed and jerked his head back toward the ocean. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest, confusion swirling in his brain. A crazy thought leaped into his mind.

What if he kissed Sean?

Not a peck on the cheek but a real kiss? If he felt something, that would tell him, wouldn't it? What was the harm in a kiss? "Do you think—?" he started to say but lost the courage.

"What?"

Ryan leaned closer, his mouth near Sean's ear. He felt ridiculous, like a little kid about to ask his mommy to buy him a toy, aware she would probably say no. "Maybe if we kissed..." he faltered and pulled back, his face burning.

"Kissed?" Sean whispered. He looked around them. "There's no one to see, no one to fool..."

"No, no, not for the act, for *real*. For me. I want to see where I am on that line." He touched the line Sean had drawn in the sand. "Just a kiss..." Sean continued to stare at him, his body now stiff, his hands clenched in his lap.

Ryan felt embarrassment licking up his face like a flame. Of course Sean didn't want to kiss him. They were friends—nothing more. Whatever Ryan imagined had happened between them on the dance floor was nothing more than loneliness and misplaced affection. He started to stand, suddenly desperate to get away.

Before he could move, Sean seemed to come alive. He leaned toward Ryan, pulling his face close with both hands. Ryan's heart was pounding so hard he found he didn't have the breath to speak. He closed his eyes as Sean's fingers entwined in his hair, his lips lightly touching Ryan's.

He felt Sean's warm tongue press gently between his lips. Without realizing it, he parted them, letting Sean's tongue enter his mouth. The kiss was probing but tender. After only a few seconds Sean dropped his hands and pulled away. Instinctively Ryan

leaned toward him, his lips still parted. He realized he was trembling, his heart thudding against his ribs. He took a deep breath in an effort to calm himself. Sean was watching him, his eyes bright.

They stared at one another as if nothing else existed on the earth. Finally Sean said softly, "So? What's the verdict? Where are you on the continuum?"

"I'm not sure," Ryan managed. "Maybe we better try it again?"

Chapter Four

They left the beach, any idea of returning to the dance completely forgotten as they walked toward their bungalow. Ryan didn't speak, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, his eyes on the ground. Sean let him be.

Once back in the bungalow they stood facing one another in the living room. If Ryan had been gay, Sean wouldn't have hesitated. He would have taken him in his arms and kissed him as he pulled his shirt up, eager to feel the heat of his skin. He would have pressed Ryan down against the sofa and pulled his pants from his body, dragging his underwear along with it. He would have taken Ryan's cock lovingly into his mouth, sucking it deep down his throat until Ryan moaned.

As it was, he forced himself to be patient. It was Ryan's move. Though his body was tingling with anticipation he couldn't control, Sean refused to force Ryan's hand. The kiss on the beach might have meant something—but it might not.

"I need a beer," Ryan finally said, his eyes sliding away from Sean. "How 'bout you? Want a beer?"

"Yeah sure." Sean followed Ryan into the kitchen. Whatever magic spell had woven itself around them on the dance floor and under the seductive Caribbean moon seemed to have been dispelled now that they were back on familiar ground.

Ryan opened the refrigerator, bending over so Sean had a perfect view of his firm, sexy ass. He clenched his fists at his sides to keep himself from pressing up against him. The kiss had cracked the door on his lust and it took all his self-control not to go barreling through it.

They took their beers out to the front porch. Sean sat in a lounge chair. Ryan stretched out on the bungalow steps, leaning back on his elbows as he stared up at the night sky. He had said he wanted to try it again. Did Sean take him at his word? Should he move to the stairs, sit next to Ryan, take his face in his hands and try it again? Would Ryan respond as ardently as he had on the beach, closing his eyes and slipping his tongue between Sean's eager lips? Or had Ryan's response only been his way of avoiding the question of where he fell on the sexual continuum?

Sean had never been interested in playing with those who called themselves bi-curious. He didn't care to be someone's experiment. Though this wasn't just anyone—this was Ryan, the man who had consumed his thoughts and dreams since they'd first met. He imagined he could still feel the imprint of Ryan's hot mouth against his own. He wanted to taste him again, to touch his face, to hold him...

Ryan was staring into the distance, the line of his firm jaw silhouetted against the night. Sean felt a rush of compassion as he watched Ryan sitting so stiffly, his body tensed as if ready to flee. Maybe the kiss *had* meant more to him than just an idle

experiment. He had to be dealing with a lot of confused thoughts right now. Sean knew most straight guys were so conditioned to deny the slightest hint of homoerotic feelings that when some slipped through they freaked out. Maybe Ryan was scared out of his wits.

"Ry, you okay?"

After a pause he answered, "I don't know. I'm not sure what I'm feeling. I never expected to kiss a guy. And to..." he trailed to a whisper, "like it so much."

Answering what he thought was Ryan's subtext, Sean replied, "It doesn't mean you're gay, Ryan. It could mean a lot of things. It might just be the novelty of it. I mean, think about it. You're surrounded by gay men 24/7. You've watched them practically having sex on the beach right in front of you. It could just be your curiosity talking. The thrill of something forbidden. Or it could be you do have an unexplored attraction to men but find your emotional connection with women."

Ryan shook his head. "I don't know about all that. I don't really feel like I've ever connected with anyone on an emotional level, to be perfectly honest. I've had a couple of serious relationships but there was always something missing. Actually, *you're* the first person I've ever really shared with. I feel like I could tell you anything and you don't have expectations of me. There's no right answer. You really listen to me. Does that mean I'm gay? Because my best friend is a gay man?" He turned to Sean, his expression beseeching. Without giving Sean a chance to respond he barreled on. "I don't know! You said back on the beach sexual orientation fell along a continuum. I was thinking about it as we walked back. Does it really matter if I'm bi or gay or straight or whatever?"

"I don't care about labeling you, if that's what you mean. What are you really trying to say?"

"Well," Ryan's voice became soft, almost shy. "I know I liked the kiss. I think you liked it too. Maybe if we..." He swallowed and gave a little snort. Sean knew he was struggling but he didn't help him. It had to come from him. He waited. Ryan finally continued in a whisper, "I want to...kiss you. Again. Please?"

"Ah god." Sean's words came out as nearly a moan, his voice low with lust. That last "please" touched his heart but it was his cock that was hard as a rock, straining and pulsing against the tight confines of the black leather he still wore. Ryan wanted to try another kiss—Sean wanted to rip Ryan's clothes from his body and take him right there on the porch. Could he balance on this tightrope, respecting Ryan's newness and trepidation while containing his own barely controlled need?

His beer forgotten, Ryan stood, a play of emotion washing over his face—part fear, part question, part desire. He opened the screen door and entered the bungalow. Abandoning his own drink, Sean followed as if drawn by a string. Once inside, he closed the front door and leaned against it, aware Ryan expected him to make the next move.

"Maybe we should..."

"It's probably better if..."

They spoke at precisely the same time and then stopped. After a beat each began again, only to stop and laugh. They stilled, the only sound in the room the ever-present slapping of the waves against the shore outside the open windows. Silently they stared at one another.

"I want to..." Ryan whispered. He began to move toward Sean, whose back was against the door. Sean closed his eyes as Ryan's scent enveloped him. Ryan was up against him, their chests touching through the thin cotton of their tank tops. Lust exploded in Sean's brain as Ryan's lips touched his, obliterating any lingering trepidation.

The shy, tentative kiss they'd shared on the beach was nowhere in evidence. Like a starving man whose hunger is awakened by the first morsel, Sean was ravenous. Forgetting his promise to go easy, he teased and goaded Ryan with his tongue, exploring his mouth inch by inch. His pulse was thumping high in his throat as he reached up and cupped the back of Ryan's neck with interlocked fingers, pulling him closer. He could feel Ryan's erection hard against his belly. The thought of Ryan's arousal thrilled him and gave him courage. He pulled him closer still, wrapping his arms around Ryan's broad back as they kissed, never wanting it to end.

Yet when Ryan pulled back, Sean at once dropped his arms, allowing Ryan to step away. Sean shook away the hair falling into his eyes and tried to focus on the man in front of him. Ryan's hair was a golden tumble around his flushed face. He was breathing hard, his pupils dilated. He stared at Sean as if in a trance. Sean licked his lips, still tasting Ryan's kiss.

Ryan swallowed hard and said with what could only be called wonder in his voice, "Jesus, I've never experienced anything like that."

"That was pretty intense, Ryan," Sean said, trying to keep his tone light. "You sure you never did that with a guy before?"

Ryan gave a weak grin as he ran his fingers through his hair. His eyes dropped to Sean's crotch, the cock and balls clearly outlined in soft black leather. His face flushed crimson. "I think I need to sit down." He moved toward the sofa and collapsed on it. Sean joined him, careful not to sit too close.

Ryan flung himself back against the sofa, staring up at the ceiling. Sean resisted his impulse to straddle his hips and kiss him again. Instead he turned toward him. "Something's happening between us, Ryan. This is more than just curiosity. I know you're nervous and you should know I'm nervous too." Ryan sat up and looked at him with a question in his face. Sean smiled a little and said, "Yeah, you think you're the only one on unfamiliar ground here?" He shook his head and gave a small laugh. "I should tell you... I want to tell you..." The smile fell away from his face as Sean screwed up his courage.

"I want you to understand what's going on with me too, Ry. I think it's pretty clear I'm deeply attracted to you. We've already connected on so many levels. You called me

your best friend—I feel the same way. Even though we’ve only known each other a few weeks, sometimes it feels as if we’ve always known each other. We were just waiting to meet.” Sean paused then plunged on. “I’ve never known a guy sexier than you. From the moment I saw you I’ve fantasized something like this might happen. I dreamed it but never dared believe it could once you admitted you were straight. What’s happening now—I don’t know, I feel like I’m in a dream and if I move too suddenly, I’ll wake up. I don’t ever want to wake up.”

His voice lowered and Ryan leaned toward him to hear. “This has to be very strange for you. Whatever’s going on now between us—we’ll explore it together. I’ll guide you but I won’t press you. We’ll take it as slow as you need to. No expectations, no pressure.”

“Thanks,” Ryan said softly. After several moments he touched the top of Sean’s hand with his fingertip, tracing a line down one finger. His touch went straight to Sean’s cock. It took all his self-control not to throw Ryan to the rug at their feet and take him then and there. He sensed Ryan’s confusion—the real desire fighting with fear over things he didn’t yet understand.

“What’s going on in your head?”

Ryan didn’t speak for so long Sean thought he wasn’t going to respond. He continued to stroke the top of Sean’s hand, his touch sending waves of desire to Sean’s already rock-hard cock. Finally he said in a thoughtful voice, “I’ve kissed lots of women. I liked it—I’m not saying I didn’t. But I never felt...” Ryan squinted as he gathered his thoughts. “It was just, I don’t know—so *intense* with you. Different than with a woman. More powerful. It felt more *equal* somehow. It just felt,” he paused, finally adding, “right.”

Ryan stared up at the ceiling as Sean admired the curve of his throat. He wanted to lightly bite his neck, to feel his jugular pulsing with his lips, to lick along the curve of his collarbone. He struggled to pay attention to Ryan’s words as he continued. “I’m not saying this right. What I mean is it felt like you and I were exactly balanced. Like our mouths were made to kiss, everything just right between us.” He looked at Sean and blushed.

“I felt that too,” Sean said, lightly touching Ryan’s thigh.

Ryan slammed the couch suddenly with his fist. “I don’t know what to think! I mean, I never expected to find myself so turned on by a guy! I don’t really know what I’m feeling right now. I feel like I’m in junior high. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing!”

Sean said, “Listen. I think you need some time. It’s late. You have a lot to process. How about you get a good night’s sleep and we’ll have breakfast together and talk things over. We don’t have to rush this. We shouldn’t rush it.”

Ryan nodded, relief suffusing his features. Sean knew he’d made the right decision for them both, even though his cock nudged in protest in his pants.

* * * * *

Alone in his room, Ryan fell onto his bed and grabbed a pillow, covering his face. It almost felt as if Sean had sent him away, yet at the same time he'd been relieved to go. His mind was a jumble of confusion. He hadn't been lying when he'd said it was the most intense kiss he'd ever shared. He loved the way Sean smelled—fresh like sunshine and the sea with a hint of coconut. He'd wanted to nuzzle his face into Sean's neck, to hold him like a lover, wrapping himself around him. What was wrong with him? He'd never felt this way before...

Yes, you have, a small voice whispered in the back of his brain. Yes, he had. Late at night, alone in his bed, his cock in his hand...he had had these kinds of thoughts. Fantasies of touching a man, of feeling the hardness of his cock gripped in his fingers, feeling the head press against his ass... Ryan shook his head. Sure, he'd had fantasies, so what? He was straight! He'd nearly been engaged, for god's sake! It wasn't as if he'd secretly had homoerotic feelings he hadn't dared acknowledge until now. Sean was probably right—it was being with all these gay guys 24/7. He was just responding to his environment. It was only natural to be affected by all these incredibly buff men around him making out right under his nose!

And Sean, he was so nice, so easy to be with. It was only natural he'd want to try his first kiss with him. He was safe. He wouldn't make the moves on Ryan. He wouldn't expect Ryan to become his lover just because they'd shared a little kiss. Ryan flung the pillow off his face and punched it. *A little kiss, my ass,* he thought with chagrin. The first one on the beach, maybe. Though even that brief kiss had sent sparks soaring through Ryan's body, heating him right to his toes.

He lay back against his pillows, stroking his cock through his pants. It had been different kissing a man. With women he was more careful, he supposed. They were softer, more fragile—one of his girlfriends had always complained his beard was scratchy, even when he'd just shaved. With Sean he hadn't given such considerations a thought. That was part of what he'd meant by equal when he'd tried to explain it to Sean. It was almost like kissing himself—only better, way better.

He unbuttoned his fly and slid the zipper down, reaching past cotton underwear to his cock. He could feel it lengthen and heat as he stroked it. He closed his eyes, sudden fatigue falling over him. It was well past midnight.

He began to drift in a near-doze, the whirlwind of thought easing as his fingers massaged his cock. He didn't try to censor the images that flowed like a silent movie through his mind. He could see Sean in the moonlight, his blond hair gleaming like silver, his eyes closing as he pulled Ryan close for that first perfect kiss...

Ryan pumped himself harder, half afraid, half eager to see the rest of the movie scrolling through his head. *Sean pulled his tank top over his head, revealing his tan, strong chest. Ryan pressed his palms flat against it, slowly gliding them down over flat abs to his erect cock. Sean leaned in for a kiss, his warm tongue snaking around Ryan's as they both sank to their knees. Gently Sean disengaged, pushing Ryan back so he was lying flat. He groaned aloud*

as Sean's hot mouth closed over his shaft as strong fingers gripped his balls. "Get on your hands and knees," Sean commanded in his quiet, sure voice. Ryan obeyed, looking back as Sean positioned himself behind him, his cock pointing toward Ryan, its tip touching his asshole. He could feel his heart pounding as Sean eased into him. There was no pain, only fullness. Sean reached around, finding Ryan's cock, massaging it as he moved inside him. "Oh god, I'm going to come," Ryan moaned...

Ryan's eyes flew open, his hand coming to a stop. He realized he'd just spoken aloud. The fantasy had been so real he reflexively glanced around the room, for a split second certain Sean was there with him. But no, he was alone. There was no one behind him, no one's hand on his cock but his own. He let out a long sigh, his hand falling away. He pulled off his clothing and tossed it in a heap by the side of the bed.

Rolling over onto his belly, his hand again sought his cock. Making a conscious effort to change the reel in his head, he began to fantasize about a woman named Elle who had worked with him at the hotel. She was beautiful in a dark, exotic way. She had been married but they'd sometimes engaged in a little harmless flirtation. One night when they'd both had a little too much to drink at a company party, he had leaned over to tell her her dark eyes were mesmerizing. They'd drifted together to an empty office, pretending to each other they had no guilty intentions. They had almost shared a kiss but she'd lost her nerve at the last second and they'd returned to the party. Now he stripped her piece by piece until she stood naked and splendid in front of him. As she danced and posed for him, he lifted his hips and pumped his cock like a man with a mission.

Yet as he neared orgasm, Elle's image fell away, replaced by another. "Sean," he whispered to the empty room. As Sean leaned forward to kiss him, he squeezed his eyes tight, panting as he crested in orgasm, his body rigid with pleasure, his mind at last blissfully blank.

* * * * *

Sean sat on the couch a while longer, staring into space. This had to have been the strangest night of his life. For the first time since Ryan had admitted he was straight, a real hope had begun to rise inside him, like a flower bud opening under the warmth of possibility. That second kiss had left no doubt in Sean's mind. Ryan had been every bit as involved, every bit as aroused as he. It hadn't been the kiss of someone unsure. It had been the kiss of a lover.

Sean stood, pondering the events of the evening. Though it was clear Ryan was scared, every cue, every action since the dance had left Sean with the inescapable conclusion Ryan was more than just curious. Sean recognized the rising joy easing its way into his heart and cautioned himself to go slow. He was not one to assume things would go his way merely because he wished it. He thought ruefully back to his very first crush—Chris Hunter.

He'd wanted Chris with the painful yearning only a sixteen-year-old can sustain. His longing had so overpowered his better judgment he'd fooled himself into thinking the feelings were mutual. After months of admiring and mooning over him from afar, they were partnered in a chemistry class one semester. Sean finally summoned the courage to invite Chris home one day after school, ostensibly to work on a lab assignment.

Instead they'd talked for hours, smoking a few joints Chris had produced, sitting out behind the shed in Sean's backyard. Chris had been the first one to bring up the subject of sex—how eager he was to experience it and how he fantasized about it all the time. Sean recalled he'd never expressly said sex *with a girl*, just sex, orgasms, the thrill of the experience.

While smoking their second joint, Chris had said, "We can get a better high if we share the smoke." Sean, who had only smoked casually at parties, deferred to Chris' obvious expertise, intrigued by what he might mean. "What you do is take a really deep drag, hold it in your lungs and then blow it into my mouth. Then I take the smoke down—two hits for the price of one, get it?"

When Chris had opened his mouth to receive Sean's smoke their lips had touched, sending a jolt of desire so fierce through Sean's loins he'd been afraid he'd come on the spot. Many late nights in the top bunk above a sleeping younger brother had been spent imagining Chris' lips pressed against his own as he jerked off to adolescent fantasies of boy-boy love. Now that something was really happening between them, he wished he didn't feel quite so heavy-headed and slow from the pot. He wanted to savor the moment.

When they'd exchanged the smoke in this fashion several more times, Sean, his tongue loosened and his inhibitions lowered by the marijuana, had confessed his crush to Chris. He could still remember his excitement for that split second before Chris had dashed his dreams—that one moment when he thought his real life could begin at last.

Instead Chris had stared at him, first with incomprehension then with a growing horror. "Freak!" he'd cried, his face twisted into an ugly scowl. He had run from the yard, not even stopping to collect his books. In school the next day Sean had found himself assigned to a new lab partner.

From that day he'd been subtly shunned by most of his classmates, though no one ever directly accused him of being what he in fact was. He'd learned then never to assume he knew with certainty what someone else was feeling. He'd learned to be careful and take his time. It was important to share his feelings and even more important to pay attention—not only to what was said, but to what wasn't.

Sean stood, moving to the kitchen to check the time since he never wore a watch. The clock on the wall said one-twenty, several hours later than Sean's preferred bedtime. Yet he didn't feel tired. He felt edgy, energized, excited and wide-awake. He felt poised on the edge of something new yet fragile.

Recognizing there was no way he was going to get to sleep, he decided a brisk walk along the beach might be just the thing. He stepped toward his bedroom, listening for a moment outside Ryan's room but all was silent, the slit at the bottom of the door dark. He went into his own room, gratefully shucking the tight leather and tank top in favor of old jeans and a faded gray T-shirt. He put on sneakers in case he felt like climbing among the rocks farther inland. Taking his backpack, which contained a rolled-up blanket, a flashlight and a bottle of water, he added a pint of brandy he kept in a cabinet in the living room.

As he walked, he was soothed by the steady crash and retreat of the waves. He had come to love the constant sound of the ocean, so different from the flat silence of his childhood. Even as his thoughts continued to race, he felt lulled by the sensory embrace of the sea. Reaching into his backpack, he withdrew the pint and took a deep pull. It sent heat coursing through his chest as it went down. He took another swig before screwing the cap back on.

After a time he found himself near his favorite hideaway on the undeveloped part of the island. Using his flashlight, he moved carefully over the jagged rocks, aware of how easy it was to lose one's footing in the dark. Nimbly he climbed over the lip of his favorite spot and jumped down. He stood a while admiring the dark, undulating ocean. The moon had set but the stars still sparkled overhead, reflected in the water like droplets of liquid silver.

He spread the blanket and sat down, taking another drink of the brandy. Staring out to sea, Sean replayed the events of the evening. His cock rose as he relived the moments when they'd touched. Something amazing had happened tonight. An avenue he'd thought closed to him had suddenly opened, flooding his world with possibility, with hope.

Sean bunched the backpack beneath his head and lay back. As he watched the stars glittering overhead, he allowed himself to daydream of Ryan as his lover, his partner... He knew he should get up and head back to the bungalow. He didn't want to fall asleep here. He closed his eyes for just a moment...

* * * * *

Ryan opened one eye and looked at the digital clock by his bed. Three-twenty. His full bladder sent him stumbling from the bed to his bathroom. After using the toilet, he splashed water on his face and rinsed his mouth. The events of the evening came flooding back into his head, making him come fully awake.

He stood a moment listening for sound but all was quiet. Pulling on shorts, he padded out to the kitchen for a bottle of water. He was on his way back to his room when he thought he'd just peek in on Sean. Very quietly he turned Sean's doorknob so as not to disturb him.

The room was dark and it took a moment for Ryan's eyes to adjust. When he saw the empty, still-made bed, he was confused, thinking for a moment Sean must be in his

bathroom. But no, that door was ajar, the room within dark as well. Where was he? Ryan stepped back into the living room, doing a slow turn as if Sean might have been hiding somewhere, but he was nowhere to be seen. He stuck his head out the door, scanning the small porch and the area beyond.

Thoughtfully he returned to his bedroom, sitting on the edge of the bed. He drank the water and set the empty bottle on the nightstand. The sun wouldn't come up for another few hours. Surely Sean wasn't up this early cleaning the pools! Unless...unless he'd never been to bed! Had he gone back to the dance? Would it still be going on this late? Maybe he'd gone to a different party! One of those sex play parties everyone was always talking about!

Ryan frowned, his thoughts darkening. Instead of wasting his time on some straight guy who didn't know what the hell he was doing, maybe Sean had decided to find some "fresh meat", as Matt crudely referred to whatever guy he picked to hit on that day. Ryan felt an unfamiliar and rather unpleasant surge of jealousy as he contemplated Sean making out with some muscle-bound guy at one of those parties. Maybe a crowd of men would be around them, watching, egging them on, taking part.

Why was he jealous of a friend? That's all they were, right? Friends. Friends who had shared a kiss, but so what? What was the huge deal about a kiss? Obviously it wasn't a big deal to Sean! He was off having sex with strangers at that very moment, or maybe telling his gay pals about what a loser Ryan was with his pathetic curiosity. Ryan clenched his fists and slammed them against the mattress.

He half stood with some vague intention of finding Sean and ordering him to explain himself. He sank back after a moment, sending a weak laugh into the empty room. This was nuts. Just because Sean wasn't home didn't mean he was at an all-night orgy. And even if he were, whose business was it but his own?

Do you want it to be your business? What's happening to you? Ryan recalled the erotic fantasy that had slipped into his head as he'd pumped his cock. Until tonight, while he had had the occasional fantasy about having sex with a man, the fantasy had never been specific. There had been no face to go with the muscular body crouched behind his. Yet tonight—there was no point in denying it, especially not to himself—tonight the man in his fantasy had been Sean. Sean, who earlier had held him in his arms on the dance floor, dropping his head at one point to Ryan's shoulder in a gesture at once sensual and romantic. Sean, the man who had kissed him on the beach, the impact of that kiss stunning Ryan into silence as they walked home. But the "moment of truth", if that was what it had been, had come during the second kiss.

Ryan could try to argue the kiss on the beach had been a fluke—its spark merely a result of tasting forbidden fruit. But there was no getting around the lust the second kiss had ignited between them. He'd felt Sean's erection hard against his thigh and his own responding desire. Jesus! What was happening to him? Was he falling in love? With a man? Could a lifetime of believing he was straight as an arrow really be toppled by a single kiss? How would he go back to his old life once this gig was over?

Ryan lay back down with a sigh. "I wish Sean were here," he murmured as he rolled over, hugging himself as he drifted into a fitful sleep.

Chapter Five

Ryan woke with a start. Shit! It was ten after and he was supposed to have been at Matt's station by eight! He sat up in a panic until he realized it was his day off. With a sigh of relief, he fell back against the pillows.

Delicious smells were wafting through the bungalow. Sean was usually long gone by this time of the morning, yet who else could it be? Curious, Ryan got up and opened his bedroom door. "Sean?"

"Morning, sleepyhead," Sean called out from the kitchen.

Ryan pulled on denim shorts and walked through the living room to the kitchen where he found Sean standing over the little-used stove. With free food at all the restaurants and canteens, neither of them bothered much with cooking. They kept cream for coffee along with water, juice and beer in the refrigerator and not much else. "Wow, what's all this?" Ryan waved toward the counter, which was piled with fruit.

"Mario, one of the chefs, is a friend of mine. He gives me whatever I want. From time to time I like to do my own cooking. I thought we'd stay in this morning instead of eating out. Connor's covering for me today. I'm taking the day off."

Ryan moved to the coffee pot and poured himself a cup. After the roller-coaster ride of emotions he'd been through last night, it felt good to remember first and foremost Sean and he were still friends. "What're you making? It smells great!"

"Crab cakes. Well, Mario already made them, but I'm heating them up." Sean grinned. "If you want to cut some fruit..." he waved toward the piles of banana, mango, guava fruit and pineapple.

"Hey, I thought this was my day off from cutting fruit!" Ryan laughed. He didn't really mind. Sean gave him a large bowl and he expertly peeled and sliced, creating a fruit salad brilliant with yellows, oranges and pinks.

Sean slid the hot, golden crab cakes onto two plates and placed one in front of Ryan before sitting across from him. Ryan realized he was starving and greedily took a bite. "Delicious," he pronounced.

They ate quietly for a while. Ryan glanced at Sean. He looked kind of ruffled, his white-gold hair falling into his eyes as usual, a few days' dark blond stubble on his face. He recalled waking in the night and finding Sean's bed empty. Aware he might be overstepping, Ryan asked in what he hoped was a nonchalant voice, "So...where were you last night? I woke up around three and you weren't in your bed."

"I couldn't sleep. I took a walk on the beach and ended up on the rocks where I go when I want to think. I didn't plan to, but I guess I fell asleep for a couple of hours."

Ryan hadn't realized he'd been tensing for Sean's response. He had told himself if he'd said he was with someone, he would be totally cool about it. Nevertheless, he couldn't control a broad grin of relief. "You slept out on the rocks? You must be stiff as a board!"

"I am kind of stiff actually. A hot shower should help. I was going to take one after breakfast. I did something to my back." He reached back with a grimace, trying to touch the affected spot. "I think I just slept funny."

"I could massage it for you," Ryan offered, and then looked down at his plate, suddenly shy. He recalled Sean's strong back flexing beneath his hands as he'd guided him briefly across the dance floor. He found himself wanting to touch him again—to feel the muscle beneath supple flesh.

"That would be nice." Sean smiled and speared a piece of mango. Ryan watched him as he ate, wondering if he really was as relaxed as he looked. Why couldn't Ryan be as cool? Sean looked up at him with a smile and he turned abruptly away, realizing he'd been staring. Sean didn't seem to notice. "So, did you get a good night's sleep?"

"I guess," Ryan said. He didn't admit he'd made himself come fantasizing about the man sitting across from him. He didn't confess he'd had a moment's irrational jealousy as he'd imagined Sean in the arms of someone else. Instead he said, "I thought a lot about last night, about what happened between us..."

"Me too," Sean said. "I want you to know I have no expectations. If you want to keep exploring whatever is happening between us, we go at your pace or not at all. If you don't, I completely understand."

Ryan nodded, feeling at once grateful and curiously disappointed. He realized a part of him wanted Sean just to take over. Then he wouldn't have to make any decisions or take responsibility for anything. He realized with a jolt this had been a recurring pattern in his relationships, all of which had failed. He'd let his girlfriends dictate the pace and intensity of their involvement, never fully participating emotionally.

As he looked into Sean's blue eyes, he knew he didn't want that to happen this time. It meant too much. "Thanks," he said aloud. He grinned and then laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"I don't know. I just feel so—happy! I feel all light inside. Everything feels so new and strange but exciting!" As Sean smiled back, he took courage and added, "It's because of you. Of us." He paused. "You know, when you said maybe I was attracted to men but found my emotional connection with women?" Sean nodded. "Well, I thought a lot about that, and though nobody's more surprised than me, I have to admit it isn't so. When I think about my past serious relationships, it was almost as if I were along for the ride. I liked the sex, I liked the girls well enough but I never *connected*. Not like this, not like with you. Maybe it's because we've become such good friends. We've shared so much already so when we kissed..." He paused, again feeling shy, aware by the heat in his cheeks he was probably blushing.

"When we kissed," Sean said softly, putting his hand over Ryan's. "Go on."

"Well," Ryan said, loving the feel of Sean's hand on his, "it made it that much more intense. Not just because it was taboo to kiss a guy but because of our connection—our emotional connection."

"Yeah," Sean said softly. "I felt it too. That was no ordinary kiss, my friend." They gazed at one another and Ryan felt his heart begin to quicken. It was Sean who broke the mood as he pushed his chair back from the table. "I'm gonna take a shower, okay? Then we'll talk for as long as you want about all this. We'll figure it out together. Remember, I'm your safe place."

Ryan decided to shower too. As he lathered his body, he closed his eyes, allowing another fantasy to wash over him... *Sean knelt in front of him, his hands moving along Ryan's thighs as his mouth slid over his shaft, lowering his head until his nose was resting against Ryan's pubic bone...* Ryan's hands moved over his cock, which elongated as he stroked it. If only he had the nerve, he'd have climbed into Sean's shower stall instead. Jesus! Had that thought really just entered his mind? He dropped his hand from his cock and finished washing his long hair. Sean would help him sort this all out.

He came into the living room in his denim shorts, toweling his hair just as Sean stuck his head out his bedroom door. Sean was wearing a thick white terrycloth robe, his hair wet, his face freshly shaved. "Hey, Ryan? Is that offer of a massage still good? My shoulder is *killing* me."

"Sure!" Ryan nodded. He followed Sean into his bedroom, watching as he dropped his robe over a chair and lay facedown on his bed. He was wearing white cotton underwear that actually covered more than the Speedos they all sported every day. Ryan sat awkwardly on the edge of the bed, not sure what to do. Tentatively he reached to touch Sean's shoulder.

"Just a little down, yeah. Ouch!" Sean jumped as Ryan pressed against the muscle between the shoulder blade and spine. Ryan jerked his hand away. Sean twisted his head back and grinned. "It's okay. I'm just really sore there. I don't know what I did."

"I think I'll start from the bottom up, if that's okay. Your muscles are really tight. If we start with your lower back and move our way up, it will give your muscles a chance to adjust."

"Sounds like you know what you're doing. Go right ahead." Ryan nodded, hoping he didn't look as nervous as he felt. He could handle this. He'd massaged his girlfriends—what was the big deal? He reached over, experimentally pressing his fingertips into Sean's lower back. Sean twisted around again. "You know, it would be a lot easier if you'd straddle me. You'd get better leverage that way." He lay back down, waiting for Ryan to comply. He took a breath and lifted himself over Sean's firm, round ass, kneeling with a leg on either side.

"It's okay," Sean said into the pillow. "You can sit on me—I won't break." Ryan lowered himself gingerly until his full weight was resting on Sean's ass, his thighs cradling Sean's hips. He looked down, aware his cock was hardening, wondering if

Sean knew it. He focused on his task, pressing and kneading the tight muscles of Sean's lower back. Sean was more heavily muscled than Ryan, his body more compact. Ryan liked the feel of the hard muscle, pleased when it began to loosen and relax beneath his steady kneading. Sean sighed with pleasure and murmured into the pillow, "Yeah, that's great. Don't stop."

Carefully Ryan worked his way up along the spine, making sure each area was properly relaxed before moving on. As he neared the sore spot, he felt Sean tense beneath him. "Relax," Ryan said, leaning over him. "I'll be careful. Just let me know if I'm hurting you." Sean drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, his body sinking into the mattress as he did so. Gingerly Ryan touched the knotted muscle near Sean's shoulder blade. He could actually feel the spasm as Sean jerked beneath his touch. He ran his fingers carefully over the bunched muscle. He used a light touch at first, slowly increasing the pressure as he gauged Sean's response. When he tensed, Ryan backed off, his fingertips lightly playing over the flesh until Sean relaxed again. After ten minutes or so the knotted muscle began to loosen. Ryan grinned with triumph as Sean moaned his approval.

"Whatever you're doing, man, don't stop. This is *incredible*." Ryan felt warm satisfaction flow through his veins at Sean's praise. He'd always had a knack for massage, or so he'd been told. Now that Sean was truly relaxed, he pressed hard into the yielding muscle, drawing out the last vestiges of tension. Sean lay limp beneath him, his face buried in the pillow, his arms thrown loosely over his head. After a time Ryan realized he was asleep. *The poor guy must be exhausted after having slept only a few hours on hard rocks*, he thought.

He patted Sean's back with affection. Sean's skin was warm, the color of rich caramel toffee from the sun. Ryan had a sudden overwhelming desire to lean against him, spreading his body flat over Sean's, resting his cheek on the back of his neck. Lightly he tapped his shoulder, whispering, "Sean? You awake?" Sean didn't stir. In a moment of daring, Ryan gave in to his impulse. He leaned over Sean, carefully lowering himself until his chest touched Sean's back. Still Sean didn't move. This gave Ryan courage and he allowed some of his weight to rest against the solid muscle of Sean's back.

Ryan closed his eyes, savoring this stolen moment of intimacy as Sean slept on beneath him. He liked knowing he had eased Sean into a restful sleep. He felt tender and possessive of him. As he relaxed his body over Sean's, it was all he could do not to rub his cock against Sean's ass. He could feel himself hardening again, his balls tightening in anticipation. Anticipation of what? He could no longer deny he was sexually aroused by the man beneath him but somehow the knowledge was less frightening than it had been the night before.

He felt himself being lulled by Sean's deep, even breathing. He snuggled against him, letting his mind drift as he breathed in Sean's fresh, sensual scent. He knew he should roll off him before he became too comfortable but it felt so good, so right

somehow to drape Sean's body with his. Sleep settled itself silently over him like a warm quilt as the two men breathed in deep, contented unison.

Sean woke slowly from a dream in which he lay pinned beneath two lovers who were unaware he was there. He tried to speak, to tell them to get off him, but he was paralyzed, unable to move or make a sound. As he came fully awake, he realized Ryan was lying on top of him, his warm, strong body pinning him to the bed from shoulder to calf. Was he still dreaming? He lay quietly, aware Ryan must be asleep.

He didn't recall falling asleep—his last waking memory was of Ryan's perfect fingers taking his twisted, aching muscles apart and putting them back together better than when he started.

As Ryan worked his magic, Sean had felt Ryan's erection pressing against his ass, and his own rising response. He had wanted to roll over and take Ryan in his arms, but even if he'd dared, the massage had felt so good and he was so tired from his brief, broken sleep on the rocks, he found he hadn't the strength. Now he felt refreshed and energized, invigorated by his nap and the excellent massage.

Gently he lifted himself, trying to roll Ryan from him without disturbing his slumber. Ryan sighed softly and gave a little snore but remained a deadweight on top of him. Sean lifted himself higher, this time dislodging Ryan, who rolled heavily from him. His arm was flung out, as if inviting Sean to snuggle against him. Taking advantage of his closed eyes, Sean feasted on his body—the strong, smooth chest, the sharply defined abs, the trail of dark blond hair disappearing provocatively into his shorts. He licked his lips as he gazed at the swell beneath Ryan's zipper. His fingers itched to unbutton the fly and pull the zipper tag slowly down...

His eyes remained closed but Sean sensed a change. Ryan's breathing was quicker, his body slightly tensed. Sean edged carefully over the sheets, his eyes fixed on Ryan. He laid his head lightly in the crook of Ryan's arm. Ryan remained still—it seemed almost as if he were holding his breath. Giving in to an overpowering impulse, Sean nestled his face in Ryan's hair, inhaling his intoxicating scent as he nuzzled his neck. He eased closer until his chest pressed against Ryan's side, his cock nudging his hip. He rested his hand over Ryan's heart and was met with a rapid tap-tap-tapping. Now he was certain Ryan wasn't asleep.

All at once he understood Ryan was extending an invitation in the only way he could at the moment—being too shy and perhaps too conflicted to be more overt. By his very stillness he was making a silent plea for Sean to take over. Sean was happy to comply. He began to stroke Ryan's firm chest, making each nipple stiffen beneath his palm.

In slow, sweeping arcs he moved his hand down Ryan's firm belly. There was a noticeable swell in Ryan's shorts, matched by Sean's own erection, which he knew Ryan could feel against his hip.

He reached up, lightly tracing the outline of Ryan's jaw with his finger. Ryan had also just shaved and Sean could smell a hint of aftershave. With a featherlight touch, he brushed Ryan's cheek with his lips. Still Ryan pretended to be asleep, though his beating heart gave him away.

Sean dipped his head, kissing Ryan's throat with closed lips. Unable to resist, he glided his tongue over Ryan's Adam's apple, moving down to the hollow beneath. He slid his mouth down to one nipple, grasping it lightly between his teeth and then swirling his tongue around it. He did the same to the other as Ryan lay still, his eyes closed.

Sean knelt up beside him so he could use both hands. Lightly he kneaded Ryan's well-defined pecs and strong arms, hoping to help him relax. He stroked the warm flesh, again moving his hands down to Ryan's firm belly. This time he slipped his fingers beneath the waist of the shorts until they touched a thatch of soft, curling pubic hair. Ryan gave the slightest gasp but continued to feign sleep.

Holding his breath, Sean pulled at the metal button that held Ryan's shorts closed. Carefully he pulled the zipper down over the bulge beneath it. He looked at Ryan's face. His eyes were now squeezed shut, his hands clenching at his sides. Sean leaned up to Ryan's ear and whispered softly, "It's okay. It's just me. I'll stop whenever you want."

Ryan didn't respond, though his body relaxed a little. Sean smiled and lightly stroked his cheek. He'd never been with someone like this—someone too shy to even open his eyes, too shy to acknowledge what was happening, though it was clear he wanted Sean to continue.

Sean began again, moving his hands over Ryan's body from throat to belly, going slowly to ease Ryan's fear and heighten his desire. His own cock strained in his underwear, its tip wet with a droplet of pre-come. Lust burned high in his chest as he once more slid his fingers into Ryan's soft pubic hair. Again that gasp as Ryan's cock nudged upward to meet his hand. Sean scooted down between Ryan's spread legs. He tugged at Ryan's shorts and, to his delight, the still "sleeping" Ryan lifted his hips ever so slightly, allowing the denim to slide free. Ryan wore no underwear beneath.

Sean stared at his groin, his mouth watering at the long, straight cock and full balls beneath it, nesting in dark blond pubic curls. Ryan's cock was longer than his own, though not quite as thick. A vein throbbed gently along the shaft, fairly begging for Sean's hot tongue.

Ryan was breathing heavily now, his hands again clenched into fists at his sides. This must be so hard for him, Sean realized—so scary! He didn't want Ryan to feel afraid but realized perhaps there was no way around it. It was equally clear from his raging erection that Ryan was turned on by what was happening. His silent invitation for Sean to continue was clear.

Sean lay down next to him, nuzzling his head in the crook of his neck. His own heart was pounding, though from desire not fear. He grasped Ryan's cock. It felt hot to

the touch, hard as steel and suffused with blood. Lightly he moved his curled fingers up and down the shaft. Ryan groaned. Sean moved his head so it was resting on Ryan's chest. He could feel his heart slamming so hard he became concerned.

Letting go of Ryan's cock, he put his hand over Ryan's heart. "Hey, take it easy," he murmured as he gently stroked Ryan's chest. "I'm not going to do anything you don't want me to. You don't have to pretend to be asleep. This is all okay. I know you're scared but don't worry. We'll go as slow as you need and stop the second you want to. Trust me, Ryan. You know you can."

After several minutes of gently smoothing Ryan's chest, he was relieved to feel his heart slow to something closer to normal. His cock, he noted with a wry grin, remained rock-hard. Still Ryan's eyes remained closed, his lips parted, his chest rising and falling. Sean moved again to kneel between his legs, his own cock as rigid as Ryan's in the confines of his underwear.

He took Ryan's cock in his hand, lifting it as he gently cupped his balls in the other. Ryan emitted a soft moan, his body trembling slightly. Sean lowered his head to lick the spongy tip of Ryan's cock, savoring the musky sweetness of it. Lightly he tongued down the hot, pulsing vein, moving up again as Ryan's balls tightened in his hand. Ryan was panting when Sean finally closed his lips over his cock. Creating suction as he moved downward, Sean took the full length into his throat, not stopping until his nose nestled in the soft curling hair at the base.

Ryan groaned, his hips arching up. Gripping his balls, Sean began to slide his lips up and down the satiny-soft skin. It was beyond a dream come true—it was heaven on earth to taste Ryan's cock, to feel his desire as he trembled and moaned. As he lifted and lowered his head over the perfect member, he entered an almost meditative state—nothing existed at that moment except the hot, hard shaft filling his mouth and throat.

"Ah god..." Ryan cried after only a few minutes. "Jesus, Sean. I can't...oh...I'm going to..." Ryan's voice pulled Sean from his sexual trance. He felt the hot blasts of ejaculate hit the back of his throat as Ryan's body rose in a rigid arc. Sean held him fast, suckling him until he was certain he'd swallowed every drop. Only then did he release his hold, slowly lifting his head.

Ryan's eyes were still closed, his chest heaving, a dark flush spreading over his throat and cheeks. Sean sidled up beside him and lay quietly, his eyes on Ryan's face as he waited for his reaction. Finally Ryan opened his eyes. He gave a small smile and said reverently, "Wow."

Sean repeated with a grin, "Wow? That's it?"

Ryan's smile widened to a grin, his cheeks dimpling as he laughed. "Wow isn't enough? Okay, how about this? That was the most amazing experience of my life! I don't know anymore if I'm gay or straight or omni-pan-poly-sexual! I don't care either! What you did..." He trailed off as Sean snuggled happily against him, almost forgetting for a moment his own unsatisfied cock.

Ryan continued. "Listen, I've had oral sex before, obviously, but never like that! It felt like you were taking me whole—I don't know how to describe it. With a technique like that I can't believe you don't have men lined up around the block day and night!"

Sean laughed, embarrassed but pleased. "Nah. I'm nothing special. You're what made it special because I wanted you so much. Because I—" He stopped himself from saying the words poised to fall from his lips—*Because I love you*. That was probably the last thing Ryan needed to hear right now. The fact he'd allowed Sean to go this far was miracle enough. He had to go slow—this meant too much to ruin by rushing.

"What?"

"Nothing. You were pretty terrific yourself, is what I was going to say. Very hot, very responsive."

Ryan gave a chagrined smile. "Yeah, if coming in like a minute is hot! I swear I don't usually do that. I'm not usually premature. It was just—"

"Shh," Sean placed two fingers lightly over Ryan's lips. "You don't have to explain. I take it as a compliment. It was sexy as hell, believe me. Next time we'll take it slow. I'll show you a few more tricks I bet your girlfriends never dreamed of." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively until Ryan laughed.

"Next time?" Ryan asked softly, his expression sobering.

"Only if you want," Sean forced himself to say calmly.

To his delight, Ryan turned toward him, closing his eyes as his lips sought Sean's. Sean leaned hungrily into him. As they kissed, they wrapped their arms around one another, their legs entwining. They stayed locked in a kiss, tongues dipping and circling. He couldn't get enough of Ryan's lips—he felt he could kiss him forever.

His cock was pressed hard against Ryan's belly. As they continued to kiss, he felt Ryan's erection swelling against his hip. The guy didn't need much recovery time, he grinned to himself. Ryan began to move in his arms, rubbing his cock against Sean's thigh. Sean's erection was peeking over the waistband of his underwear, the head nearly purple with blood. Unexpectedly he felt Ryan's fingers tugging at his underwear, drawing it down over his hips. His cock popped out, smacking against Ryan's belly.

Ryan wrapped his arms around Sean again, hiding his face in Sean's neck. He could feel heat emanating from his cheeks and realized Ryan was blushing. Sean found his continued shyness endearing. He wanted to flip Ryan over and fuck him then and there but of course he did no such thing. Instead he held him close, letting him adjust to the feel of a thick, erect shaft hot against his belly.

They began to move in a kind of horizontal dance, rotating their hips as their cocks pressed together, each as hard as steel beneath smooth, silky skin. Sean felt Ryan's fingers wrap around his cock. They felt cool against his hot shaft. As Ryan gripped more tightly, Sean felt electric pleasure shoot through his nerve endings. He felt Ryan's other hand slip down, fingers tickling his balls as the hand grasping his cock began to

pump it. Sean felt dizzy with nearly unbearable pleasure. He was unable to stop the moan that issued from deep inside him.

"*Ah god,*" he sighed, unaware he'd uttered a word. Like Ryan before him, he knew he was going to come any second. It felt too damn good to hold back. Ryan's strong fingers had massaged away all his aches and pains. Now they continued to work a different kind of magic until Sean felt his body begin to shudder beyond his control. At last, for the first time since he'd laid eyes on Ryan, Sean let himself go completely. He had no choice as Ryan led him to the brink of orgasm with a sure hand so skilled Sean found it hard to believe he'd never done this before.

He tried to tell Ryan he was about to come. He wanted to warn him in case Ryan wasn't yet ready to feel a man's ejaculate shooting into his hands. He tried to tell him, but his mouth wouldn't form itself around the words. All he managed was an "Ungh, ungh..." He thrust forward as he felt the semen rushing through his cock, which was ready to explode.

All conscious thought fled as he finally gave in to the soaking heat and ecstasy of Ryan's touch.

Finally he lay still, his body bathed in sweat, his heart pounding. He was dimly aware of Ryan using his underwear to gently wipe away the semen smeared on his belly. The gesture was so charmingly domestic that tears popped into Sean's closed eyes as a nearly overwhelming affection for Ryan swept through him.

He opened his eyes to find Ryan staring at him with those emerald green orbs, his expression worried. "Well? So how was it? Do I have potential? Aren't you going to say something?"

Sean grinned and leaned up on one elbow. "Wow," he replied.

Chapter Six

The next morning at work Ryan found himself looking at the men around him with a different eye. It wasn't that he was suddenly attracted to men and no longer attracted to women. It was more complex. He realized he'd always found men sexually attractive but he'd never permitted himself to think in those terms. Instead he had focused on an attribute—a well-developed physique, a handsome face, a strong back—and simply told himself he admired it without attaching any sexual meaning.

Now it was as if the lid had been blown off his carefully protected libido. A lifetime of conditioning and training to ignore latent sexual feelings he'd never explored had been shattered by the experience of the last two weeks. Not only was he forced to admit he was attracted to men as well as to women, but he realized his attraction to Sean was *stronger* than any attraction he'd ever felt for a woman.

He bent to serve two older gentlemen reclining in lounge chairs beneath a bright umbrella. "Ah, thank you, young man," said one of them as he took the iced fruit and rum drink. He reached up and stroked Ryan's bare thigh, adding, "I wish I could put *you* in a drink and swallow you whole." Ryan forced himself to smile. The man was just flirting as they did with all the staff. He understood now the man meant nothing by it. Though he still wasn't used to being touched by strange men, at least he was better at hiding his discomfort.

The day was especially hot, the sun beating down on Ryan's unprotected head. When his break came, he borrowed Matt's golf cart so he could quickly retrieve his cap from the bungalow. As he entered, he found Sean in the living room, a cold bottle of water in his hand.

"Hi." Ryan smiled, the memory of yesterday causing him to flush with warm pleasure mixed with a touch of lingering shyness. They'd spent hours in Sean's bed, kissing, playing, dozing and touching. Ryan had gained courage and confidence over the hours, feeling increasingly at ease. Hunger had driven them at last from the bed. Over dinner at one of the resort's outdoor restaurants, they'd beamed at one another like new lovers—which they were. Even the waiter, an unfamiliar face, had commented on the "two lovebirds". Ryan had felt strange then—not sure he was ready to come out in public about their relationship.

Sean, always sensitive to his mood, had asked gently, "What's up? A shadow crossed your face."

Ryan had felt awkward, not wanting to hurt Sean's feelings. Yet he had admitted, "It just feels weird, you know? Having everyone think of us as a couple." Sean had laughed, a big-throated, hearty sound. Slightly miffed, Ryan demanded, "What? What's so funny?"

"You big dope," Sean grinned. "What the hell do you think we've been *doing* for the past two weeks? At least now we don't have to pretend."

Now Ryan said, "What're you doing home?"

"Just taking a break. It's really hot today. I think I'll wait until later in the afternoon to finish up."

"Man, I envy you. I came back to get a hat. Fifteen minutes and I better be back or Matt will be on my ass. Er, so to speak." He grinned and Sean smiled. "I wish I had the kind of freedom you have. I'm on the clock." He glanced at his watch as he said this.

"Well, I'm glad you're going to wear a hat. You can get heatstroke if you aren't careful. You don't realize how hot that sun is with the nice sea breeze always blowing." He stood, following as Ryan went to his bedroom closet to find a cap. "You know, there're lots of other positions at this resort. You've passed the two-week probation period. Maybe put in with the owners for a change? Guys do it all the time."

"I just got trained in this position," Ryan responded. "They wouldn't want to switch me to a job where I'd have to be retrained, would they?"

"Maybe not. Unless you were already trained."

"What do you mean?"

"Massage therapy. That massage you gave me yesterday was nothing short of miraculous. I'm not kidding. I had a real kink there. I could barely move until you got hold of me. It was the best massage I've ever had."

Ryan smiled but shook his head. "Thanks, but I think you might have been a little influenced by our, uh, situation."

"Maybe my cock but not the rest of me." Sean laughed as Ryan blushed. "Seriously, I'm speaking objectively. I've been to lots of massage therapists and you rank right up there with the pros. You've definitely got the strength and stamina it takes, and your technique is superior. I could put a word in."

"You really think so? You think they'd give a job like that to someone who wasn't a certified massage therapist?"

"I don't really know, but I could find out. Robert and Gerald own this place, you know. They call the shots. They may have certain standards to uphold, but in the end it comes down to who they like and what the guests want. I know them pretty well and I think I know how to get you the job without too much hassle."

"Yeah? How?"

"You'll give one of them a massage. That's all it'll take. You're that good."

* * * * *

Ryan nervously twisted his napkin in his lap. He had been impressed at how easily Sean had arranged dinner with Gerald and Robert. They were seated at a corner table in

the fanciest of the three restaurants, a bottle of wine resting in a bucket on a stand as they ate their appetizer of spicy marinated shrimp kabobs.

Gerald, a slight man with salt-and-pepper hair and handsome, even features, smiled broadly at Ryan with perfectly capped teeth. "So how're you fitting in, Ryan? Adjusted to the pace yet?"

"It's fine, thanks. It's a great setup you have here. Everyone's been really friendly."

"I bet they have," Robert said, a leer on his face.

The conversation remained general for a while as their meal was served and the wine poured. Eventually Gerald said, "It's not often our Sean gives such a glowing recommendation as he's given you." Ryan shot a glance at Sean, who looked down with a small smile. "He's never steered us wrong before."

"He seems to think you're being wasted serving the guests their cocktails and letting them fondle your perky ass. Says you give the best massage this side of the Atlantic," Robert added. "I've talked to the head therapist at the spa. A fellow called Jiru. Japanese boy, always bowing at me." Robert grinned as Gerald made a face as if to say, "Don't be rude!" Robert ignored him, continuing. "He said they're actually short-staffed right now. Schedules are always booked through the week. They've wanted to extend hours, but without another therapist there was just no way. You'd actually be doing us a favor if you could lend a hand over there."

"I'd love to give it a try," Ryan said. "But you do know I'm not trained, right? Whatever Sean said," he couldn't help a quick affectionate glance toward Sean, "he's just one guy. What I mean is, I wouldn't want to get the job under false pretenses and then let you down."

"No worries there," Gerald said. "We're going to sample your talents firsthand. Robert has generously volunteered to be your guinea pig." He grinned affectionately at Robert, who laughed, nodding.

"Yep, you give me a massage. I'll make the decision then. No pressure or anything." He laughed, slapping Ryan on the back just as he was taking a sip of his wine.

Gerald continued. "Er, there is the question of salary. We usually hire licensed massage therapists, who naturally command a higher rate of pay than we pay servers. Because you aren't licensed—"

"I completely understand. I wouldn't expect an increase in pay. The beauty of this place is compensation enough," Ryan hurried to interject. He could hardly believe how easily this seemed to be happening. He realized Sean must have quite a bit of influence with the owners. The thought of getting off gofer duty was appealing, though he wasn't at all sure he had what it took to be a full-time massage therapist. He fervently hoped Sean's faith in him wasn't misplaced.

Robert turned to Ryan and said, "I'll meet you at the spa at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. I suggest you arrive earlier, meet the other therapists on duty and learn your way around before I get there. I should warn you, I'm not easy to please and I don't

sugarcoat the truth. You don't measure up, it's back to serving drinks and fetching towels. I'll put you through your paces tomorrow, I promise you. We'll see what you're really made of then, won't we?" He winked broadly and guffawed. Ryan swallowed and nodded his assent. Beneath the table, Sean gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

* * * * *

The spa was located in the center of the resort. Large windows in the spacious waiting area provided a scenic view of palm trees and the ocean in the distance. A series of smaller rooms opened off the main area, each one equipped with a massage table and counters lined with scented candles and oils. The walls were painted subdued colors, the lighting soft and relaxing.

Ryan arrived at eight o'clock the next morning to find an Asian man with straight dark hair falling in a fringe over his forehead. Dressed in a thick white T-shirt and white shorts, he was bent over a table, arranging a vase of flowers. He looked up as Ryan knocked on the partially open door. "Hi. You must be Ryan. I'm Jiru. Robert told me to expect you."

Matt had been annoyed when told Ryan wouldn't be arriving for beach duty until sometime in the afternoon, if at all. There was plenty of waitstaff available, but he seemed to take a special pleasure in teasing Ryan—grabbing his ass as he walked by, making suggestive remarks about how eager he was to get his hands on Ryan, once he'd tired of "the pool boy" as he referred to Sean. *If nothing else, Ryan reasoned to himself, even if I don't pass this massage audition with Robert, I get to have the morning off from Matt.*

"Hi," Ryan responded to Jiru. "Nice to meet you."

Jiru bowed slightly at the waist and said, "I could really use help on this early shift. We're short-staffed as it is and none of the other therapists want to get up before noon." He grinned, his eyes narrowing to half moons. "Coffee? Tea?" He waved toward a table in the corner of the room. Along with coffee and hot water there was a bowl of fresh fruit and a plate of pastries. As Ryan moved toward the table, Jiru said, "So what's your specialty? Swedish? Aromatherapy? Reflexology? Accupressure? Shiatsu?"

What did Sean get me into? Ryan thought anxiously. Aloud he said, "Uh, I don't really have a specialty. I just give massages. Whatever seems right for the body type and the needs of the client." Jiru looked confused. Ryan added, "I guess Robert didn't tell you, I'm not a trained therapist."

Jiru's face closed as he turned away. "No. He didn't tell me." He focused on his flowers as Ryan poured himself a cup of coffee. He almost wished he were back at Matt's bar cutting fruit.

"I'm eager to learn though," Ryan added, trying to keep his voice bright and confident. "This morning I'm just giving Robert a massage as a sort of audition."

"Ah," Jiru said, nodding. "That makes more sense. Robert is not an easy man to please, at least when it comes to massage." He looked Ryan up and down, his

expression knowing. Ryan, dressed in khaki shorts, a pale green T-shirt and sandals, felt uncomfortable. No one had told him to wear white—perhaps there was a uniform? He was about to ask when Jiru added, “Robert likes pretty blond boys like you. Forgive me if I am being rude, but he probably just sees this as a way to get naked in front of you and force you to touch him. You’ll be back washing dishes or gardening or whatever it is they hired you for in the first place once he’s had his fun.”

Ryan felt himself coloring. He wanted to retort that yes, Jiru was being very rude. Yet as he recalled Robert’s hungry gaze every time he looked at him, he found himself feeling sick with apprehension. Naked! No one had said anything about the clients being naked! Was this really just a setup? Mentally he shook his head. Sean wouldn’t have let something like that happen. They might have fooled Ryan, but not a seasoned hand like Sean. Ryan took a breath, trying to compose himself.

He decided to try enlisting Jiru as his ally. “You think so? You think they just set me up to have some fun?” He shook his head. “Thanks for the heads-up, man. I mean, I can take a joke as well as the next guy. I’ve got to tell you though, I was really looking forward to having a serious go at this. I’m an early bird too, just like you. I could take the clients you didn’t want, help with the overflow, act as your assistant while I learned the ropes. I’d be honored to work with a certified therapist. I appreciate I don’t have your knowledge or skill, but I’m eager to learn.”

Jiru appeared somewhat mollified. He nodded slowly. “An assistant. Yes, I rather like the sound of that. I need to assess your skill level before I’ll agree.” Ryan smiled inwardly, somehow doubting Jiru had a say in who he worked with but pleased his aim at Jiru’s vanity had hit dead center. Jiru glanced at his watch and said, “Follow me. Let’s see what Robert’s pretty boy can do.”

Ryan followed him into one of the massage therapy rooms, its walls painted a soft blue, the ceiling a deeper hue studded with tiny phosphorescent silver stars. He watched as Jiru pulled off his shirt and slipped out of his shorts without the slightest hesitation. He lay down on the massage table and pointed imperiously toward the sheet folded at the bottom of the table. Ryan pulled the sheet up to Jiru’s waist, thankful he hadn’t stripped entirely.

“Uh, you want me to give you a massage?”

“Obviously,” Jiru replied. “Consider it audition number one.”

Ryan weighed his options. He could refuse and further alienate Jiru, or he could go along and hopefully pass the audition. He glanced at the row of massage oils lined up neatly on one of the counters. “Would you like me to use some massage oil?”

“Skip it. Skip the music, the candles, all that. I just want to get a measure of your technique. I’ll know within a few minutes if you’ve got a shot in hell. This is a high-class resort, my friend. We’re known for our *professional* massage.” Beneath his breath but obviously intended for Ryan’s consumption he mumbled, “I don’t know *what* Robert was thinking...”

Ryan moved to the table, wishing he'd done some research on proper technique and all those terms Jiru had thrown about. He closed his eyes, wiping his suddenly damp palms on his shorts. Sean's voice floated into his mind as if he were there in the room. *Don't worry about technique. Just do what you do. Have faith in yourself.* He opened his eyes and lightly touched Jiru's lower back.

Jiru was of medium build, his muscles long and tightly wound. Ryan began by applying gentle pressure along the sides of his spine, increasing the pressure as he fanned his fingers outward. He used his fingers, palms and thumbs, responding to Jiru's subtle cues as he felt him relax beneath his hands. Five minutes passed. Ryan expected Jiru to leap up and inform him he had no business being there. Instead Jiru remained still, his face hidden in the cushioned face rest.

Not knowing what else to do, Ryan continued to massage Jiru, moving down along his thighs and up his arms before returning to his back and neck. He enjoyed massage, finding a challenge in loosening tight muscles. After twenty minutes, during which Jiru had not moved, Ryan found himself wondering if the man had fallen asleep.

He glanced at the clock over Jiru's head. Robert wasn't due for a while but he had been hoping Jiru would fill him in more about what was expected of him before Robert arrived. Gently he touched Jiru's shoulder. His breathing was deep and even. Bending near his hidden face, Ryan said softly, "Jiru, you awake?"

"Hmm," Jiru responded. Slowly he lifted his head. He smiled a slow, lazy smile toward Ryan and unexpectedly winked. "You tricked me, didn't you? What is the expression in English – the joke is on me? Yes, telling me you weren't trained."

"I'm not. I didn't mean to trick you. I'm not sure –"

"Shiatsu," Jiru interrupted. Slowly he sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of the table. "That was one of the best Shiatsu massages I've ever had. Your knowledge of the Ki energy system is evident."

"Excuse me?"

"You know – Ki, the unblocking the flow of life energy and restoring the balance in the various meridians on the body. You are obviously intimately familiar with the acupuncture meridians. You have the sensitivity, the ability to listen to the body that is quite Asian in its expression. I'm very impressed." He laughed, shaking his head. "You had me fooled all right."

"Jiru, I'm sorry. I mean, I'm really glad you liked the massage, but I'm not kidding around. I've never had formal training. I do 'listen to the body', as you put it, but I just go with my gut. I feel the muscle and sense what a person needs to relax and I just do it. I was hoping you could help me learn some proper techniques. I'd really like to work here if I could swing it."

Jiru tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. "You're serious, aren't you?" As Ryan nodded, Jiru lightly jumped from the table and began to dress. He shook his straight bangs from his eyes and smiled. "Okay, I'll help you. I like you. You're modest, another appealing trait I don't see much of around you Americans, no offense. I can teach you

other types of massage. Different guests like different techniques or different types at different times. Robert, for example, prefers a deep-tissue technique—the deeper the better. Pretty standard Swedish but with more muscle. You can work him as hard as you like and he'll only want more."

"Thanks," Ryan said, grateful for the tip. He followed Jiru back into the main waiting area. He saw the plate of pastries and realized he was hungry. "All right if I take one of these?"

"Sure," Jiru nodded. "Help yourself." Now that he approved of Ryan, he became very friendly, giving him a full tour of the facilities, showing him how to adjust the various types of massage tables and chairs, where supplies were kept, how to use the sound system, where the schedules and roster of regulars was kept and how to interpret the shorthand markings indicating their massage preferences next to each name.

"Finally," he said as he opened a closet in the supply room, "your uniform. The therapists always wear white. If you get oil or anything on your clothes, just toss them in this hamper and get a new set. We have all sizes. At the end of your shift, just leave your whites in the hamper. You can store your own clothes in one of these cubbies." As Ryan looked at the rows of neatly folded shirts and shorts, Jiru added, "You might as well get changed now. Your first, uh, client, will be here in a few." He grinned conspiratorially and Ryan had a moment's unease. What if this really *was* a setup for Robert to get him in a compromising situation?

As he dressed in a white T-shirt of heavy cotton and a pair of white shorts, he decided he'd better try to feel Jiru out a little more about what this new gig really involved. After all, this *was* a gay resort. Jiru hadn't mentioned anything about clients expecting more than just a legitimate massage, but he'd learned in his time on the island not to make assumptions, especially about what was acceptable or not when it came to sex.

He watched Jiru putting the finishing touches on his flower arrangement for a few moments as he figured out how to phrase what he knew he had to ask. "Uh, Jiru. This spa—it's legit, right? I mean, you do massage therapy."

"What? Obviously."

"No, I mean *exclusively*. That is, you know, you don't cater to, uh, other needs. Other requests. You know, like they offer a big tip and then ask you to—"

Jiru interrupted him with a loud braying laugh. "To blow them? Is that what you're asking?" He stared at Ryan. "My god, either you're the most innocent, naïve guy we've ever had working at this resort or you're just stupid!"

Ryan flushed, annoyed and embarrassed. Still, he needed the information Jiru possessed so he stood his ground, waiting. Jiru relented, grinning at him. "Okay, I see you are serious. Here's how I handle it. I've been working here four seasons. You always get the guys who come in thinking this is a massage parlor—a cover for male prostitutes who will massage them...but just their cocks!" He laughed again as Ryan

felt his face turning red. "I'll be honest with you—some of our therapists willingly go that extra mile for a guy who gives a big enough tip. There's no explicit rule against it. It's up to you to establish those sorts of limits. The ones who mix pleasure with their work get a reputation fast. They always have plenty of clients and I'm sure they make tons of money.

"However, discretion is essential. I won't have this place operating as a whore house. If discreet attention is paid to certain parts of the body more than to other parts and they're quiet about it, I don't have a problem. For me," he shook his head firmly, crossing his arms over his chest, "that's not my personal style. I take pride in my work. I'm here to give the best massage I can, not to jerk off some guy just because he waves a hundred-dollar bill in my face."

He sat on one of the large couches, leaning back and crossing his legs. "You, my friend, will have to make your own call. A good-looking guy like you is going to get hit on from all sides. You're new—fresh meat. The ones who come here looking for sex will make their pitch. If you're not interested, you just let them know that, same as I'm sure you have to do on your job now. They should respect your decision. If they hassle you, let me know. But they should be pretty cool as long as you're clear you're just there to give a legitimate massage."

He leaned forward, adding, "Just make sure *you're* never the one to hit on a client. That's a no-no. Our clients need to know they can come in here for total relaxation without hassle from anyone."

"Thanks, Jiru. I really appreciate all this information. I just hope Robert likes his massage. Everything hinges on that."

"Trust me, Ryan. With those hands, you've got nothing to worry about."

* * * * *

Sean and Ryan were sitting atop the volcanic rocks in Sean's favorite hideaway, the remains of a picnic lunch spread between them. Ryan had been describing his first day at the spa in amusing detail, making Sean laugh with his descriptions of Jiru, some of the clients and most especially Robert. After Robert's massage, Ryan had been asked to stay for the entire shift. He couldn't help but grin with delight as he'd thought of Matt, who would no longer have the chance to fondle and embarrass him on a daily basis.

"So he obviously liked the massage since you got the job," Sean said. "Tell me about it. Did he behave himself?"

"Well, he was fifteen minutes late, which made me nervous but Jiru said not to worry—Robert went according to his own schedule. He was already in with a client when Robert arrived. This other therapist had come in by then—a guy named Anthony. Robert showed up in a beach robe with a bathing suit beneath it. He said why bother to dress when I was just going to undress him. That made me a little nervous as you can imagine."

"I can." Sean grinned and stroked Ryan's arm affectionately.

"We went into the same room I'd used for Jiru. This time I had candles lit and soft music going. I tried to act calm and professional. He stripped butt naked in front of me and kind of flopped down on the table, growling at me to do my stuff. I pulled the sheet up to his waist and asked if he'd like some massage oil, which he did.

"So I chose one that smelled nice, a kind of vanilla cinnamon, and I was just starting to rub it into his back when he flipped over and said, 'I pulled a groin muscle. I want you to massage it.' He gave one of those big laughs of his and licked his lips."

"Uh-oh," Sean laughed.

"Yeah, 'uh-oh' is right! The sheet was standing up like a tent pole was beneath it! I decided to play along like I knew he was joking. I prayed he was, anyway. Ignoring the tent pole, I started with his shoulders and chest, working him deep as Jiru suggested. He behaved himself after that, thank god, and after awhile he closed his eyes and the tent pole slowly collapsed. When I told him to turn over so I could do his back, he was as compliant as a baby. He's the biggest person I've ever massaged with thick muscles covered over with a layer of fat. I can see why he likes the deep-tissue massage."

"So I guess you passed the audition."

"Yep," Ryan grinned. "I seem to have a knack for making people fall asleep. When I was done with him, he was snoring like a freight train. I just pulled the sheet up to his shoulders, dimmed the lights a little more and left him there to rest. He came out about thirty minutes later and said, 'I haven't felt this good since 1989. Consider yourself promoted. Pencil me in on the schedule for the same time tomorrow.'"

"That's great, Ryan. I knew if they just gave you a chance, you'd get the job. Are you glad? Think you'll like it better than being a server?"

"Are you kidding? It's *great*! I did three more guys after him. I had an *hour* break instead of fifteen minutes, plus Jiru says if there isn't a client scheduled, I can just relax, watch TV, whatever. All three guys tipped me too and not one of them hit on me. Two of them said they want me exclusively to do their massage going forward. Isn't that amazing?"

"Not to me. Like I said, you've got a real talent."

"Sean, thanks for this."

"For what?"

"For getting me the massage gig. I feel good there. I'm more than just a piece of meat in a Speedo. It's a lot more satisfying than cutting pineapple and fetching towels and having my ass grabbed twenty times a day."

"Yeah, that's just for me now, right?" Sean laughed and playfully lunged toward Ryan. Ryan blocked him and caught him in a wrestling hold. They tussled for a while, laughing as first one and then the other gained the upper hand. Sean finally pinned Ryan beneath him. They were both breathing hard. Sean dipped his head to kiss his captive. Ryan closed his eyes and parted his lips, clearly of the same mind.

As they kissed, lust shot through Sean's body. He couldn't seem to get enough. He was still stunned by Ryan's newfound desire, amazed that his own fairy tale actually seemed to be coming true. He knew he was falling even more deeply in love. Now that they'd become physical, lust raged hot in Sean's blood, almost obscuring the warm, quiet love that burned at a slow simmer in his heart. They hadn't yet spoken of deep emotions. He hardly dared to think Ryan might ever come to love him. For now it was enough just to be in his arms, to taste his lips, to feel his passion.

He lifted himself over Ryan, moving down to pull Ryan's T-shirt up so he could lick his nipples and feel his warm, strong chest. Ryan sighed, his eyes still closed as he permitted Sean to worship his body. Sean licked along his sternum, tasting the tang of his sweat. He kissed Ryan's firm belly, gliding his tongue to his shorts where a telltale bulge like an iron rod pressed against the zipper.

They were outside but so secluded in their secret hideaway no one would see them. Sean pulled Ryan's shorts open, greedily seeking his cock. He dragged the shorts along with Ryan's underwear down his strong, sexy legs and tossed them aside.

"Ah..." Ryan moaned his approval as Sean began to lick, fondle and kiss his long, beautiful cock. Lovingly he took his balls in his hand as he knelt between Ryan's legs, taking his length into his mouth. He pressed Ryan's legs wider with his knees and reached below his balls, seeking his hot, soft cleft. He found Ryan's puckered hole and lightly rimmed it with his finger. Ryan jerked and tried to close his legs.

"Hey," he said, his eyes popping open as he tried to sit up. "Hey, what're you doing?" Though they'd spent hours together the night before, fondling, kissing, touching, Sean hadn't yet touched Ryan's ass, aware he was still so new to it all. He knew he shouldn't rush him, but his lust had won out over his better judgment for a moment.

"Shh," he said, "I'm just touching you. Touching your beautiful body. Let me feel you. I won't hurt you. Trust me. Just let yourself experience it. I haven't steered you wrong yet, have I?" Gently he pressed against Ryan's chest and Ryan lay back against the blanket.

Again Sean took his shaft into his mouth, lowering himself until he was impaled on it, blocking his own windpipe as he savored its musky heat. Using his throat muscles, he squeezed until Ryan groaned with pleasure, grabbing hold of Sean's head with both hands. Sean moved up and down, using his mouth and hands to drive Ryan nearly to orgasm. When he knew Ryan was close, he pulled back and began to lick his balls. Again he slid his fingers down, finding the puckered, virgin hole. He felt Ryan flinch but otherwise there was no resistance. Licking his finger, he again touched Ryan's asshole, this time pressing very gently so just the tip of it lodged inside him.

"Hey," Ryan protested weakly. Sean silenced him by sliding his lips over his cock again until Ryan's protests changed to moans, his breathing labored as his body began its slide toward climax. Just as he shot his load down Sean's throat, Sean thrust his finger deep into Ryan's ass. He could feel the virgin muscles clamp down hard around

his finger, gripping with each orgasmic thrust. When he'd milked every drop from his lover, Sean released him and let his finger slide out as well.

He nestled up next to Ryan, who opened one eye and said, "Wow."

Sean laughed and ruffled Ryan's long, silky hair. Ryan caught him in a sudden embrace and kissed him hard on the mouth. "What you do, Sean! What you do for me..."

"Hmm?" Sean responded between kisses.

"I want to give you that! What you do for me. It's amazing." Sean opened his eyes, catching the nearly desperate sound in Ryan's voice. His eyes were bright, his expression almost fierce. Hoarsely he said, "Teach me. I want to try..."

"Teach you...?" Sean's cock responded with an aching lurch to Ryan's words, understanding the request before Sean's brain processed it. Was Ryan asking to suck his cock? Though they'd touched and fondled one another for hours the day and night before, Ryan hadn't come near Sean's cock with his mouth. Sean had hoped it was only a matter of time, and he'd been content to wait. He promised himself never to rush Ryan into something. Each step had to be taken by him first, each act of passion freely offered. Ryan leaned close to Sean's ear, whispering in that heartbreakingly endearing way he had when he was too shy to voice what he wanted. "Teach me to worship your cock the way you do mine. I want to give you that pleasure."

Silently Sean stood, stripping himself bare. His thick, hard cock bobbed toward Ryan, who stared at it, his eyes wide, his lips wet and parted. As he knelt in front of Sean, he seemed mesmerized by it, bringing his face close as he reached out a tentative hand. His fingers lightly stroked the underside, sending shivers of pleasure through Sean's nerve endings. Ryan swallowed and bit his lower lip, clearly nervous. Sean reached down and stroked his hair, tucking a loose tendril behind his ear.

He wanted to feel Ryan's mouth so bad he had an instant's impulse to grab his head and force his mouth down over his cock. Instead he controlled his baser instincts and said, "It's okay. The key is to relax. It's just like massage really. You listen to the body the same way. Follow your gut."

Sean couldn't help but grin as he watched Ryan lean toward him, squeezing his eyes shut as if he were about to kiss a snake. Tentatively his tongue darted out, licking across the head. "Mmmm," Sean murmured encouragingly. Ryan licked again, this time in a slow circle. Sean lightly caressed his hair. He felt Ryan cup his balls. He felt his warm breath as his lips closed lightly over the head, this time drawing an involuntary groan of pure pleasure from Sean's lips. To his frustration, Ryan again pulled back.

"I can't do this," Ryan said, his voice urgent. "It's too big."

"You *are* doing it. Your mouth feels like heaven."

"I can't do what you do. I can't take it in like you do."

"That's okay. Remember, just follow your gut. Do what feels good to you. I can assure you, it all feels fabulous to me! I'm about to come just from having you down there on your knees like that. You have no idea how fucking sexy you are right now."

Ryan grinned up at him. "Yeah? Okay." Again he leaned forward, his lips parting to lightly grip the head of Sean's thick cock. He lowered himself very slightly. After a few moments he took more of Sean's cock into his mouth. He reared back suddenly, spluttering and coughing.

Sean suppressed a grin as he said encouragingly, "Hey, that was hot! But why not just focus on the head for a while? There's no law that says you have to take the whole thing your first time out. You can use your hands, you know. Do what's comfortable. You're doing great!"

Ryan nodded, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Sean noticed his cock was semierect, even after his orgasm—a good sign. He didn't want Ryan doing this as a favor—he wanted his lover to want this as much as he did. Perhaps in time...

Sean stopped thinking as Ryan's tongue began to weave itself around his shaft, licking in spirals to the base and then circling up again. Again he caught Sean's balls lightly in his hand, using the other to follow the hot, wet trail of his tongue. Sean could feel the slight tremble in his fingers and he stroked Ryan's head in silent encouragement.

He put his hands on Ryan's shoulders to steady himself as he gave in to the fiery pleasure Ryan was stoking deep in his belly. He began to pant, Ryan's mouth and tongue nearly driving him wild. Other men had sucked his cock, certainly with greater skill, taking him in to the hilt, milking him until he exploded, but no one had ever touched him with such trembling sweetness. He had never wanted anyone the way he wanted Ryan.

He felt his orgasm mount, his seed roiling as it readied itself to shoot free. He gasped, "I'm going to..." but before he could get the words out, he had. Ryan reared back, Sean's come catching him on the cheek. Sean half expected him to wipe it off with disgust, even horror.

Instead he touched it, scooping a bit with his finger and staring at it with wonder. "I did that. I did that to you." His voice was colored with awe, as if he'd effected some kind of magic.

Sean couldn't help but laugh. "You sure did, babe."

Chapter Seven

December eased into January as Ryan settled into his new job at the spa. For the first time in his twenty-five years he had found something from which he derived real satisfaction. Not because it was the right career path or because someone else expected it of him, but because he really enjoyed what he was doing. He took pride in his work as a massage therapist, even if he didn't have the piece of paper that certified him as such. Both Jiru and Anthony had shown him new techniques and given him useful pointers. The atmosphere was completely different from the constant barrage of sexual innuendo and heavy flirtation he'd experienced as a beach server. There were still sexual overtures from some of the massage clients, but he felt better able to cope with them, dressed in his professional whites, fully in control.

His relationship with Sean was deepening from one of tentative lovers to a real couple, though the going was not always smooth. Ryan loved their sexual play—the kissing, fondling, holding and touching. He had improved at sucking Sean's cock, though he had nowhere near the skill or confidence Sean had and doubted he gave his lover nearly the pleasure Sean could wrest from him.

Even after quite a bit of practice, he couldn't take Sean's cock into his throat. Each time he tried he began to worry he was going to gag and sure enough, that's just what would happen. "You focus on technique too much," Sean had told him when he'd worried aloud he would never get the hang of it. "It's not about that. I love when you touch me, when you kiss me. I don't care if you can deep throat or not. We're a journey, you and I, not a destination. It's all good—the exploration, the discovery."

Ryan wanted to believe him. He still had trouble admitting in his head he was gay. Well, bisexual, he supposed, though at the moment he only had eyes for a man, for Sean. He knew Sean was in love with him and believed himself to be in love with Sean, though neither of them had yet uttered those fateful words. When he'd been in relationships with women, they had always been the first ones to say it, usually well before he had come to the same conclusion. How did it work with two guys? Last one to say it wins?

Lately Sean had been gently pressing Ryan to take the next step—the big step—anal intercourse. Intellectually Ryan knew this was a natural progression for a loving gay couple but emotionally he wasn't ready to take the plunge. Just from a physical standpoint he found himself intimidated by Sean's thick cock. He couldn't imagine something that large penetrating his tiny entrance. He found it hard to believe it was really pleasurable, focusing instead on how it must hurt.

The last few nights as they lay together naked in Sean's bed—Ryan's had gone unused since their first night spent together—Sean had curled into Ryan from behind,

nudging his erect cock between Ryan's ass cheeks. "I want you, Ryan. I want to show you how hot it can be between two men." Ryan had pulled away, rolling to face Sean and distracting him with a kiss. He wasn't ready. He wasn't sure if he'd ever be ready. Sean didn't press but Ryan could see the hurt in his eyes.

* * * * *

"Penny for your thoughts."

Ryan looked up. He was supposed to be mixing oils for his scheduled clientele but realized at Anthony's question he had been staring out the window in a daze, thinking about Sean. "Oh," he said, flustered. "Just daydreaming I guess."

Anthony was tall with broad shoulders and a long, lanky frame. He had dark curly hair and dark black-brown eyes. Now that Ryan had become fully aware of his bisexuality, he realized he found Anthony very attractive. Unlike sunny, blond, blue-eyed Sean, Anthony had a brooding appeal with dark, straight brows over deep-set eyes and thin lips that often curved in a sort of enigmatic half smile. He'd never tried to flirt with Ryan, yet he'd sometimes catch him staring, a compelling gaze with something smoldering just below the surface. When he did this, Ryan felt his face heating and he'd turn away.

"Jiru and I were talking about going to the Greek party on Saturday night. Open to staff. You going?"

"The Greek party?"

"Yeah, you know. A lot of the play parties are by invitation only or for paying guests only, but occasionally they throw us working types a bone. I've been to a few – they can get pretty wild."

A play party like the one Ryan imagined Sean had gone to the night they'd shared their first kiss. Sean had told Ryan he'd been to a few early on in his tenure at the resort but he hadn't been in years. "What's it like? I've never been to one."

"Oh, you know, the usual. They always have a theme. This one is Greek. Easy to dress for – wind a sheet around yourself and voila, a toga."

"So what do you mean it can get wild?"

"It's a *play* party. Anything goes. They usually start out with some scheduled event. Like Saturday I've heard it will be a slave auction. You can sign up to be a slave and they put you up on the auction block and guys bid on you with play money. The winner gets to have his way with you."

"For real?"

"Well, as real as this sort of stuff gets I suppose. The 'slave' fills out a form in advance – what he will and will not permit. Petting, kissing, some bondage play if they're into that, or even the whole nine yards. It's all just in fun."

"You mean a slave could conceivably get bought for the evening by some guy he's never met and agrees in advance to let the guy do whatever he wants?"

"That's it. You got it. It's fun! It's the adventure of it I guess. I've never signed up to be a slave though. I'm much more the Master type." Again he fixed Ryan with a smoldering stare that made him flush and look away.

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"You want to go *where*?" Sean wasn't sure he'd heard correctly.

"The Greek play party. It's this Saturday. Anthony said it's open to staff. We could dress up in togas and stuff. It would be fun."

"Fun? A bunch of guys dress up in costumes and then make out in front of each other. I mean, I guess it's okay but I can think of other ways I'd rather spend my Saturday night." He trailed his finger suggestively along Ryan's bare thigh. They were lying together on top of the sheets, still damp from a shared shower. "In fact I was thinking we could take a private midnight swim. Gerald and Robert are going to be off the island this weekend. They always let me use their private pool when they're not around. I was going to surprise you."

"Oh," Ryan said, the single syllable round with disappointment. Sean felt a sliver of jealousy slide into his heart. Since they'd become a couple, Ryan hadn't expressed the slightest interest in anyone or anything but Sean. His focus had been exclusively on their private exploration of the physical pleasures of male love.

He should have known it couldn't last. A handsome, sexy man like Ryan was bound to venture out—to want to see more, know more, experience more. "Hey, what's the big deal?" Ryan added, no doubt reading something of Sean's feelings in his face. "It's not like I want to go alone. I'm just curious to see what it's like. Don't forget, this is all new to me. We wouldn't have to stay long. We would still have time for that romantic swim." This time it was Ryan who trailed his fingers along Sean's thigh. He didn't stop until he found what he was looking for. Sean closed his eyes and moaned with pleasure, aware he would do anything Ryan wanted. He was completely in Ryan's thrall and he knew it.

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The play party was in the same building where the dance had been but in a different room. Ryan had said he felt silly as Sean was winding a white sheet around him to create a toga. "Hey, you're the one who wants to do this." Sean knew his voice held reproach and he tried to soften his tone. It wasn't fair to dampen Ryan's eager enthusiasm toward a world that had just opened to him. "Don't worry, everyone will be dressed up. You actually look pretty sexy in this getup if I say so myself."

The room was lit with hundreds of candles set on high shelves along the walls. About fifty men stood scattered in little clusters or seated at small, round tables, drinks in their hands, white sheets on their bodies. Some of the men wore narrow gold crowns of leaves in their hair. Others wore a thin strip of brightly colored leather tied around

their head. "Those are the Masters," Sean said, gesturing toward a man with a crown. "They'll be bidding. The ones with leather hair ties are the slaves." Ryan nodded and pressed closer to Sean, who put a comforting arm around him. The party hadn't really begun—the bidding was scheduled for ten o'clock.

Sean said, "We have time get a drink and find a table."

Once seated near the front of the room, off to the left of a raised stage, Ryan seemed more relaxed. "What's the big deal? I don't see any playing going on."

"You will. Once the auction is over, that's when the party really begins. It's kind of the icebreaker. Most of the guys who sign up as slave or Master are hardcore players. They like to scene publicly. Once they're paired up, you'll see some pretty heavy action, if that's what you're into. Some of them really *are* Master and slave."

"What?"

"You know...S&M. Whips and chains."

Ryan's eyes widened. "No *way*."

Sean smiled at Ryan's naïveté. "Sure, why not? This public stuff is all for show, but there's a good chance if you stick around, you'll see some guy get whipped or spanked for the amusement of the onlookers."

Ryan swallowed hard and drank most of his gin and tonic. He stood and said, "I'll get us another drink." Sean nodded and watched him walk toward the bar. A lot of the other guys were watching him as well. Sean hadn't been kidding when he said Ryan looked sexy in his makeshift toga. His strong, broad shoulders and sexy back were set off nicely by the white folds partially covering his torso. Sean felt pride swell as he watched his lover returning to the table with their drinks, oblivious of the admiring glances from the men watching him.

Ryan drank half of his second gin and tonic in one gulp. Sean put his hand on his arm and said, "Listen, Ry. We don't have to stay here. We can go right now. No big deal."

"No, no. I want to stay. I'm fine. It's not like *I'm* getting up there on that stage! *Then* I'd be freaking! Nope, I'm just a spectator, a voyeur." He grinned and sat back.

A man of about forty dressed in a real toga costume climbed to the stage. The room quieted as he held up what looked like a piece of parchment. He began to read the names printed there in a loud, theatrical voice. Ten men, each one young and good-looking, each dressed in some form of white sheet or towel with a leather strap across his forehead mounted the stage stairs and stood at attention behind the auctioneer.

"Gentlemen," the man boomed. "You see before you the finest slaves Greece has to offer, hand-selected for your entertainment tonight. For those of you not familiar with the rules, only those men wearing crowns are permitted to bid. The slave goes to the highest bidder, his possession for the evening. Be sure to follow the slave's contract. We're all here to have fun, but we must respect limits at all times."

"That said, let the bidding begin." The room erupted in hoots and applause as the auctioneer called out, "Slave Jonathan, present yourself!" One of the men stepped forward, looking distinctly nervous. He was of medium build with auburn hair cut short, his sideburns long but his face otherwise smooth-shaven. He was wearing a sheet draped over one shoulder and tied at the waist with a gold braid. His feet were bare. Sean watched Ryan's mouth fall open as the auctioneer walked over to Jonathan and yanked at his belt with one hand while pulling at the sheet with the other. Jonathan stood clad only in white silk thong underwear, his cock and balls visible beneath the sheer fabric.

"Turn for your Masters," he ordered. The young man began to pivot slowly and the crowd again applauded as his small, shapely ass came into view. The auctioneer raised his hand for silence and read from a sheet of paper. "Jonathan is an authentic submissive. His dream is to find his true Master here tonight. His limits for the evening are," the auctioneer paused, surprise on his face as he glanced at Jonathan and then back at the page, "no blood drawn. That's it." He frowned but then turned to the audience with a bright smile. "Well? What am I bid?"

Several men began to call out amounts, each one topping the last by several thousand of the play dollars. Ryan leaned over to Sean, "No blood drawn? That's it?"

"I told you. Some of these guys are hardcore players. You saw even the auctioneer was surprised. Usually the limit list is longer with stuff like no anal, no French kissing, no oral sex, et cetera. That guy up there is the real deal looks like. Wants to be owned by a sadist who matches his masochistic kink. To each his own I guess." Sean shrugged.

After a few minutes the bidding ended. A burly man of about thirty came on to the stage carrying a dog collar and leash. He placed the collar around the slave's neck and led him off the stage. "He came prepared, huh?" Ryan said, staring as Jonathan was led like a dog to the man's table. Once there he was directed to kneel at the man's feet, which he did at once, laying his head on the man's lap.

Their attention was diverted by the auctioneer calling out for the next slave to step forward. This one—Tom—was a dark-skinned man with multiple tattoos over his very muscular arms and chest. His limits were more traditional—no public anal sex, no exchange of bodily fluids, no restraints or blindfolds. He was sold in short order and so it went until all ten were dispatched to their owners for the evening.

Crowds began to form around the tables where slaves were being held. Men were also moving to corners of the room, sitting together on deep sofas or lying on the piles of soft pillows strewn along the edges of the room. Ryan's eyes were wide as plates as he watched two men right near them stand and shuck their togas from their bodies so they were completely nude, each sporting a sizable erection. Ryan ducked his head, hiding his face against Sean's shoulder.

Sean put his arm around him and asked softly, "Seen enough?"

"Well, if it isn't my long-lost serving boy! I thought I saw you two across a crowded room." Matt the bartender stood before them, bigger than life in a makeshift toga, his

massive chest half bare and glistening with body oil. Without being invited, he grabbed a chair from a nearby table and sat down.

"Sean, I didn't know you hung out at these things. You should have put Ryan here up on the block. I would have bought him in a New York minute. I'd have you on your knees, boy, finally where I want you." He laughed, his eyes now fixed on Ryan, his expression hungry. Sean, whose arm was still around Ryan, tightened his grip. He noticed Matt was wearing one of the gold crowns but it looked as if he had been outbid that evening.

"Not for sale," he said lightly, smiling coldly at Matt. "We just stopped by to check out the action for a few. We actually have someplace else to be, right, Ryan?"

"Yeah," Ryan answered. He seemed distracted, barely acknowledging Matt's rude comments. "Oh my god..." Sean followed his gaze. The young man called Jonathan had been led up onto the stage by his Master of the evening. The man whispered into his ear and he turned toward the wall, his back facing the audience as he raised his arms over his head and locked his fingers behind his neck.

The man had a pocketknife and gripping the waistband of the thong, cut it from Jonathan's body. He tossed the bit of fabric aside and stood back, a heavy flogger in his other hand. Men crowded the stage but from their vantage point off to the side, Ryan, Sean and Matt had a clear view. The man drew back his arm and snapped it forward. As the braids of the whip made contact with Jonathan's flesh, Ryan gasped. The man struck Jonathan again and again, making him jerk forward as his ass and back were reddened by the leather slapping against it.

Sean leaned close. "It's okay, Ryan. It's what he wants. Some people get off on the pain—it's just part of their hardwiring. It's completely consensual, don't worry. I bet you if Jonathan turned around right now, you'd see his cock was hard as a steel bar."

"What's the matter, Ryan? Never seen a guy take a beating before? I'd like to give your hot little ass a spanking, let me tell you. In fact, I might just have to as punishment for leaving my work detail. Such a naughty boy." Matt laughed loudly and Sean resisted a sudden impulse to punch him.

Instead he said, "Cool it, Matt."

Ryan surprised Sean by adding, "How many ways do we have to tell you, Matt? I'm not interested. Never was, never will be. So if you'll excuse us..." He stood and extended his hand to Sean, who took it as he rose from his chair.

As they weaved through clusters of men toward the exit, Ryan said, "Sure is great not to be working for that guy anymore! He used to make me feel like a rabbit in a fox's lair. He's the kind of guy who can't take no for an answer."

"You've got that right," Sean answered, grinning.

As they reached the exit, Ryan turned around, taking in one last time the various scenes of lovemaking and heavy petting unfolding around him. Sean couldn't help a twinge of vague jealousy. Ryan had said he wanted to go, yet he lingered, his eyes wide

with wonder. He was clearly fascinated, if not aroused, by what he was witnessing. Sean wanted to pull him along, to demand he leave at once.

Yet what was the harm in looking? Besides, Sean never wanted to become the kind of clingy, needy lover who wouldn't let his partner out of his sight for fear of his straying. He'd finally found the man of his dreams. He wasn't about to diminish what they had by attaching strings or setting limits on Ryan's behavior. He'd promised himself even if Ryan eventually decided he wanted to be with other men, he'd find a way to handle it. After all, Ryan was just beginning to find himself sexually speaking. It wouldn't be fair to keep him under lock and key, nor was it his place.

Near them, a man wearing only a leather thong knelt in front of another man fully clothed. He held a long riding crop he was using to smack the kneeling man's bare ass. The man's forehead was touching the ground, his ass raised up like an offering. His arms were bound behind his back, tied with rope at the elbows and wrists. Sean glanced at Ryan, who was staring with a rapt expression at the two men, wincing slightly each time the crop met its mark. He could almost feel Ryan's desire rising like a wall between them.

The room felt too close suddenly, the air oppressive and hot. "I'll be outside," Sean said in an urgent whisper. He dashed from the party, moving quickly through the large, open hall toward the front door. He needed fresh air. He just needed to clear his head.

He stood breathing in the moist sea air and began to feel better. He hated when his thoughts went down the twisted sinister lane of jealousy. Ryan had never given him a moment's doubt. He'd never flirted with other guys or said anything about wanting to be with other men. Yet the yearning had been stark in Ryan's face if only for a moment. Being in love, he realized, was the most vulnerable thing he'd ever done.

"Hey, Sean." Ryan was beside him. "You disappeared on me. What's up? You okay?"

"I just needed some air. I think I'm a little claustrophobic. It started to get to me." Ryan peered at him, narrowing his eyes, but he said nothing. They walked along for a while, heading in the general direction of their bungalow.

"Still want to take that swim?" Ryan asked, slipping his arm around Sean's waist.

* * * * *

After swimming and horsing around in the pool, they moved to the attached hot tub, luxuriating in the frothing heat as they talked about the play party. "I wonder what's happening there now?" Ryan said.

"Do you wish we'd stayed?"

"Nah, I saw enough. I guess I'm more naïve than I thought. Not just about gay stuff but all that BDSM. Man! To think of being tied down and whipped. It's just too bizarre to even contemplate." The odd thing was, as Ryan said this, the image of Jonathan being whipped on stage scrolled through his head and he felt his cock begin to rise. The

memory of the nearly naked man kneeling with his arms bound so tightly behind his back made his cock even harder.

Uncomfortable with the unexpected arousal, he shifted in the bubbling water, moving away from Sean. "What is it?" Sean asked, ever sensitive to the slightest change in his demeanor. Ryan considered lying for a moment. After all, his reaction was strange to say the least. He wasn't some kind of pervert!

He turned to face Sean, ready to say it was nothing, when he stopped himself. He knew Sean had been uncomfortable at the play party, only agreeing to go to please him. He'd sensed toward the end Sean's growing discomfort. When he'd practically run out of there, Ryan had known something was wrong. Yet when he'd asked, Sean had said it was nothing.

Now Ryan said, "I was about to say it was nothing, but it wasn't nothing. You're so sensitive to my moods you always know so I might as well give words to it. First let me ask you something. You don't have to answer right now, but maybe when I'm done you'll want to." Sean sat up, his full attention on Ryan, who continued. "The way you kind of hightailed it out of there—you said you just needed air, but I think it was more than that. I think you were uncomfortable being at the party and specifically at being there with me." Sean started to speak but Ryan stopped him. "No, wait. Don't answer yet. Hear me out. What I'm getting at is I think something was bothering you, but when I asked you, you said you were feeling claustrophobic or something like that.

"Here's the thing, Sean. You and I have something I've never had before. A kind of connection I never had with anyone, male or female. The kind of connection I honestly didn't think I was capable of having. There's a trust between us that underlies and infuses everything we do.

"If we start down this path, which I think you were doing earlier, and that I almost did just now, of brushing scary feelings under the carpet or at the very least denying them to each other, we risk losing that safe place you've described so beautifully to me, and that I want to be for you. Let me be your safe place, Sean, and keep being mine."

Sean was looking at him with a tender expression. He shook his head slowly and said, "Ryan, you're right. I'm sorry. I was holding back out of insecurity. I got a little jealous in there, not of the other guys but of your reactions to what was going on. Like a kid in a candy store, not sure what to grab, it all looks so good."

Ryan laughed. "It was pretty intense! I could never see myself on public display like that. What we share," he touched Sean's shoulder, letting his hand move down into the water to stroke his chest, "is between us and that much the sweeter, I think, as a result. Please don't feel threatened by my reactions. I'm not about to run off and sign up for slave duty!" He laughed at the thought and Sean laughed too.

After a moment Sean said, "Okay. I promise to try to be open with you about my fears or insecurities. And I guess you're going to tell me now what was going on with you a few minutes ago—what made your face close and caused you to turn away from me."

Ryan pressed his lips together in a nervous smile. "You mean this has to be two-way?" He laughed and then sobered as he tried to think how to explain the confusion of feelings. He decided just to talk and hope the words would sort themselves out.

"Well, here's the thing. I'm not sure how to say this so I'm just going to say it and hope you understand. When that guy took Jonathan up onto the stage and started whipping him, I was one part horrified but also one part," he paused, gathering his courage to admit something he knew Sean probably found repugnant, "aroused." He waited for Sean to grimace and cringe in horror, but he just sat there, nodding a little as if what Ryan was saying was perfectly natural. Emboldened, Ryan went on. "It wasn't that I wanted to be up there getting whipped, god no! But it was, I don't know, somehow erotic to watch."

He closed his eyes, recalling the man kneeling on the ground. Giving voice to his thought, he said, "And that *other* guy! Jesus! The way he was all tied up, unable to get away from the riding crop..." He trailed off, afraid he'd betrayed too much, afraid Sean was going to reject him.

To his surprise Sean said, "Light bondage can be very hot in the right circumstance."

"Yeah? What do you know about it? Have you actually done any of that stuff?"

"Sure, for fun. It's no big deal. I mean, I never found the appeal in pain—either inflicting or receiving, though I know from guys who do it, it can be the most intense experience of their lives. But it's just not for me. Like I said, I think people are hardwired that way, just like their sexual orientation or which hand they use to throw a ball.

"But light bondage—a little rope, maybe some cuffs, a blindfold, can be very erotic. It can also be very freeing."

"Freeing? That sounds like a contradiction in terms."

"Yeah," Sean laughed, "I can see how it might. What I mean is, someone, say someone who's afraid to try something—he's inhibited or nervous or whatever. He wants to do it, but he can't quite get up the nerve. Add a little rope, a little restraint and he *can't* refuse. He doesn't have to struggle with deciding if he can do it or not. The choice is taken from him—he's no longer responsible."

Ryan was quiet, processing the implications. Finally he said, "You want to tie me up so I won't be afraid of anal sex? Is that what you're getting at here?"

Sean gave a big belly laugh. "No, not at all, though now that you mention it..." He laughed again at Ryan's concerned expression. "I'm teasing. No, I don't think that would be a good idea because that's such a big step for you. I'm thinking more of little things, like learning to relax your throat more during oral sex or letting me touch your body in a way that's more intimate than you're used to."

"Oh..." Ryan said softly. Whatever trepidation Sean's words were causing in his head, his cock was responding beneath the water. Sean watched him, those knowing

blue eyes seeming to see past his skull right into his secrets. He dropped his gaze, not certain what he felt.

"Want to try it? Maybe tomorrow—we have the whole day off to explore. I have some rope in my pool shed that should work perfectly. It could be fun. It could be hot."

"And if it's not?" Ryan realized he was at once excited and very nervous at the idea of letting Sean tie him up for sensual play.

"Then we stop. Simple as that. As with all our lovemaking, we stay within your comfort level at all times. I would never want it any other way."

* * * * *

Ryan woke before Sean, something that rarely happened. He wanted to shake him awake and ask where that rope was kept. He had been disturbed several times in the night by sensual, dark dreams rife with bondage imagery. The dreams had been at once compelling and frightening and he woke with both a pounding heart and an erection.

He didn't want to appear overeager but he was very curious to try Sean's suggestion. He tried to imagine what it would be like to have his arms bound behind him like that guy at the party. He glanced at Sean, still peacefully asleep, one arm flung over his face.

Controlling his impatience, Ryan took a quick shower and went to make coffee. He decided to go to the canteen and get something to go for the two of them. When he returned some twenty minutes later with still-warm croissants, a rasher of bacon and some fresh berries, he heard the shower running. He set the table and put out the butter and cream along with the food he'd brought. He sat down with a fresh cup of coffee and tried to pretend he wasn't dying for Sean to hurry up already.

"Morning," Sean said, finally emerging from the bedroom. "Hey, what's all this? Looks great! Thanks."

"Thought we could stay in this morning." He stood and poured a cup of coffee for Sean, placing it in front of him. A moment later he retrieved jam from the refrigerator in case Sean wanted it for his croissant. He sat back down, tapping his foot as he watched Sean finally take his first bite.

Sean looked over at him and said, "What's with you? You're hopping around like a little kid ready to go trick or treating. You waiting for something? Did I forget an appointment? Are we late for a wedding?"

Ryan grinned sheepishly. "Is it that obvious? I thought I was being very cool."

"You're always cool, babe," Sean laughed. He put his hand to his chin, stroking an imaginary beard as he said in a teasing voice, "I wonder...could it be you've got something on your mind? Maybe something that we talked about last night? A little game we were going to try today? Something to do with rope perhaps? Hmm?"

"What? I don't know what you're talking about. Not a clue." He managed to keep his face straight for about three seconds before he burst into laughter.

Sean laughed with him. "Just hold your sexy little horses. Let me finish my breakfast then I'll take the cart and go get that rope from the pool shed. I can see I'm going to have no peace until I tie you up and have my way with you."

* * * * *

Soft nylon rope circled Ryan's wrists, binding them together. His arms were extended over his head, attached to the headboard with a slip knot. His heart was thumping even though Sean hadn't touched him yet.

Sean lay down next to him and leaned up on one elbow. "How're you feeling? Okay?"

"Yeah." Ryan pulled against the restraints. Though not tight, the rope held him firmly in place. He couldn't get loose without Sean's help. He was at Sean's mercy. This thought hardened his cock even more.

Sean leaned over and kissed Ryan's eyelids. "Close your eyes. I want you to trust me. We're going to push your envelope today." Ryan felt adrenaline fanning through his body as Sean's fingers moved along his throat, down his chest to his cock. Sean grasped it gently in his hand as he said, "I'm going to touch you in ways I haven't touched you before. I want you to trust me and let me explore with you. You with me?"

"I'm not sure. I mean, I'm nervous."

"That's okay. You know you're safe with me. This is what you might call an exchange of power. You're giving me the power over your body. Those ropes around your wrists symbolize the exchange. While you're tied, I'll make the decisions for us. You don't have to agonize over whether you're comfortable with something or afraid to try or experience it. You just go with the flow. You keep your eyes closed and you trust me to keep you safe. You open yourself to the experience. Can you do that?"

As Sean spoke, he continued to stroke Ryan's cock. His words were having a strange effect on Ryan. He felt deeply aroused but also a little scared. Ironically the fear seemed to blend with the desire, intensifying it in a way Ryan didn't understand. Slowly he nodded. Whatever was happening, he was deeply excited and ready for whatever Sean had in mind — he hoped.

Chapter Eight

Ryan had never really given much thought to his nipples one way or the other. Until now. Sean was straddling his waist, his strong thighs lightly gripping Ryan's body as he bent over him. He felt his soft, warm tongue slowly circle first one then the other. A nudge of teeth, a lick, a gentle bite.

As he suckled and teased Ryan's nipples to stiff points, Sean reached back, cupping his balls and gliding his fingers upward over his cock. "You belong to me right now," he whispered in a low, throaty voice. "My captive. My possession." He bit Ryan's nipple, a small shot of pain offset by the stroking fingers on his shaft. Ryan gasped, pulling at his restraints.

His chest was falling and rising as his breathing became more rapid. Sean bit the other nipple, another flash of pain quickly subsiding into pleasure, his cock rising hard to meet Sean's hand. "What're you doing to me?" he managed to gasp between shallow breaths.

"Giving you what you need," Sean murmured, his mouth suddenly at Ryan's ear, his warm breath on his cheek. Ryan, eyes closed, turned his head for a kiss but Sean was gone, his lips again seeking Ryan's hard nipples. He licked and nibbled each one as Ryan tensed for the fleeting pain of his teeth. When it didn't come, he was oddly disappointed. He wanted it—he *needed* it.

"Do it again," he urged. Sean laughed softly, the sound knowing. Again his mouth was on Ryan's nipple. He pulled it taut with his teeth, nipping the tender bud until Ryan groaned, his cock throbbing in Sean's steady grip. "Jesus," he whispered, at once confused and thrilled by what was happening to him.

"You ready?" Sean's mouth was again at his ear.

"For what?" Ryan managed.

"For what's next. Keep your eyes closed. Stay open to me. Go with the experience. That's what I need from you now. Can you give me that?"

Ryan felt he could give Sean anything, would give him anything at that moment. "Yes," he said, "yes."

Sean kissed him lightly on the cheek and Ryan heard him moving on the bed. He felt him crouch between his legs. In a moment he felt Sean's warm mouth sliding over his cock, sinking down until he felt the head make contact with the back of Sean's throat. He moaned his appreciation, arching up with his hips.

Sean suckled and teased him for several moments. If Ryan's hands had been free, he would have grabbed Sean's head, holding him in place. But he wasn't free. His

wrists were tied with loops of soft rope. He couldn't pull Sean to him nor could he push him away. He was, as Sean had whispered in his sexy voice, his captive.

Sean pulled back and said, "Remember, go with the flow. I'm going to push your legs up. Don't fight me. Let me position you. Promise?"

"Yeah," Ryan said, ready to promise anything. He wanted Sean's mouth back on his cock. Sean pushed his legs up until his knees were bent, his feet flat on the mattress. Gently he pressed his shins, pushing Ryan's knees back toward his body. Sean moved in closer. He realized Sean might be staring at his puckered asshole. Reflexively he tried to close his legs, but Sean, perhaps anticipating his reaction, had placed his hands firmly on the backs of Ryan's thighs, preventing him from moving out of the position.

"Hey!" Ryan struggled to raise his head, opening his eyes to stare down at his lover, heat flushing his cheeks.

"Hey yourself," Sean smiled at him. "Lie down. It's time, Ryan. It's time to move past your fear. Lie back down. Trust me. Close your eyes and give yourself over to what you know is going to happen. You're my captive don't forget. In my power, at my mercy, under my control."

As Sean said these words, Ryan felt a curious sort of heat rising through him—a secret rumbling desire like a stirring volcano. Despite his embarrassment at having his legs bent up, his ass cheeks splayed and his asshole on display, his cock was raging, pressed up hard against his belly. He let his head fall back to the pillow, surrendering. After all, he was tied down—what choice did he have?

He felt Sean's hands moving over his ass, stroking his flesh. He felt the fingers moving closer to the cleft between his cheeks and he tensed. Again the hands stroked his skin and slowly moved back toward the center. Over and over warm, soothing fingers touched his body until Ryan was lulled by the sensual rhythm and feel of his lover's hands moving over him. When a finger brushed over his asshole, he tensed again.

"You're doing great," Sean murmured. He continued to glide his fingertip along the cleft between Ryan's cheeks, lightly passing his nether entrance until he became accustomed to that as well. He relaxed muscles he hadn't realized he'd been tensing as he gave in to the sensations actually quite pleasurable. "Sexy man," Sean cooed softly.

His hand was withdrawn but a moment later Ryan felt something wet on his asshole. He realized Sean must have licked his fingertip. He could feel it gently circling with the lightest of pressure.

Ryan felt a jolt of unease and again reflexively tried to move out of position. He tugged at the rope binding his wrists. "Are you okay?" Sean asked. "Is the rope hurting you?"

"No, it's okay. It's not the rope. I—I kind of like it," he said. He more than liked it but he wasn't quite ready to admit that. He didn't understand it, but there was something thrilling about being bound and helpless. "It's—it's what you're doing. I'm not comfortable with it. I mean, it's embarrassing to have you see me like that. To look

at me, you know..." He faltered, squeezing his eyes shut as he imagined Sean staring at his splayed ass cheeks and what lay between them.

"Shh," Sean whispered. "I know this is new for you. You're a little nervous. That's natural. But know this—I love your body. I adore it. You are so hot, so sexy. Your ass is perfect. I want you so bad. This is the first step. The first step to helping you get over your fear. Trust me." He leaned up and gently kissed Ryan's lips. Ryan responded ardently, wishing at that moment he could get his hands free so he could pull Sean down and kiss him hard and long.

Sean kissed his mouth, licking his lips with the tip of his tongue in such a way it sent shivers down Ryan's spine. He pulled away when Ryan parted his lips and beckoned with his tongue. He gave a frustrated sigh as Sean moved away, sliding back down between his legs.

Ryan had let his legs fall, feet flat again on the mattress as they'd kissed. Sean again pressed them back up into position. "Just the next step. Remember. This is what you need." Ryan felt adrenaline slide through his body, certain Sean was going to take him further than they'd yet been. He realized even though he was nervous, he wanted it. He wanted what Sean was offering.

Lightly Sean pressed against his exposed opening and this time the fingertip slipped in just a little. Ryan could feel his sphincter muscles clamp down. Embarrassment mingled with arousal as he submitted to Sean's gentle but insistent attentions. Sean pressed his finger partway and then eased it out again. Ryan felt himself relax as his body grew accustomed.

He waited to feel its teasing touch again. Instead he felt Sean's lips grazing over his thighs and ass, leaving a trail of soft kisses in their wake. Sean lifted himself over Ryan's body. He felt his warm tongue circle the head of his cock, licking down the shaft to his balls. As Ryan groaned, Sean gripped the base of his shaft with one hand and closed his lips over the head, sending waves of pleasure cascading through Ryan's body.

Sean's expert attention, coupled with the slow, steady tease of the past minutes or hours or whatever it had been brought Ryan very quickly to the edge of orgasm. "Oh god!" he cried. Sean pulled away, abandoning his glistening cock and aching balls.

"Sean!" he cried with frustration. "Don't stop. I'm right on the edge."

"That's where I want you. Right on the edge." Sean again pressed his legs up and back so his ass was splayed. Without giving Ryan a chance to protest, he knelt low between Ryan's legs. This time the wetness he felt wasn't from Sean's finger but from his tongue.

Sean licked a tiny circle and then pressed the tip of his tongue into Ryan's ass. Ryan knew he should be horrified. He told himself if he wasn't tied down right now he'd push Sean away.

But he wasn't listening.

The pleasure was too intense, his cock throbbing as Sean's warm tongue swirled inside him. Inexplicably, each gentle probe sent a thrill of pleasure directly to his cock.

"Oh," he murmured over and over, unaware he was speaking. When Sean reached up to stroke his cock, he moved into sensual overload. He ejaculated suddenly, globs of his semen spurting across his belly, hitting his chest and chin.

His heart was pounding in his ears as he lay with his wrists still bound high over his head, his position leaving him still exposed but too spent to move. Sean sat back and gently pulled his legs down, stroking his thighs with his palms as Ryan lay trying to catch his breath. After a few moments Sean sidled up beside him, snuggling against his shoulder.

Reaching up, he released the slip knot from the headboard and quickly unwound the rope from Ryan's wrists. Stroking Ryan's chest, he spoke softly into his ear, "There now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

* * * * *

One reason Ryan enjoyed his job was it gave him plenty of time to daydream. As he worked the muscles on a back or leg, he let his mind wander and invariably it settled on Sean. Since the Sunday a week before when Sean had first tied his wrists to the headboard and proceeded to have his way with him Ryan had been insatiable.

Now that the taboo had finally been broken regarding his ass, he couldn't wait to feel Sean's fingers and tongue nudging, licking, teasing, penetrating. He hadn't quite gotten up the nerve to reciprocate, though he wanted to. Sean being Sean hadn't made an issue of it. He continued to give, never asking anything of Ryan in return.

It wasn't that he found the idea repugnant or dirty. Sean was always very clean. He knew his hesitation was silly and he promised himself each night it would be the night he touched Sean in that most intimate of ways. Intellectually he had no problem with the thought of touching Sean's ass, yet something always held him back.

Sean hadn't tied his wrists since that first explosive time. He found himself wondering if perhaps the rope held some kind of key for him. If it might free him to go further as it had that first time. Something about being held down, being made helpless seemed to release his inhibitions as Sean had said it might. Maybe they could try it again tonight.

He finished with his client and went out to check his schedule. To his surprise, the name Anthony Keller had been penciled in as his next appointment. He turned to the couch where Anthony was sprawled, his long legs stretched before him.

"You want a massage?" Ryan asked, puzzled.

Anthony turned his dark eyes toward Ryan, a lazy half smile on his face. "I do, Mr. Weston. If you aren't too busy. I saw you have the next two hours free on your schedule. Jiru still talks about your technique and I thought I'd see what all the hoopla is about."

Ryan looked around the room. Jiru wasn't due until later that day. A different therapist named John was still with a client in one of the rooms. "What if we get a walk-in?"

"We'll hear the bells. They can sit and wait a few minutes." Anthony stood and moved close to Ryan. He could smell his aftershave—fresh mint and a hint of jasmine. He smelled good. He looked good too in a dark, sort of dangerous way. In spite of himself, Ryan felt his cock nudging against his white shorts. He'd stopped blushing every time Anthony turned that dark, sexy stare on him, but now he felt his face heat as the tall man stared down at him.

"Okay," he found himself saying. After all, it was just a massage. It was a compliment that a licensed therapist wanted a massage from him. He preceded Anthony into the massage room and busied himself remaking the massage table as Anthony stripped to his underwear. He couldn't help but notice the dark, curling hair, fanning out over his broad chest. As Anthony lay down on the table, Ryan pulled the sheet over his long legs, covering him to the waist.

He began with a light massage, loosening the muscles before he went deeper. The massage oil made Anthony's skin glisten. For a moment he had a crazy impulse to bend down and lick it. Anthony's back was broad and well muscled. Ryan inhaled, Anthony's sexy scent mingled with the massage oil and thought guiltily of Sean.

He forced himself to focus on his task, refusing to acknowledge his barely admitted attraction. "Yes," Anthony murmured. "Ah, you have the gift, no question." Ryan smiled, pleased at his words, though he was used to such praise now since he received it daily from his clients. While leaning in to apply more pressure, he accidentally brushed his groin against Anthony's hip. He felt his cock swell and he pulled back, embarrassed.

He couldn't deny he was sexually attracted to the guy. Was that a crime? When he'd had girlfriends, his eye often roved, fantasies of other women leaping into his brain unbidden during sex with the one he was supposed to love. That hadn't ever happened with Sean. Sean completely consumed all his attention. So what was going on?

Anthony flipped over unexpectedly and the sheet fell away. Ryan couldn't help but notice his cock, fully erect in his underwear. It was huge and Ryan found himself staring. Instead of hiding himself or looking away, Anthony said in a bantering tone, "Like what you see?"

Ryan felt flames licking his neck and cheeks. Quickly he bent to retrieve the sheet, which he threw over Anthony's body. "What's going on?" he demanded abruptly, aware he was sporting an erection of his own and upset by it.

Anthony laughed a slow, easy laugh and sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of the table. He stood, still making no effort to hide his sizable erection. In spite of himself, Ryan's eyes were again drawn to the huge package.

In a slow, sensual drawl Anthony said, "Imagine yourself on your knees in front of me. Think you could take it all?" Ryan flushed and looked away as Anthony brazenly stroked himself over his underwear.

"Get dressed," Ryan said abruptly.

Anthony gave a small laugh and said lightly, "Hey, I'm just kidding around, Ryan. I apologize. I was out of line." As he pulled on his shorts, he glanced toward Ryan. "What can I say? I've had my eye on you since you got here. Such a good-looking guy and that adorable way you have of blushing every time I look at you—it's a real turn-on. You've really got the naïve, innocent act pat I have to say. I bet the tips come pouring in." Ryan felt his face heating yet again and turned angrily away, lining up bottles of oil already neatly placed.

Anthony went on. "Hey, I'm sorry if I've upset you. I swear I didn't ask for the massage in order to hit on you. I really wanted to see what everyone is raving about. I can't help it if my body responds to being near to you."

Ryan turned back around, relieved his erection had wilted and his cheeks no longer felt hot. "You know I'm with Sean," he said.

"Yeah, I know. Like I said, I can't control my body. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you weren't exactly indifferent either, hmm?" He stared pointedly at Ryan's crotch and Ryan turned away. At that moment they both turned to the sound of bells tinkling.

"Someone's here," Ryan said, hurrying to the door.

"Saved by the bell." Anthony's laugh followed Ryan as he fled from the room.

* * * * *

They were sitting on their front porch, watching the sun set in brilliant colors over the ocean. Each had the next day off and the evening stretched luxuriously ahead of them.

It was the day after Ryan's disconcerting interaction with Anthony. He'd wanted to come home right away and tell Sean what happened. Until now he'd shared everything of interest from his workday with Sean, who always listened with his full attention and made Ryan feel validated and special. He loved the way Sean could sit with such calm stillness, seeming to look past his words to the essence of what he was trying to say.

This was the first time Ryan had failed to share something that affected him—that could conceivably affect the two of them. No, that was crazy. Anthony's making a pass at him had nothing to do with his wonderful relationship with Sean. And he hadn't even really made a pass, had he? He'd said he found Ryan attractive—was that so terrible? Because if he were honest, Ryan found Anthony attractive as well, very much so. That didn't mean they were going to act on it.

So why then did he hesitate to tell Sean what had happened between them? He thought of Anthony's huge cock bulging in his underwear, mentally comparing it to Sean's in spite of himself. He shook his head, annoyed and upset by this line of

thinking. Sean was Sean—nothing and nobody could compare to him. Impulsively he reached over and stroked the top of Sean's hand resting on the arm of his chair. Sean looked up and smiled at him.

"You know, there's this guy, this massage therapist," Ryan blurted, and then stopped. What was the point of upsetting Sean? Would he want to know some guy was hitting on Ryan?

"Yeah? Someone new?"

Now that he'd started, he knew he had to say something. "No, not new. His name is Anthony."

"Anthony Keller?" As Ryan nodded Sean continued. "I know him. Been here a few seasons. Tall, dark guy, right?"

"Yeah, that's the one." The image of Anthony's dark, brooding eyes suddenly flashed into Ryan's mind. The memory of his slow, insolent smile made Ryan shift uncomfortably in his seat. His mouth felt dry and sweat prickled under his arms.

Sean, watching him, said with his usual acumen, "Something bothering you, Ry? Is Anthony bothering you?"

"What? No! No, not at all," Ryan said hurriedly. He looked away from Sean's penetrating blue eyes. He forced himself to look back, hoping his face didn't betray the turmoil of confused feelings inside. Sean waited. "He just wanted a massage, is all. Said he wanted to see what all the 'hoopla' was about. He said, uh, he said I had a gift."

Sean flashed his wide, sunny smile and Ryan warmed to it, almost forgetting he'd just told his first lie to his lover, a lie of omission but a lie nonetheless.

* * * * *

Sean had to admit, the light bondage had been a great way to help Ryan get over his inhibitions about his body. He'd been surprised by Ryan's intense reaction to the rope—his cock, always hard, had been like steel once those ropes held him captive.

He'd been surprised with his own reaction as well. He'd played around a little with bondage with other partners, but it had been more of a game. With Ryan, perhaps because of his strong reaction, Sean had found himself thrilling to his position. When he'd whispered to Ryan he was in his control, he was his possession, the words had fired something in his own belly as well. He knew they weren't yet done exploring the potential power bondage would have in their relationship. But as in most things, he was content to take it slowly and let it flower of its own accord. In fact, he'd purposefully not used rope for the rest of the week, wanting Ryan to get comfortable with their first level of anal play without coming to rely on bondage. He wanted to find out if Ryan enjoyed the play for its own sake or only submitted to it in order to experience the bondage.

To his relief, Ryan still seemed to thrill to his fingers and tongue without the restraint of rope leaving him no choice. Though Ryan had yet to offer the same

attention, Sean wasn't worried. Ryan had to come to that place on his own without any coercion on Sean's part. It would happen when it happened.

Sometimes he wasn't in quite so healthy a headspace and his thoughts drifted to a more negative place. He knew when Ryan had brought up Anthony Keller he'd been going to say something other than what he'd said. He'd cut himself off and Sean hadn't pressed, but it had been as if a cold shadow had passed over them for a moment. He'd tried to let it go, hoping if Ryan did have something to say, he would eventually do so.

Instead he focused on how far they had come together. In a way, it was more satisfying to have such an inexperienced lover as opposed to someone who'd done it all a hundred times before. Each new step Ryan took was filled with such trembling heat, such breathless reaction, and it thrilled Sean to know he was the one leading him there.

Though he knew he had to be patient, he was aching to feel the hot clench of Ryan's ass around his cock as he reached around to stroke his lover to a fever pitch. He knew he would wait as long as it took until Ryan was ready. Now he focused on Ryan's words. He had, he'd told Sean excitedly, an idea.

They were lying in bed together, dinner over, the night's adventure waiting to unfold. "I was thinking," Ryan said, fingering the sections of rope Sean used to bind his wrists to the headboard. "I know it isn't fair the way you touch and lick me and I never..." he faltered, and looked away. Sean couldn't help but smile at the earnest tone in Ryan's voice. He was so endearing with his shyness about anal play.

"It's not about fair. You know that by now."

"I know, I know. But the thing is, I *want* to touch your ass," he barely whispered the last word. He took a breath, clearly screwing up his courage. "God, you'd think I was twelve or something. I'm just going to say this!"

Sean waited expectantly. Finally he said with a laugh, "Okay, say it!"

"Okay. Right." He handed the ropes to Sean. "Tie me up. My wrists behind my back."

"Is that an order, Sir?" Sean grinned.

Ryan flushed but pushed on. "Here's the thing. When you tied me down, I somehow let go. It freed me to be myself. To let go of a lifetime of conditioning. I've been able to get over some of my inhibitions about being touched. Now I want to give that to *you*. It feels so good, it feels so sexy. I want to touch and kiss you like that. But I'm scared. I can't seem to get past it on my own. So I thought maybe the rope. If I was bound and able to get into that hot headspace you seem to put me in, perhaps I could get past it."

Sean nodded. "It's a good idea. I like it. But we'll do it according to my rules, agreed?" Sean knew just what buttons to push with his lover. He knew it would help Ryan all the more if he quickly took command. Though he'd never considered himself a dominant lover, with Ryan it seemed a natural role. "I call the shots. You obey. You belong to me." Ryan nodded, his beautiful clear-green eyes wide. Sean observed how Ryan seemed to ease back into himself. The edginess lessened as his body stilled.

They were both still wearing shorts and T-shirts. Sean stood and said, "First, take off my things." Ryan scooted off the bed, kneeling to eagerly pull Sean's clothing from his body. Sean's cock sprung out to greet him and Ryan at once began to lick and suck it. His hands came up to cup Sean's balls and he marveled at what an expert Ryan had become in so short a time. His mouth and hands felt amazing and Sean almost let him continue, but he didn't want to be distracted. "Uh-uh," he said with a smile. "I didn't tell you to do that." Gently he pushed him away.

Ryan sat back on his haunches and looked up with a question in his face. "I want you to strip and lie on your back on the bed." Ryan pulled off his clothing and obediently lay as directed. Sean stood over him, leaning down to kiss him on the mouth. Ryan responded ardently, bringing up his arms to pull Sean down to him. Sean pulled away. "Not yet, my love. I have other things in mind. Lift your arms over your head, palms touching."

"But I said I was going to kneel and —"

"I have a better idea," Sean interjected. "Remember, my rules. I call the shots—you obey." Ryan nodded and closed his mouth. Sean noted with satisfaction his cock was bobbing at attention despite his protests. He reached down and stroked the hot, silky flesh, his own cock as hard as Ryan's in his other hand.

"You have the desire to please me but you're still new and untried. It will be easier to work past your fear if I'm in control. Rather than having you kneel and force yourself to find the courage to do what you want to do, I'm going to remove that obstacle for you. I'm going to straddle your face instead. All you have to do is receive me. Do you think you can do that?"

"I'm not sure what you mean..." Ryan said hesitantly. He bit his lip nervously but his cock remained like a steel rod in Sean's grip.

"I'll show you. And remember while you're bound, the moment you feel uncomfortable or scared you tell me. That's an order." He smiled as he gave this directive, stroking Ryan's cock as he leaned down to kiss him once more.

He felt Ryan relax and asked, "Ready?"

"Yes," came the whispered response.

Standing over Ryan, Sean reminded him, "Hands over your head on the bed, palms facing each other." Ryan obeyed, pressing his hands together as if in prayer. His eyes were riveted to Sean as he took the soft rope and looped it around Ryan's wrists, tying off the ends in a slip knot over the top bar of the headboard as he'd done the last time he'd bound his lover.

He noted Ryan's breath quickening as he pulled against his bonds, testing their strength. His cock was pointing upward on his belly. Sean wanted to gorge himself on the beautiful member but he had other things to do first. Moving to the top of the bed, he straddled Ryan's head, carefully positioning himself over his face.

"Stick out your tongue and keep it out no matter what," he commanded. Trusting Ryan would obey, slowly he lowered himself until he felt the tip of Ryan's wet tongue

make tentative contact with his asshole. He expected Ryan to refuse, to protest, at the very least to turn his head, and he'd been prepared to try again and again. To his surprise, Ryan held his ground, keeping his tongue pointed up, its tip just making contact with Sean's entrance.

Sean realized Ryan's submission to his command as much as the warm, sexy contact with his tongue was making his own cock tingle and throb with anticipation. "That's it, hot boy, yes." Sean closed his eyes, thrilling to Ryan's tongue on his asshole, thrilling at the thought of his lover tied and helpless beneath him.

"Keep your tongue out. Let me guide you," he said, and Ryan obeyed. He lowered himself slightly, forcing the tip of his tongue just inside. Reaching out, he grasped Ryan's cock firmly. Ryan groaned and pushed his tongue in farther of his own accord. Spirals of heated pleasure radiated through Sean's body. Each swirl of his tongue was rewarded with a pulling stroke to his cock.

Sean grasped his own cock with his other hand, stroking himself and Ryan in a steady rhythm as Ryan tongued and rimmed his asshole with increasing enthusiasm. Sean had wanted to draw out the moment but it felt so incredibly good and the setup was so fiercely arousing to him that within minutes he knew he was going come. Ryan's tongue continued to swirl and lick him to a frenzy.

Giving himself over to the fierce pleasure, he rubbed and pulled both their cocks as he threw his head back with a cry of passion. "Ahhhh..." The sound was drawn out as he climaxed over Ryan's stomach. He felt Ryan shudder and gasp beneath him in the seconds before his own release. As Ryan came, he remained straddled over his face, Ryan's tongue still in his ass as his seed spurted onto his belly and chest.

Carefully he lifted himself from Ryan's face and lay down beside him, still trembling from his own blindingly intense orgasm. He reached for a soft hand towel from the pile they kept near the bed and gently wiped their mingled ejaculate from his lover's body.

Ryan remained bound, his arms pulled taut above him, his hair wild over his face. "Jesus, you look hot like that, Ry," he whispered, his cock stirring despite its depleted state. "Maybe I'll just leave you like that all night."

Ryan opened his eyes at this remark, his expression worried as he started to speak. Sean put his finger over Ryan's lips and said with a grin, "I'm just teasing. I have to set you free so we can snuggle." He slipped the knot from the headboard and released Ryan's wrists.

He rested his cheek against Ryan's firm chest, lulled by the steady, even rhythm of his lover's heart. Ryan's arm came around him, its weight comforting.

"I love you," Sean murmured against his chest, too quietly for Ryan to hear.

Chapter Nine

"If it isn't Sean Evans. Where've you been hiding yourself?" Sean, who was working on a faulty pool pump, its parts spread over his workbench in the tool shed, turned to the familiar voice with a smile.

"Kenny! How's it going?" He moved into the open arms of Kenny Spencer, who caught him in a bear hug, almost lifting him off the ground. In spite of himself, Sean felt the old zing of desire ricochet through his body. He'd had a huge crush on Kenny the season before, but Kenny had been obsessed with his then-lover Jeremy. Sean had been aware Kenny had returned for the season and Jeremy had not. If Ryan hadn't appeared like a burst of sunlight into his life, he probably would have investigated Kenny's status further.

Stepping out of the small shed together, they exchanged small talk for a while. Curious, Sean said casually, "So you're solo this season?"

Kenny, who hailed from Barbados, worked on the golf course at the resort during peak season. His skin was dark as roasted coffee beans with a splash of rich cream, his eyes a startling light golden brown. He wore a small gold hoop in one ear and a bright red bandana tied around his head. Though striking with prominent cheekbones and a lush, sensuous mouth, it wasn't primarily his looks that had attracted Sean but a compelling sort of barely contained power lingering just below the surface. He reminded Sean of a panther – sleek, patient and potentially lethal.

"Yeah, Jeremy and I burned bright while we lasted," Kenny said with a rueful smile. "But he had his life back in the States and you know me, man. I could never leave this part of the world. We just weren't meant to be," he added with a dramatic sigh.

Sean nodded, unable to suppress a sudden jagged edge of worry that scraped at the edge of his brain. So far he'd avoided thinking about the season's end. He found himself wishing time would stop with Ryan always in his arms.

"What about you? I've heard through the grapevine you've got yourself a lover. Is it serious, hmm?" Kenny leaned close, touching Sean's arm. His golden eyes flashed as he licked his upper lip in a slow, sexual tease. "I've always had a thing for you, Sean. Jeremy and I used to talk about including you in a threesome, but I know that's not your style." Lightly he stroked Sean's arm. Sean knew he should pull away and yet he didn't. Kenny's deep, melodic voice was almost hypnotic, his strong fingers moving over Sean's flesh with a snake charmer's rhythm. "How about just the two of us? No one has to know. Just a bit of stolen pleasure in the dark, yes?" He pointed toward the shed.

Sean felt confused as his cock rose at Kenny's words. He turned his body slightly, aware his interest was showing despite himself. For a second Sean toyed with playing

down what he had with Ryan. Despite his strong feelings, the relationship was still in its honeymoon phase. He could feel Kenny's heat, coiled like a wild thing just below the surface. He knew if he gave Kenny the smallest opening, he'd take what he wanted. Did Sean still want to give it?

Sean froze as Kenny reached out and cupped his erection, long, dark fingers sending jolts of sensation hurtling through him. He stepped back abruptly, Ryan's face looming suddenly in his mind's eye, the brilliant green eyes and the soft waves of blond hair falling to his shoulders. His heart actually contracted with an aching love.

"I'm sorry, Kenny. No." His voice was firm with conviction.

Kenny gave a mock bow, waving his hand in front of him as if taking off a hat in defeat. "*C'est la vie*. I guess it's pretty serious, huh?"

"It's pretty serious, yeah," Sean admitted. "His name is Ryan. Ryan Weston." Just saying Ryan's name made him smile.

"Actually," Kenny admitted, his voice no longer dripping with calculated sensuality, "I'm seeing someone myself. Not the love affair of the century you're experiencing, if that goofy expression when you say his name is any indication." Sean ducked his head but didn't deny it. Kenny went on. "His name is Mario. One of the chefs. Friend of yours I believe. He's the one who clued me in on your new love affair. Says you don't even leave your bungalow for days on end—he sends enough food for the weekend."

"He's exaggerating a bit, but he is very generous with provisions when I ask. He's a good guy. Great cook too." He was at once relieved and perhaps a tad disappointed the sexual tension between them had been broken.

"I guess you and me got a case of bad timing, eh?" Kenny flashed a grin. "Maybe the four of us should get together. Do a little swapping, have a little fun?"

Sean shook his head to dislodge a sudden image of Ryan lying naked in Kenny's arms, golden tan skin against rich chocolate brown. "I don't think so. I'm pretty much a one-man kind of guy."

"And this Ryan, is he a 'one man' kind of guy too?"

* * * * *

Several days had passed since "the massage incident" as Ryan called it in his head. Anthony acted as if nothing had happened between them and Ryan followed his lead. He thought of Anthony's huge cock, clearly outlined beneath pale silk. He couldn't help but wonder how anyone could get such a member into his mouth, much less down his throat.

Despite himself, Ryan found himself staring at Anthony when he wasn't looking. He imagined wrapping his fingers in that dark curly hair, pulling the taller man down for a kiss... Sometimes Anthony would catch him staring, turning suddenly to lock him

into a compelling gaze, dark brown mesmerizing eyes pulling him into a fantasy of secret liaisons and danger...

Ryan was always the first to look away. His heart belonged to Sean! They'd never expressly said they wouldn't see other people, but Ryan knew it would hurt Sean if he messed around with another guy. Sometimes he worried though. How long could he expect Sean to wait for him?

For though his mind would write the check, thinking he was ready to try anal sex, his body wasn't willing to cash it. He continued to back away each time Sean gently approached the issue. He knew he was being silly, but so far he hadn't found the nerve to let Sean make love to him in that way nor was he ready to reciprocate.

Yet not that long ago he'd been terrified at the thought of a kiss! Now he'd come to crave the hot intimacy of licking and teasing every part of Sean's body—lips, fingers and tongue greedily tasting his lover's flesh and receiving his touch in turn. He reminded himself of Sean's wise words—together they were a journey not a destination.

"Daydreaming again?" Ryan jerked up from his slumped position on one of the waiting room couches. The shift was nearly over and his last appointment hadn't showed. Jiru was still in a massage room with a client. He hadn't heard Anthony come out from his room where his client was no doubt slowly emerging from a massage-induced stupor.

"My last client didn't show up," he offered, avoiding a direct answer.

Anthony smiled at him, large square teeth white against olive-tan skin. "You know, I owe you one." His dark eyes glittered.

"Pardon?"

"A massage. Granted, the one you gave me was cut rather short." He raised one eyebrow, his expression sardonic. "But I would love to return the favor."

Sean was away that afternoon, having taken the ferry to Barbados for some pool supplies. Forbidden desire suddenly loomed large, blotting the image of Sean's face. Ryan shrugged, pretending a casualness he wasn't feeling. A niggling little voice whispered in his head to watch out but he ignored it. It wasn't as if Sean and he were married, for god's sake. Anyway, Anthony was offering a massage, that was all. "Sure, I guess. I don't have any plans."

"Cool."

Anthony's client emerged, along with Jiru and his client. After the two men scheduled their next appointments and left the spa, Jiru went into the back room to change his clothes. As he was changing, he called out, "You guys wanna grab some lunch?"

"No thanks," they said in unison. Jiru emerged as Anthony volunteered, "I'm going to give Ryan a massage. Payback."

"Oh I see," Jiru said with a knowing smile. "Well, use the dolphin room. I saw on the schedule the ocean and star rooms are already booked for the next shift. Unless," he said suggestively, "this massage isn't one that can be done at the spa..."

"It's just a massage!" Ryan blurted, annoyed. He knew at that moment he should have run. He stayed.

"That's right, Jiru. Get your mind out of the gutter. Just a professional courtesy to repay Ryan for the massage he gave me."

"Okay, whatever. All the same to me," Jiru said with an offhand wave. "See you boys tomorrow."

The second shift staff arrived and Anthony explained they would be using the dolphin room if that was all right, which it was. The room was decorated with glass dolphins of varying sizes hanging from the ceiling with fishing wire. The walls were painted like a seascape. Ryan found the room rather busy and avoided using it when he was on shift.

Anthony shut the door and pushed a button on the CD player. The room was filled with soft new age music. He lit several candles and moved to the oil counter. "What's your pleasure?" he asked without turning around. Ryan knew he was expected to take off his things and arrange himself over the table. The music and candles struck him as a bit much for a "professional courtesy" massage but he didn't comment. *Get out of here*, a voice whispered in his head, but he ignored it.

Instead he said, "I'll try that new tangerine jojoba oil Jiru prepared." He stripped quickly to his underwear and lay facedown on the table, draping the sheet over his lower half. *What am I doing?* He pushed the thought away, emptying his mind as he felt Anthony's capable fingers smoothing the lightly scented oil over his back.

"Do you model?" Anthony asked as he moved his hands lightly over Ryan's flesh.

"Never have," Ryan responded. Since he'd arrived at the resort a lot of guys had asked him that question. He was relieved to see Anthony really did seem intent on actually massaging him—not on putting the moves on him. If a tiny part of him was disappointed, most of him was relieved. Whatever had happened that last time was a fluke.

"Well, even if you continue with massage when the season's over, you should look into it. Good money. With that long hair and your square jaw and this bod..." His fingers dug into the muscle in Ryan's lower back and he gave an involuntary sigh of pleasure.

Anthony moved faster than he would have—he preferred to begin with a lighter overall body rub before beginning the deeper muscle treatment—but he had to admit it felt wonderful. He relaxed into the padded table, the scented candles, soft lights and expert fingers lulling him into semiconsciousness.

When Anthony gently prodded his side and whispered, "You can turn over now," Ryan obeyed without much thought. Strong fingers eased his chest and arm muscles, slightly sore from a long ocean swim with Sean the evening before. Eyes closed, Ryan

could almost imagine these were Sean's hands moving over his body, pummeling and kneading every last vestige of tension he hadn't known was there.

Anthony moved from his torso to his feet, working his way up Ryan's legs. Deft fingers eased the muscles in his calves, tired from standing for most of the past several hours on his shift. As sure hands kneaded and soothed him, he drifted into a dream, unaware he'd fallen asleep...

It felt so good as Sean's fingers moved teasingly along his thighs, steadily inching toward his cock, which rose with the expectation of his touch. He couldn't seem to move, his limbs as heavy as lead, his eyes held closed by some enchantment as music swirled over him like a breeze. "Hmm," he murmured as he felt Sean's fingers slip into the waistband of his underwear. He could feel him easing it down past his erect cock, slipping it past his balls as he pulled it free. When Sean's warm, strong fingers closed around his shaft, he moaned his appreciation, his balls tightening beneath his grip. "Yes," he said dreamily, arching up to meet Sean's hands slick with soft oil.

As he sank farther into the bed, enslaved by Sean's perfect touch, the music seemed to be speaking to him, whispering, murmuring, its cadence steadily more urgent until he was forced to focus on the words contained in it... Not Sean. It's not Sean. Wake up. It's not a dream...

The words finally seeped into his brain, exploding as he registered their meaning. He sat up abruptly, his eyes flying open. Anthony was standing over him, his large hands curled around Ryan's exposed, erect shaft. Anthony smiled his trademark lazy grin and released Ryan's cock for a moment. Gently he pushed him back down, strong hands against his chest.

"Shh, lie down. Close your eyes. Just part of the treatment. I'm giving you a full deluxe body massage, baby." As he spoke, he again gripped Ryan's cock, pulling it to full erection despite his protest.

Ryan's muscles, so relaxed by the deep massage and his catnap, behaved like Jell-O, refusing to obey his command to act. "No, Anthony. No." Ryan's resolve was weakening beneath the delicious sensations coursing through him. The music was soothing, Anthony's hands so sure, so insistent... "No, I can't. Sean and I... Please..." Anthony was pumping him harder now, the friction creating a rising pressure in his belly. "Please no..." Ryan murmured, falling back against the table, knowing he had to push Anthony away, dimly aware he should be outraged as his body began its tumble toward orgasm.

Anthony leaned over the table, his mouth closing hot and wet over the head of Ryan's cock as he continued to stroke the lower shaft. "Ah god..." Ryan moaned, letting his eyes flutter shut as he gave in at last with a sigh. Within moments he jerked against Anthony, shooting his hot seed down Anthony's open throat as expert fingers massaged the last drops from him.

He lay on the table, his heart thrumming, a pulse beating in his throat, his breathing labored. He felt Anthony pull the sheet up over his body to his waist. He kept his eyes closed, hoping Anthony would leave.

Instead he laughed, a low, almost cruel sound. "Such a tease you are, Ryan. You may have said no, no, no, but your body sure said yes."

When it became clear Anthony wasn't going anywhere, Ryan sat up, hiding his head in his hands, his hair falling forward, obscuring his face. "Fuck," he said softly. He looked up, shaking his hair away, anger rising as the endorphins resulting from his orgasm receded. "What the hell happened?" he demanded. Covering his lap with the sheet, he added, "I fell asleep. You took advantage of me!"

Anthony snorted. "*Please*. Don't play the naïve innocent. You *knew* it was going to go there. You wanted it. You asked for it. Don't tell me you didn't."

"I did *not* know any such thing!" Ryan retorted angrily. Yet if he were honest, he did know letting Anthony massage him was a bad idea. He had quashed his own reservations, ignored the quiet warnings in his head because he'd *wanted* to feel Anthony's large, sexy hands on his body. He took a breath, trying to sort out his jumbled thoughts, which were skittering around like a squirrel on the road.

"Listen," he said, trying to sound calm. "I know this probably doesn't mean that much to you. You figured we're just having a little fun and what Sean doesn't know won't hurt him. And maybe I'm partially to blame for agreeing to a massage in the first place when I knew there was, uh, sexual tension between us."

"Sexual tension," Anthony drawled slowly. "I like that—and I massaged all that sexual tension away, now didn't I? Perhaps you'll return the favor now, hmm?" Anthony started to pull off his T-shirt.

"Stop!" Ryan jumped from the table and grabbed his underwear, which lay in a heap by the table. He pulled on his clothing with lightning speed. "Stop it. This has gone far enough!"

"My god," Anthony gave a dry little laugh. "You sound like a bad actor in an even worse soap opera. Since when did giving someone a little friendly head become a criminal offense? Shit, you've been eyeing me all week—don't think I didn't pick up the cues. I don't get all this virginal outrage now."

At least Anthony was no longer trying to take off his clothes. He was leaning against a wall, his arms wrapped over his chest, his head tilted slightly as he waited for Ryan to explain himself. "Listen to me," Ryan tried again. "I'm being very serious. I need you to understand something. What Sean and I have is very special. And for me it's a first. I've never—" He stopped, aware he'd been about to admit he'd never been with a guy before, aware he'd been about to blow his cover. Yet what difference did it make at this point? He no longer needed that so-called perfect cover—what had been feigned was now more real than any relationship he'd ever had.

Yet he'd nearly ruined it just now, if not actively, then by letting Anthony do what he'd done. After all, he had been awake before Anthony made him come. Why hadn't he leapt from the table then? Was a bit of sordid pleasure worth more than the special thing he had with Sean?

"You've never what? Had a guy blow you on a massage table? There's a first time for everything, babe." Anthony's laugh was harsh, his eyes glittering darkly.

Ryan winced and closed his eyes. Whatever attraction he'd felt toward Anthony evaporated as the last drop of ejaculate slid down his throat. Still he felt compelled to try to explain. "Listen. Sean and I are in love. Maybe it's a foreign concept to you, I don't know. What happened just now was wrong. Wrong for me. Wrong for Sean.

"I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression. I can't deny there was something between us—some kind of attraction. Whatever it was, it's gone. What happened just now made me realize that for certain. If you have feelings about me, I'm sorry about that. Hopefully we can still work together, if not, I'm sure we can arrange different shifts."

Anthony was staring at him with something approaching incredulity. "Are you *quite* finished with your little speech? Jesus, you'd think we'd just fucked on the floor in the main restaurant with everyone watching and then I stood on a table and asked you to marry me with all the patrons as our witnesses. For crying out loud, it was just a little blowjob! Between friends. I'm not in love with you, you little idiot. Not by any stretch. You're a hot guy with a nice dick and I just thought I'd partake a little. What's the big deal? Jesus. Get the fuck over yourself!"

Ryan felt his fists clenching at his sides. Even though Anthony was taller, he knew he could knock him out with one swing. His arm actually tingled with the desire to deck the guy. He swallowed and forced himself to be calm. The air felt close and hot, the cloying smell of massage oil sticking in his throat. This guy wasn't worth losing his job over by having a fight. Yet he knew if he didn't get the hell away from him, they'd come to blows. "Okay, whatever. I gotta go." Ryan fled the little room, Anthony's derisive laughter following him.

* * * * *

Sean rounded the corner of the bungalow, glad to be home. He enjoyed getting off the island from time to time, but he loved coming back even more. Especially now knowing he had someone to come home to.

He saw Ryan sitting on the porch bent over a book and called out, "Hi there. Did ya miss me?"

Ryan's head popped up, his face breaking into a beautiful smile that seized Sean's heart. He leaped from his chair and bound down the stairs to meet him. "Sean! Sean..." Ryan wrapped him in an embrace, holding him so tight he finally had to gently push back against him to breathe.

"What is it? What's the matter?" He stepped back to see Ryan's face.

"I love you!"

Sean grinned widely, his heart lurching in his chest. Ryan had never said those words to him. He had never said them so specifically either, instead couching them

within other sentences. "...you know I love you so you can trust me..." "I love you too! But what brought this on? Did something happen? Are you okay?"

"No. I mean, yes. I mean, no, I don't know!" Ryan pressed his lips together, knitting his brows.

Sean put his arm around him and said, "Let's go inside. We can relax and you can tell me what's going on. Whatever it is, it'll be okay, don't worry." Despite himself, Sean couldn't help the rush of possibilities hurtling through his brain—Ryan in the arms of another man, Ryan deciding to leave the resort before the season's end or deciding he was straight after all but would always love Sean as a friend...

Ryan lowered himself into a chair, dropping his face into his hands. Sean felt his gut clench and prepared himself for the worst. He sat on the couch opposite and waited. Finally Ryan lifted his head, pushing his long hair from his face. He let out a long breath and said, "Something happened today."

"Oh?" Sean nodded, keeping his expression blank.

"Yeah. I didn't plan it. I mean, it wasn't my fault." He paused and absently twisted a lock of his hair. "Okay, no. It was my fault. I mean, I should have known better. I should have stopped him. I was stupid. The whole thing was stupid."

Suddenly he knew. "Anthony," he said with the finality of an epitaph. He closed his eyes as he leaned back against the sofa, forcing himself to take deep, even breaths. He recalled the week before when he'd been fairly certain Ryan had been about to admit something concerning Anthony but had stopped himself. He hadn't pressed then—had that been a mistake? He felt sick, his gut twisting, but he forced himself to remain calm. Ryan had opened their conversation with his first outright declaration of love so things couldn't be too bad.

"How did you know?" Ryan asked, his voice barely a whisper.

"Ryan, is it—" *Is it serious*, he almost said, but the word stuck in his throat.

Ryan spoke at the same time. "The guy's an asshole." He stood and moved quickly to the couch, sitting close to Sean. Sean put an arm around his shoulders and Ryan leaned into him. It didn't *feel* as if he were about to leave him, but Sean remained on edge, his body tense, his mind trying to open itself to whatever Ryan had to say.

Finally Ryan said, "I don't really know how to say it. It just kind of happened. At first I kept telling myself he took advantage of me, and I guess he kind of did, but he didn't do it in a vacuum. I mean, I put myself in a position for something like that to happen and when it did, I let it go on. I didn't stop him. Oh god, if I ruined things between us, I'll never forgive myself." His voice cracked and he hid his face against Sean's arm.

"Whatever happened, you couldn't ruin things between us. At least not from my side. I want to be in your life as long as you'll have me. But I can see whatever happened has really upset you. So talk to me. You can tell me. We'll work through whatever it is, I promise."

Ryan began to relate his story, hesitating at first but finally talking in a steady stream, his voice colored with anger and remorse. Because of the build-up, Sean had been expecting something much worse. As Ryan finished his narrative, Sean felt his blood boiling, not with jealousy, but with rage toward Anthony. He was angry at how Anthony had treated Ryan—first for taking advantage, for that’s definitely what he had done in Sean’s estimation, but most especially for how rudely he’d handled Ryan’s rejection.

“How’d you keep from knocking that jerk on his ass?” he said when Ryan was done. “I would have beat the crap out of him.”

“I wanted to. But the situation was so weird—almost surreal. I mean, I’d just let him...” Ryan trailed off miserably.

“Hey, it’s okay.” Sean stroked his hair, loving the feel of his head resting against his shoulder. He felt weak from the relief cascading through his body. Ryan had said he loved him! None of the rest of it mattered. “You’re right. He’s not worth risking your job over. I’m just reacting. What a bastard! I never knew him well, but he always seemed all right. I guess you never can tell with some people.” He turned toward Ryan, his voice earnest. “He really did take advantage of you, Ryan. Even if he didn’t know you were so new to all this, he still should have respected your telling him to stop. And his obnoxious response when you tried to explain, that really took the cake. He behaved like a bully.”

Ryan sat up and turned to stare at Sean, relief suffusing his features. “So you’re—you’re not mad? I mean I let another guy—I mean we’re a couple. And I let him...”

Sean smiled, gently cuffing Ryan’s head. “You’re funny, you know that? Listen, if that’s the worst that happens between us, we’ve got nothing to worry about. In a way I almost can’t blame the guy. You *are* incredibly hot—who wouldn’t be attracted to you! I can’t blame you for being attracted to him. He’s got a sultry sort of way about him. He’s one of those seducer types who practice their smoldering stare in the mirror, lifting their eyebrow just so for effect.” Ryan laughed and snuggled against Sean, who laughed with him.

Sobering, he added, “So it happened. I’m glad you told me. The guy’s a jerk. We know that now. If it made you say you loved me, it was almost worth it.”

“I didn’t know you were waiting for me to say it.” Ryan looked up with a smile. “I guess I was kind of scared to voice it. To admit it and what it means for us. I don’t really know what it means, do you? I mean, this is a temporary gig for me and all that. I’m going to have to find something else to pay the bills once it’s over. Have you thought about that?”

“I have,” Sean said, aware he was making the understatement of the year.

“Well, what have you thought about it? The season’s half over. By April I’m going to have to have a real job lined up and I doubt it’ll be on this island. They keep a skeleton crew and anyway I’m not sure I’m ready to live here year-round.”

"We have time," Sean responded, leaning back and closing his eyes, willing a serenity he wasn't feeling to come back to him. "We're only halfway through the season. Who knows what will happen between now and then? I have a feeling things will work out for us one way or the other. If it's meant to be, we'll make it happen. If it isn't, well..." he paused, refusing to admit the possibility of losing the best thing ever to happen to him. "Well then, life goes on. For now let's savor what we have." He turned to Ryan, reaching to stroke his cheek, love welling through him and for the moment easing the pain at the thought of losing him.

"So what happens now?" Ryan asked softly.

"What do you want to happen?" Ryan closed his eyes, leaning his face forward in an invitation for a kiss. Their lips touched, their gentle kiss quickly heating as lips parted and tongues entwined. Sean pressed Ryan back against the arm of the sofa, running his hands under his T-shirt, greedy for the feel of his warm skin. The image of Kenny slipped into his head, dark and sexy, beckoning him with a smile. Despite his love for Ryan, he acknowledged to himself he was still sexually attracted to Kenny.

He thought of Anthony's hands running over Ryan's nude body. The thought of another man's mouth on Ryan's cock was having a curious effect on him. Though he remained furious at Anthony for his insolent behavior, the image of the tall, handsome man bent over his naked lover, taking the long, straight shaft into his mouth created a sexy picture in his mind. He felt his cock harden as desire surged through his veins.

He was almost rough as he jerked Ryan's shorts and underwear down his legs. Hungrily he pulled Ryan's cock into his mouth, quickly sucking it to its full length. He felt Ryan's hands reaching down to touch his hair and impulsively he grabbed his wrists, gripping them tight. He was overcome with a nearly violent urge to control, to possess, to claim his lover.

Ryan tried to pull away but Sean's grip was firm. He felt Ryan's cock stiffen even more as he licked and teased it. He couldn't get enough—couldn't take him deep enough. Ryan was groaning and thrusting beneath him, arching up as Sean bore down. Still he held his wrists tight, though Ryan no longer struggled. Sean pulled back to catch his breath, admiring the hard, glistening shaft as it slid from his lips.

Never before had he felt so possessive of another man. The thought of Anthony's mouth on this perfect cock fueled his lust as again he took Ryan deep into his throat, milking him until Ryan cried out and spasmed hard against him. Still he didn't let him go, though he knew Ryan had orgasmed. His cock remained hard as Sean continued to lick and suckle it.

He let go of Ryan's wrists as he moved down to lick and kiss his balls, warm and fuzzy against his mouth. "Sean," Ryan breathed. "That was amazing." Sean barely heard him as he licked lower, finding Ryan's puckered entrance and lapping it like a kitten at its cream. "Oooh," Ryan moaned, his body limp and pliant as Sean pushed his legs aside for better access.

He grabbed Ryan's cock, still hard, and began to stroke it almost roughly as he licked from asshole to balls with a long, sure tongue. Ryan was moaning softly, his little cries punctuated with staccato gasps. Sean's own cock was throbbing in his jeans as he brought his lover to the edge of a second orgasm. Ryan grabbed handfuls of his hair, wrapping his fingers in it as he moaned. "Oh god, Sean, no, no, yes, no, oh, oh, oh..." Sean rose up, closing his mouth over the head of Ryan's cock just as he began to spurt in hot streams.

Sean licked away every last drop as Ryan fell back, one arm hanging limply over the side of the couch, his legs akimbo, his hair in a tangle over his face. His cock still raging, Sean pulled himself up over Ryan and gently pushed the hair from his eyes. As he bent to kiss his lover, Ryan whispered, "I'm ready, Sean. Make love to me. Please."

Chapter Ten

Sean closed his eyes, leaning his head back as Ryan stood behind him in the spacious shower stall, lathering his hair with a rich shampoo. "Feels good," he murmured, luxuriating in the scalp massage. Earlier that evening when Ryan had asked him to make love to him, Sean had wanted to leap on him then and there, plundering his virgin body like a pirate seizing his prize. He'd forced himself to slow down. He wanted to make sure Ryan's passionate plea was motivated by real desire and not just the heat of the moment.

They'd gone to dinner, talking it over as they ate and shared a bottle of red wine. Ryan continued to insist he was ready so they returned to the bungalow to freshen up. After the shower, they toweled one another dry with large, soft white towels before moving to the bedroom. Ryan lay back on the bed, his wet hair spreading like dark gold over the pillows. Sean lay beside him, lifting himself on one elbow so he could cradle his head in a hand. Over the months they'd been together, they'd talked a lot about anal sex. Ryan had admitted he'd never tried it with a woman, being afraid he would hurt her.

Sean stroked Ryan's smooth chest, his eye following the line between his firm abs to his flat belly and his cock nestled at half-mast in dark blond pubic hair. Again he fought the impulse to take him right then hard and fast without regard for Ryan's pleasure or comfort. He wanted to ravish him – to claim him completely.

His cock rose at the thought and he moved closer to Ryan, nudging his hip with his erection. Ryan glanced down and grinned nervously. Sean sensed his anxiety and finally his love overrode his lust. "Relax. We've got all night. Anal sex doesn't have to be painful. In fact, if it is painful, you're doing it wrong. The most important thing is for you to be sure you want it. Then you'll be able to fully relax and experience the pleasure."

"I do want it. I think." Again Ryan grinned. "I mean, I know I want that kind of intimacy with you. I'm just afraid I guess."

"That's natural. The first time is scary for anyone. Think about the first time you were with a woman."

"I wasn't scared then," Ryan replied with a grin. "I was just premature."

"I didn't mean you." Sean laughed. "I meant the girl. The first time being penetrated is scary. And if you're not relaxed, it can hurt. But it doesn't have to."

Ryan sobered. "Yeah. She was very nervous now that you mention it. It probably took an hour just to get it in. It wasn't especially erotic that's for sure. I was so thrilled when I finally made it inside I think I came in like thirty seconds. I was dumb enough at

age seventeen to ask if it was good for her. She was insecure enough or kind enough or some combination of both to lie and say it was."

Sean smiled and leaned down to kiss Ryan. After a moment he pulled back and said softly, "I won't have to ask you, Ryan. I'll know. And I promise you, it will be good."

They'd decided over dinner to try the missionary position with Sean on top and Ryan beneath. Sean had found this to be the best beginner position since it would allow Ryan to fully relax, making penetration easier. Moving between Ryan's legs, he took his semierect member in his mouth and suckled it lovingly to full erection. As he kissed him, he fondled his balls, letting his fingers slide down to his puckered nether entrance.

"Feels so good," Ryan moaned, shifting forward to give Sean better access to his ass. Encouraged, Sean took a pillow and slid it beneath Ryan's hips, tilting his body to make penetration that much easier when the time came. He licked his finger and slid it around the rim of Ryan's asshole before gently inserting it. As he moved it inside the hot, tightly muscled tunnel, Ryan groaned and closed his eyes.

Sean's cock was hard as granite, bobbing eagerly toward Ryan's body. He reached toward the night table and snagged a condom, quickly tearing the wrapping from it. He rolled it onto his cock and grabbed the tube of lubricant, squeezing a generous amount over the condom. With still-slick fingers, he again returned his attentions to Ryan's asshole, pleased at how he was able to relax and receive his fingers with no resistance.

Kneeling between Ryan's legs, he again kissed his mouth. Ryan responded ardently, pulling him down for a long, hot kiss. Finally Sean sat back and said softly, "Are you ready? We'll go slow."

Ryan swallowed hard but nodded, his pupils dilated in the soft light of the room. Gently Sean took his legs, lifting them so Ryan's calves rested on his shoulders. "Are you comfortable? Is this okay?"

Ryan nodded. Sean ran his hands lightly over Ryan's strong, firmly muscled legs, memorizing their shape with his fingers. He looked into Ryan's face, searching for the slightest hesitation or anxiety. He'd suggested this position not only because it would keep Ryan's muscles relaxed but because he wanted to be able to gauge Ryan's reactions every step of the way.

Leaning forward, he touched the tip of his well-lubricated cock against Ryan's opening. Ryan took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Sean bent forward and kissed his eyelids. "You are so sexy right now. It's so hot to have you like this, lying beneath me ready to take my cock at last." He pressed gently against the tight ring of muscle as he spoke, his soothing voice belying the rage of lust boiling up through him. The head of his cock slipped in and Ryan's eyes widened. "Ow!" he cried. Sean pulled out, leaving the head of his cock still touching Ryan's entrance. He'd pressed too fast—so eager to take Ryan he was nearly trembling with desire.

"Sorry! I'll take it slower." He tried to keep his breathing in check and willed his heart to slow.

Ryan's tone was anxious. "It's not going to work. There's no way. I want it, but I think you're just too big."

Sean shook his head. "No, you'll see. It's just a matter of relaxing, of getting your body used to it. Thanks for the compliment by the way," he grinned, "but I'm not too big for you to handle, I promise."

As he spoke, Sean reached down and wrapped a hand around Ryan's flagging cock, gently pumping it until it stiffened, the long, fat vein thrumming its pulse against his fingers. Ryan sighed and closed his eyes, his face suffusing with pleasure.

"I'm gonna try again. I'll go more slowly this time. You tell me if it hurts."

"Okay," Ryan whispered, his green eyes trusting as he gazed up at Sean. Tenderness washed through him, making him lean down to kiss the nervous but eager man beneath him. God, he wanted him!

Silently reminding himself to take it easy, again he pressed the head of his cock against Ryan. This time as it slipped in he continued to stroke and fondle Ryan's cock to distract and relax him.

The clench of warm muscle around the head of his cock caused a thousand pulses of pleasure to flash through his body. It was all he could do to keep from slamming himself all the way into the hot, virgin tunnel, smothering Ryan's cries with kisses. Instead he whispered, "You did it, baby. You did it. I'm inside."

Ryan's eyelids flipped up, his expression one of surprise. "I did?" He grinned, wriggling his ass slightly toward Sean, who moaned as Ryan's sphincter muscles contracted. "It doesn't hurt!"

"Good. I'm going to press deeper now, okay?"

"Yeah," Ryan panted as Sean continued to stroke his cock. "Yeah, do it. Fuck me."

Fuck me. Fuck me. The words blazed through Sean's consciousness, ripping the cover from his carefully controlled lust. "Oh god," he moaned, this time unable to stop himself as he pushed deeper into Ryan's ass. For a moment giving way to his passion, he pressed in nearly to the hilt, aware he was moving too fast but too overcome with lust to control it.

Ryan tensed beneath him, his muscles spasming against Sean's cock. "Ow! It hurts. I can't do it. Stop." At once Sean stilled but didn't withdraw. He couldn't bear to pull himself from the hot, tight tunnel. He took several deep breaths, trying to slow his pounding heart. He wanted Ryan so bad it hurt.

Pushing his lust aside, tenderly he said, "I'm sorry. I went too fast again. It feels so damn good." He stroked a dark blond strand of hair from Ryan's face and said encouragingly, "Listen, I know you can do this. You *are* doing it. We're making love. I'm inside you. I feel like I'm wrapped in velvet heat. It's incredible." His cock still buried in Ryan's tight ass, he bent down to kiss his lips.

Though on fire for his lover, he desperately wanted it to be good for Ryan too. The first time would set the precedent for all their future lovemaking. Thus he forced himself to say, "You want me to stop? We could try again another time —"

"No!" Ryan cut him off. "No, don't stop. I just got scared for a minute. Just take it slower, okay? It doesn't hurt now. It feels kind of good. Don't stop. I want it."

Heartened, Sean nodded. Slowly he began to move inside Ryan, gently thrusting and circling as Ryan's body adjusted to the invasion. Ryan's muscles hugged and gripped his shaft as he began a rhythmic thrust. The pleasure was so acute he knew he was going to come in a matter of minutes. His moans mingled with Ryan's as he continued to stroke Ryan's cock. He looked down on his lover, whose eyes were closed, his mouth open, his arms flung out on either side.

Falling over him, he nuzzled against his neck, inhaling Ryan's delicious, unique scent. "I've dreamed of this forever," he whispered. "To be with you like this. To make love to you at last." Ryan shifted, turning his face to find Sean's lips. As he moved, his anal muscles clamped around Sean's cock, sending him into another spasm of pleasure. "Oh god," he breathed and Ryan shifted again.

"You like that, huh?" he said in a low voice thick with lust. "When I move like this." Again Ryan moved, swiveling his hips beneath Sean.

"Jesus, if you keep that up, I'll come. I'm near the edge as it is. Ah god—" Sean forgot he was speaking, forgot to be careful, forgot everything except the nearly excruciating pleasure of being buried inside his sexy lover. Ryan's cock was trapped between their bodies as Sean pummeled inside of him. He knew he should slow down but his body refused to obey, caught in its own primal rhythm as he surged out of control toward orgasm.

When he came with a cry, Ryan bucked beneath him, his legs falling from Sean's shoulders as he writhed and panted. With a low, guttural moan he came as well, his hot ejaculate spurting between their bellies. They lay together, sweat mingling, hearts pumping until finally Sean found the strength to lift himself from his lover.

Carefully he withdrew from Ryan's ass. He stripped the condom from his cock and tossed it into the small trashcan beside the bed. Ryan lay limp, his legs and arms splayed over the bed, his head back with eyes closed and lips parted. His hair was a wild tumble over the pillows. Sean traced the line of his jaw with one finger, overcome with tenderness and love.

"I love you," he whispered, though he thought Ryan was asleep.

"I love you," Ryan answered softly.

* * * * *

Ryan and Sean had talked through what to do about Anthony. They agreed it was probably going to be awkward for a while, but Ryan really liked working the early shift so he had the rest of the day to relax and spend time with Sean, who had to work early

to make sure all the pool facilities were sparkling before the guests arrived to swim and tan.

"Why should you let him dictate your shift?" Sean had said when Ryan worried aloud about having to work with Anthony. "The guy's not worth wasting another second over. If he gives you the slightest bit of trouble, you should put him in his place publicly. Bullies usually fold when confronted like that. But I have a feeling he's going to lay low – pretend it didn't happen. He's had time to think it over and he's probably decided you're not worth the hassle. Just another pretty boy who can't take a joke." He had grinned and ducked his head as Ryan reached over and gave him a good-natured cuff.

Back on his shift that Monday morning, Ryan changed into his whites and poured himself a cup of coffee. He was reviewing his schedule when Anthony walked in. Jiru was already in his massage room, getting ready for his first client. Ryan found himself wishing he wasn't alone with the tall, handsome man. He grinned to himself – he was a big boy, he could handle this.

Anthony, as Sean had predicted, seemed to be taking the "nothing ever happened" approach. "Morning," he said curtly, giving a quick nod toward Ryan, who didn't respond. Anthony seemed about to say something else, but he didn't, instead going to change. Before he reemerged, Ryan went into his own massage room, laying out fresh towels and sheets in anticipation of his first client, who happened to be Robert, the resort owner.

Robert had asked for Ryan exclusively, coming by nearly every day since he'd started at the spa. Except for the first time when Robert had teased him a bit, he'd behaved himself, thank goodness. It was one thing to have it out with another employee. He sure didn't need any complications with the boss!

Jiru stuck his head into Ryan's room and said, "Excuse me, have you got a minute?" His expression was very serious.

"Sure, what's up?"

"Uh, I don't know how to approach this delicately so I'm just gonna say it." Jiru looked uncomfortable.

"What? Is something the matter? Is there a problem with my work?" Ryan racked his brain for something he might have forgotten or messed up. Jiru as the most senior member of the massage therapist staff was recognized as the informal boss. He was the one who assigned clients who didn't make specific requests and he kept track of and ordered supplies as necessary.

"No, no problem with your work. It's, uh, more with your behavior." Jiru came into the room and closed the door.

"My behavior!" Ryan frowned, crossing his arms over his chest.

Jiru sat in a chair in the corner of the room. Ryan remained standing. "Look, Ryan. I know you're new and this is your first season. But it's very unprofessional to force your, uh, attentions, on others. I know you're probably used to having every guy you wave a

finger at drop his pants and bend over, but it doesn't work like that here at the spa. I don't care how good-looking you are. We strive for a very professional image with clients and staff alike. It's just too easy in an environment like this with the client naked or nearly so and you laying your hands on him. This is just a warning—I'm not going to recommend you be fired or anything. But don't let it happen again. Got it?"

Ryan felt numb, a sick, icy sensation rising up through his body. Something was going on and he had a feeling Anthony was at the bottom of it. Forcing himself to speak calmly he said, "Jiru, I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

"No? Well, Anthony came to me so you can forget the bullshit. He brought JD Reed with him too. JD said you not only touched him inappropriately but you actually propositioned him for sex." Jiru held up a hand as Ryan started to protest, adding, "I know you and Anthony had a kind of a flirtation going on, what with the reciprocal massages and all that, but JD is a client and *strictly* off limits. What you did to him is enough to get you not only transferred but thrown off the island."

The ice in Ryan's veins had turned to fire. "Anthony! I knew that's what this must be about! That bastard took advantage of me! He lulled me into a sleep with his massage and then—" Ryan felt himself flushing, both from embarrassment and rage. Yet he had to defend himself, to explain. "He...he," the words "sucked my cock" stuck in his throat. He tried again. "He was touching *me* inappropriately as I came awake. He'd pulled down my underwear and was fondling me with his," he took a breath, nearly choking on the words but determined to say them, "his hands and mouth. He wouldn't stop, even when I said no."

Jiru arched an eyebrow. "That's not the story Anthony told me! In fact quite the opposite. You're a strong guy, why didn't you fend him off? Why didn't you report him to me? No offense, but it seems a little odd you're coming up with this story only now. Now that you've been accused of the same thing." Jiru eyed Ryan with obvious skepticism.

"I was embarrassed! I was upset. I felt partly responsible. I thought he must have read my cues wrong. I tried to talk it over with him but he was a real jerk about it. I decided just to let it go. Working here means too much to me to blow it by getting into a fight with an asshole."

"Anthony is my friend," Jiru said haughtily. "I would appreciate if you didn't insult him with that term."

Unable to control his retort, Ryan shot back, "Well, your *friend* is a liar."

"Oh? And I suppose the client who also said you were inappropriate with him is a liar too? Maybe *I'm* a liar too. Maybe you're the only honest guy around here."

"JD Reed is the young red-headed guy, right? I don't think I've ever massaged JD more than twice. He barely said a word to me nor me to him. I *certainly* never touched him inappropriately. And why in god's name would I *propose* him? Surely you don't think I'm that stupid! Jiru, give me some credit. Why would I be interested in JD? And if I were, why would I do something so stupid?" Ryan knew he was sounding

desperate. He realized with a sinking feeling Jiru had already made up his mind before even coming to him. He hadn't asked for his side of the story, only speaking with him to reprimand and warn him for something he'd concluded must be fact.

Jiru was shaking his head. "Look, I said I'm not going to make a big issue over this. I suggest you do the same. Club Eros is built around sex. I get that. This is your first season and maybe you thought the games people play on their own time could translate into a little fun here at the spa. I'm sure you'll behave yourself going forward."

Feeling helpless, Ryan insisted, "Jiru! It's so obvious Anthony's setting me up! Maybe he was afraid I'd tell someone about what he did to me and this was his way of making sure to muddy the waters. I don't know! But somehow he's got that kid involved for whatever reason." Jiru's expression remained impassive. Giving it one last try, Ryan said, "Let's all get together and bring this out into the open. Have them say it to my face with you as a witness. Let's see who's lying then!"

Jiru shook his head again. "I am considering the matter closed. The owners don't like our clients made uncomfortable for any reason. I've said I'm willing to overlook it this time. My advice to you is to buckle down and behave." Jiru stood, moving toward the door. Clearly he was done.

Quiet rage seethed like poison in Ryan's veins. He could feel it throbbing at his temple. He wanted to punch Jiru in his smug face. He wanted to smash Anthony in the stomach. He wanted to demand from this JD character what the fuck he thought he was doing slandering someone he barely knew. Yet if he blew up, they would only take it as confirmation of his guilt. Jiru almost seemed to be waiting for him to lose it. He decided not to give any of them the satisfaction. Revenge, he told himself, was a dish best served cold.

In a low voice he said, "I've been set up. You obviously believe them over me and there's nothing I can do about it. You don't know me well or you would know there's no way in hell I would behave that way. As for JD, I can only assume his motive has something to do with Anthony."

Jiru pursed his lips, clearly not convinced. "Well, this isn't a court of law," he finally said. "I'm willing to forget it as I said. Just watch your step."

"And you watch yours," Ryan murmured as Jiru left.

Robert arrived a moment later, shedding his clothing in a haphazard fashion before climbing onto Ryan's table for a deep-tissue massage. As Ryan worked on him, anger fueled his mind, which was burning with rage toward Anthony. How could anyone be so sneaky on top of being such a lowlife scum? And to think he'd found the man attractive. He'd even fantasized about being in his arms. What an insult to Sean—to himself!

Ryan wasn't a man to act impulsively but nor did he forget things easily. Anthony had chosen the wrong man to slander. It was ironic because Ryan had been willing to let the regrettable scene the Friday before go. He had hoped Anthony would too, encouraged by Sean's assessment of the situation.

How wrong they had both been. Anthony, probably afraid Ryan would strike, had struck the first blow, making any accusation on Ryan's part sound like a poorly thought-out defense, invented to cover his own ass. Adding another accuser was a stroke of genius, Ryan realized. The credibility of a client's word over his, coupled with Anthony's damning remarks, had sealed his fate in Jiru's eyes before he'd even spoken to Ryan. The bastard!

"Hey, I never thought I'd say this, but not so deep, my friend. I think you hit bone!" Robert rumbled.

Ryan apologized. "I'm sorry. I have a few things on my mind. I'll be more careful."

"It's okay. You're still the best in my book. I don't know what I'm going to do when the season ends. You've ruined me for anyone else."

Ryan smiled grimly to himself. At the rate he was going, he might not make it to the end of the season.

* * * * *

"He what!" Sean expostulated with disbelief.

"Yep. I'm on probation until Jiru's satisfied I can keep my cock in my pants and my hands to myself. If it wasn't so fucking ludicrous, it'd be funny. Straight boy hitting on the gay guys." He laughed without mirth.

Sean glanced sharply at him. Straight? Did Ryan still define himself as straight? How could he possibly when they shared what they shared—said what they'd said? He started to say something but Ryan was off and running, still seething from the unjust accusations of the morning.

"This jerk—JD Reed—I should confront him. Demand that he say to my face what he said to Jiru. Make him take it back."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Sean said. "It'll keep the whole thing going. We don't know JD at all—we have no idea how he might react if accused of a lie. He might pitch such a fit you'd be fired just on the grounds of upsetting a client. You know how big Gerald and Robert are on creating a paradise for their guests. You getting into a fight with a client would definitely put a damper on paradise."

"But it isn't fair!" Ryan said, his voice almost a whine.

They were lying side by side on the beach, warming their bodies in the sun before a long swim in the ocean. Sean reached over and stroked Ryan's arm. "I know it isn't. It totally sucks. It was a vicious, lowdown thing for Anthony to do on top of taking advantage of you. But there are ways of getting back at people without involving yourself directly. And guys like that usually cause their own eventual demise. I vote we think about it. Take our time and come up with a plan to beat the bastard at his own game. I'll help you. I can be very devious when I put my mind to it." He grinned at Ryan, waiting until he finally smiled back.

"Let's go swimming," Ryan said as he stood, shaking back his long blond hair. Sean looked up, the sun behind Ryan lighting him like a golden god. How would he survive once Ryan was gone? Now that he'd finally truly opened himself to love, would it be his undoing?

They ran together to the ocean, each plunging headfirst into the crashing waves. The tide was high, the waves rough and churning, which fit their mood, Sean thought. Each swam hard, funneling their separate frustrations into their exertions. Golden arms sliced through the water as they rose and fell, making headway at last against the strong tide. Sean concentrated on the sea, forgetting for a moment his lover's troubles and the inexorable slide of time. If only he could swim fast and far enough to keep Ryan always by his side. If only life were so simple.

* * * * *

"That's him! That's JD Reed, the little bastard who lied for Anthony!" Ryan pointed excitedly toward a slight man with short red hair. He was sitting across from another man neither Sean nor Ryan recognized. Since the incident at the spa, JD hadn't come around for a massage. Ryan had told Sean he wasn't sure if he was glad or not. A part of him wanted to confront the little prick no matter the consequences.

Things at the spa had settled down. Ryan completely ignored Anthony, who smirked around him but didn't try to strike up a conversation. This was good since Ryan doubted he could have controlled his temper if Anthony had dared to continue his vile slander campaign. Jiru was civil but only just. It saddened him that the easy, relaxed rapport the three of them had shared was gone. Oh well, he told himself. It was just a job, not even a permanent one. He could get through the time that remained easily enough.

Sean took a long look at JD. "I've seen him before. He swims at the big pool. Does laps early in the morning. I'll watch him more closely next time I see him. Maybe even strike up a conversation. See what I can find out."

"Like a detective, huh? We'll build a case then strike!" Ryan grinned.

"Yeah, something like that," Sean agreed. "But for now let's ignore him and forget all that. This is *our* night."

They were in the grand ballroom, which was decked out with hundreds of red roses set in vases on each table. Large shiny red hearts had been taped on the walls and the room was washed in a rosy glow, the regular lighting replaced with red bulbs for the evening. Soft romantic music was playing and many couples were swaying together on the dance floor.

Ryan and Sean had decided to check out the much-touted Valentine's Day dance. Sean found himself eager to dance again with Ryan. How different it would be tonight! Instead of holding himself back, trying to keep his rising erection from pressing against Ryan's thigh, he would be free to take him in his arms, even kiss him if the moment seemed right. Sean sighed happily.

"What?" Ryan said. "You seem lost in a dream." He put his hand lightly over Sean's. All around them men were leaning toward one another, heads touching across small tables set just for two.

Sean picked a dark red rose from the vase and held it to his nose. The petals were soft as velvet, soft as the skin that covered Ryan's perfect cock. "I am I guess. I'm so happy you've come into my life, Ryan. You're my personal dream come true." Ryan smiled back, though Sean thought he detected a flicker of worry. "Are you okay? You looked worried."

"No, no, I'm fine," Ryan began, but then bit his lip. "It's just that it's the middle of February. I've only got a short time left. Have you thought about that, Sean? About us?"

"I think about it all the time," Sean said quietly. He'd been wondering when or if Ryan would bring this up. It had been moving steadily from the back to the front of his own mind as the days continued their relentless tumble toward April. Though he had always prided himself on his ability to live in the moment—to take one day at a time and embrace it—lately he'd been leaping ahead, way ahead, to a life without Ryan.

"Yeah, well, me too. I mean, I know I can't stay here. I've got a life back in Florida. I have family there. And it's not like I have a job here after the season's over. I'm sure they expect me to pack up and ship out with the rest of the seasonal crew once April fifteenth hits."

"Have you thought about staying on? As part of the permanent staff. Would you want to?" Sean held himself very still, not sure he wanted to hear the answer. He loved Ryan as he'd never loved anyone else but he wasn't going to beg the man to do something he didn't want to. Ryan had to want him on his own terms not because Sean wished it were so. Still, he felt himself dying a little in the pause while Ryan formulated his thoughts.

"Do you think I'd have a chance? I never even really considered it. I just figured permanent staff was in place and that was that."

"Well, there is some flexibility. But the real question is would you want to? Is it something you might consider?"

"Sean, it's a lot to think about. I don't know. I mean, I know I love you," he hurried to add, no doubt reading the hurt in Sean's face he apparently hadn't been able to hide. "But this whole thing. It's been like a kind of dream. A fantasy. A wonderful fantasy, but can it actually be real? I've always thought of myself as straight. Figured I'd find the right woman someday and marry her and have a few kids.

"Yet here you are—the best thing that's ever happened to me. I'm not sure how to reconcile all of it. I wonder if maybe I shouldn't go back when the season's over. Figure things out. See where we as a couple fit in with my sense of identity." He paused, his expression stricken. "God, you must think I'm such an ass. I can't even figure out if I like girls or boys. I wouldn't blame you if you just said get lost."

Sean tried to smile. He decided to be blunt. "Listen, Ryan. We've been over this a lot. You don't *have* to figure out if you like girls or boys. Why define yourself? What's

the point? I think what you're really saying, and what you really have to decide, is do you want to stay in this relationship with me or do you just consider it a fling, a gay experience you can tell your wife about someday."

"That's harsh, Sean."

"Is it? I'm in this too you know. I don't want to tell you what to do, but your decision will obviously affect me. A great deal."

"Okay, well, what about this? Would you consider moving to Florida? They have beaches there. We could get a place, both find jobs, start fresh."

"Is that something you'd want? Would I have a place in your life back on the mainland? You'd want to introduce me to your family and friends? As what? Your roommate or your lover?" Sean knew he should shut up. Now wasn't the time to pressure Ryan like this. He pressed his lips closed, wishing he could rewind the last fifteen minutes and start over. "Listen, I'm sorry. I'm out of line. We don't have to do this now. We have time. Who knows, by April we might hate each other." He laughed hollowly. Ryan didn't laugh with him.

They were silent for a while, each staring down into his drink. Ryan lifted his to his lips, tilting back the glass until it was empty. He set the glass down and took a deep breath. Sean pressed on his eyelids, annoyed with his eyes for allowing tears to prick against them.

Ryan said softly, "Look, I'm sorry. You're right. We do have stuff to think about and we will. Meantime it's Valentine's Day. Let's act like lovers do. Want to dance?"

Sean nodded, relieved Ryan had rescued the situation for them, at least for the moment. They walked to the dance floor and as Sean moved into Ryan's arms, he laid his head on his shoulder, absolutely certain this was where he belonged but not at all certain Ryan felt the same way. He felt Ryan's arms tighten around him as they swayed to the music. Closing his eyes, he decided to stop thinking and just let Ryan lead.

Chapter Eleven

"Oh my god! I can't believe it." Ryan stared at the letter he'd just opened. Mail was delivered to the island twice a week. Up until this point Ryan had only received the occasional letter from his parents or sister.

"What is it?" Sean asked, looking up from his own packet of magazines and junk.

Ryan felt guilt assail him, dampening some of the excitement of his news. He realized it was happening – what they'd put off discussing was going to become a front-and-center issue at last. "It's a job offer. Well, not an outright offer. A request to come in for an interview." He tried to keep his voice neutral. "From the hotel chain where I used to work before they outplaced me. They're opening a new hotel in Palm Beach and my old boss Peter Rhodes has been tapped as manager. He's recommending me as his assistant manager! I would be his right-hand man. It's a great step up if I could swing it!" He realized he was gushing and again tried to tamp his enthusiasm. "The hotel won't open until mid-May. If I got the job, I'd be expected to come onboard prior to that to get up to speed."

Sean nodded slowly. His blue eyes seemed to bore holes into Ryan's face and Ryan looked down, hating the expression of barely concealed pain he saw there. "It sounds like a great opportunity," Sean said softly.

"Well, yeah. I mean, I'm not saying I'm going to take the job or anything, but at least it gives me options, right? I'd be earning enough to where you wouldn't have as much pressure to find something right away. If you came with me, that is."

When Sean didn't respond, Ryan felt another wave of guilt wash over him. This was followed by anger. Why couldn't Sean at least pretend to be happy for him? This was a real coup and totally unexpected. Assistant to the general manager was the next step to managing his own hotel someday. It wasn't as if he were forsaking Sean, leaving him stranded on some desert island, waving sadly as Ryan floated back to a different life. He'd invited Sean to come along! Did Sean really want to spend the rest of his life cleaning pools at a resort club? Didn't he have any aspirations? He said none of this, aware if he opened his mouth at that moment, a toad might well pop out.

Sean, with his usual M.O. when overly stressed, stood and said, "I have to take care of some things at one of the pools. I'll be back in time for dinner." Ryan nodded, resisting his urge to beg Sean to stay and talk things out. If he wanted to run, let him.

* * * * *

Sean had meant to head to one of the fountain pools. There was a leak he actually did need to attend to. However, he found himself walking toward his secret place among the rocks, his refuge when he didn't know where to turn.

Why had he run out? He always encouraged Ryan to share what he was feeling or going through. He tried to be open and honest with him as well as they moved to a deeper level of trust in their relationship. So why did he revert to his old way of hightailing it out of there?

It wasn't so much the realization Ryan would probably leave at the end of the season. He'd been trying to adjust to that very real possibility for some time now. No—it wasn't that. It was the joy sparkling in Ryan's eyes as he had read that letter. The excitement leaping through his voice, though Sean could see he was trying to subdue it for his sake. It wasn't that Ryan had no place at the resort once the season was over. He didn't *want* to stay. His "real" life was elsewhere.

Sean sighed heavily as he stared out to the blue-green sea. He hadn't told Ryan, wanting to let it come from Robert and Gerald, but he'd felt them out, just to see if there was in fact a permanent position for Ryan should he wish to remain. They had been enthusiastic, Robert exclaiming he'd come to require Ryan's daily massage and had been fretting about what he'd do once Ryan left.

Yet Ryan hadn't made any effort to see if he could stay on. He assumed his job was over in April and seemed to accept that as final. Though Sean had said he should check with Robert and Gerald, to his knowledge Ryan hadn't done so. Clearly he was planning to leave at the end of the season.

Sean gazed around him at his familiar, safe place, snugly surrounded by dark rock, seagulls flying idly overhead, the ocean lulling him with its constant ebb and flow. Ryan had invited him to return to Florida, to move in with him as he became reestablished in the hotel business. And what would Sean do? Keep house? Find a job as pool boy at some local resort or health club?

Though his work at Club Eros was not brain surgery, he had a place here. He was an established and trusted employee who had the respect of the owners and a free hand to run things as he saw fit. He had free room and board in one of the most beautiful parts of the world. He had solitude when he needed it and friends when he wanted them.

Until this year he had been content. Perhaps not expressly happy but content with his life and his work. When Ryan entered his world, he'd turned it upside down and then right side up again, shaking it into something new in the process. For the first time in his life, he could honestly say he was happy. He was in love with a man he never expected to possess. He knew Ryan loved him too. But how far did that love extend?

It was one thing to be lovers on an island populated by gay men in a lush atmosphere of tropical paradise and hedonistic abandon. How would that translate in the real world? How would Ryan, who had always categorized himself as straight, adjust to having a live-in male lover? How would his family and friends react? Had

Ryan really thought his invitation through? Was he ready to take the plunge, to come out of the closet he hadn't even known he was in? Was he ready for the inevitable fallout that would result?

Ryan, so innocent, so naïve in certain ways, had no idea how insidious and pervasive bias against homosexuals really was despite increasing acceptance over the last decades. He'd never had someone sneer in his face or threaten to beat him up simply for existing. He'd never been faced with the open bigotry or hidden insinuations that he was somehow less than a man because of his orientation. How would he fare against all that? Would he have the courage to stand up with pride and admit who he was? Or would he be confused and ashamed and reject Sean in the process?

Wouldn't it be easier to stay here where they were insulated and safe from a bigoted, repressive society? Couldn't Ryan be happy here? Wasn't true love all they needed to be happy?

Sean shook his head. He knew it was more complicated than that. While he loved the solitude and peace of the island in the off-season, Ryan might hate it. It was clear from his reaction upon receiving the letter that he missed the life he'd left behind. Perhaps he thrived on twelve-hour days, deriving great satisfaction from running a hotel, from making things happen. Perhaps this "gig" had just been a hiatus, a break while he recovered from being "outplaced". Perhaps Sean was just a diversion as well, something to be put aside once real life resumed.

"Stop it," he admonished himself aloud. "This is ridiculous. Ryan's a grown man. So are you. We don't have to decide anything yet. He might end up not getting or not wanting the job. He might decide to pursue massage therapy full-time and stay here in paradise with me. I don't have to project. I need to keep my feet right here on the ground. I need to slow down and take life as it comes."

Sean smiled, aware he was giving himself the same sort of pep talk he gave Ryan when Ryan was worrying about something in the future he couldn't control. He closed his eyes, lifting his face to the sky, waiting for the serenity he had lost to drop its reassuring net over him once again.

When Sean returned to the bungalow, Ryan was nowhere to be found. Instead he found a note on the pillow of their bed.

Sean, I went for a walk to get my head on straight. We need to talk. You taught me that. We'll work it through as long as we have each other. Love, Ryan

P.S. I'm bringing home dinner. Let's have a picnic on the porch.

Sean smiled and fell back against the bed. He could learn a few things from Ryan. It was a relief in a way to realize he didn't have to have all the answers. He had a partner.

* * * * *

Ryan realized before he'd received the letter about the potential job he'd felt "less than" in a subtle way. Sean hadn't known him before—the man with his hair pulled discreetly back, dressed in a suit and tie, working long hours in the corporate world. He was a college graduate climbing the ladder until it had been pulled from beneath him. He hadn't consciously expressed it, but up until that point, he'd felt Sean had perceived him as a serving boy who had stumbled onto the massage thing by accident. By comparison, Sean was an established, independent employee with status and longevity, obviously respected by the owners.

Things were different now. He was a man with options—with real potential. He still loved the quiet, handsome man sitting across from him but it felt different somehow. More like equals—like partners. He liked it. They had talked over their picnic dinner and afterward as they walked along the beach. Ryan tried to explain how important this opportunity was for him. "I might not even take it, but I want to know I could have, do you see? I want to be the one in control of my destiny."

Sean had nodded, saying he did see. "I think you should go check it out, definitely. I have to be honest with you though. I'm not sure I could make a life with you in Florida. I'm not sure you'd even want me to."

Ryan had balked at this, but what Sean said next had made him pause, a little shaken. What would it be like to return home to his family and friends with a gay lover at his side? Was he ready to come out just like that? Was he even really gay or was this whole island thing some kind of experimental time-out while he found himself again?

It was disconcerting to admit he didn't know. He could see this response had hurt Sean, but he also believed Sean when he said they would work through it together and things would turn out as they were supposed to for them both. "Your job isn't to protect me, Ry," Sean had offered, giving him a sad smile. "You've got to follow your heart. If you don't, we'll both end up resenting each other and ruining what is so special between us."

Now Ryan wrapped his arms around his naked lover, pressing his cock against Sean's ass. They'd had anal sex a few more times in the period since that first sizzling occasion. It wasn't a nightly thing since it still took Ryan a long time to relax sufficiently to receive his lover.

Tonight he whispered, "Are you ready for me to try, Sean? I want to take you tonight."

Sean responded by pressing his ass back against Ryan's cock. "Yes," he whispered. "Yes," he repeated. Ryan could hear the desire in his voice, the longing. He felt the power of his position and thrilled to it. He was going to take his lover in this most primal of ways. His cock stiffened in anticipation.

He nestled between the cleft of Sean's ass, swiveling his hips to increase the friction. He reached over to get a condom and lubricant, wishing for a moment he didn't have to. He wanted to feel every moment, every sensation of this first time. He saw his hands

were trembling slightly as he adjusted the latex sheath over his cock. He was glad Sean's back was to him. He didn't want him to know how nervous he was.

Yet desire fought and won the battle of nerves as Sean rose gracefully to his knees. "Take me from behind," he whispered in a low voice raw with need. He knelt on his hands and knees and looked back at Ryan, his eyes fiery, his lips parted.

Ryan positioned himself behind his lover and guided the head of his cock to Sean's nether hole. Holding his breath, he pressed against the tight opening, gasping in delighted amazement as his cock was swallowed by Sean's eager body. Taking hold of Sean's hips, he pressed farther, hoping he wasn't hurting his lover. It felt incredible—different from a woman. Instead of the warm glove of a pussy, it was more like a tight ring of pleasure, gripping his cock in a way that was more intense than anything he'd experienced before.

Sean, who had been still as he'd pressed his way in, began to move, arching back to meet him, taking Ryan's cock even deeper. "Jesus," Ryan breathed. "This is incredible." He gripped Sean's hips harder, using his body as he pulled him to him and pushed him slightly away. He tried to go slowly as Sean had done, watching in fascination as his cock glided into the now-stretched entrance and pulled back again, though not quite out. He didn't want to lose the contact. It was too damn good.

"Harder," Sean said throatily. "Don't be afraid. You won't hurt me." Ryan thrust with more force, pausing to make sure it was okay. "Yeah, like that. Don't stop. Use me. I can take it. I want it." Aroused by Sean's words, encouraged by them, he let himself go, giving in completely to his urges. He slammed against Sean, who grunted and held himself strong beneath the onslaught. "Yes," he hissed. "Just like that. Do it, baby."

Ryan didn't need to be told again. Almost savagely he rammed into Sean, lust completely obscuring caution. His balls slapped against Sean's ass as he fucked him, riding himself very quickly to the edge of a climax. His body was damp with sweat, his cock sliding in and out of ecstasy. Dimly he knew he should reach around Sean's body and grab his cock, massaging him to orgasm as Sean always did for him. Yet somehow he couldn't quite manage. His own blinding pleasure was too intense. Selfishly he jerked and spasmed, moaning as Sean's muscles clamped down hard, milking his seed.

For several moments he lay against Sean's back, his arms hanging loose, too spent even to hold on. He could feel his heart thudding against Sean's back and pulsing at his throat. Sean maintained his position, easily bearing Ryan's weight.

As his breathing slowed, he wrapped his arms around Sean for support, holding on as he came to himself. Endorphins were zinging through his body, bubbling up through his blood, making him drunk with satiated pleasure. Sean remained on hands and knees like a rock beneath him, keeping him safe.

Still buried inside him, Ryan reached around to find Sean's cock hard and eager for his touch, its tip gooey with pre-come. Ryan licked his fingers and reached around again, grabbing the shaft. Sean sighed heavily, his cock warm and weighty in Ryan's hand.

"That was so hot, Sean," Ryan whispered close to his lover's ear as he stroked his cock. "You're so hard right now. So sexy." He moved his hand over Sean's cock, reaching with the other to cup his heavy balls. His semierect shaft, still inside Sean, made them both moan as he moved with each stroke. "Come for me, baby. Yeah, that's it." Ryan could feel Sean's balls tightening in his hand. He was moaning as he began bucking beneath him, thrusting his cock into Ryan's steady hand. Almost as quickly as Ryan had come, Sean was soon panting and writhing, his breath coming in gasps.

As he orgasmed, he fell heavily against the bed, taking Ryan with him. As they fell, they rolled to their sides, Ryan still nestled inside Sean. He buried his head in Sean's neck, inhaling his fresh ocean scent, licking the spicy tang of his sweat. He could feel Sean's heart thumping against him. As they lay together, their bodies slowly cooled, the sheen of mingled sweat drying on them.

For that one moment Ryan didn't think about the future. He didn't think about his career or his love life or if he was straight or gay. He didn't think about getting revenge on Anthony or whether Sean would be willing to move to Florida. He only had one thought in his mind. He gave it voice as he whispered, "I love you."

* * * * *

Early in the morning several days later Sean was at the Olympic-sized pool, fixing grout between the tiles on the mosaic pattern that lined the edge. He heard someone approaching and saw tan legs fuzzed with dark red hair move past his line of vision. A moment later the man sauntered back to the pool's edge, moving to the shallow end, no doubt to take a swim before breakfast.

He sat on the edge of the pool, close to where Sean was working, and said, "Hey there. Nice morning."

Sean glanced up and realized it was none other than JD Reed, the man who had lied for whatever reason about Ryan, claiming he'd "touched him inappropriately" during a massage. JD was a short, slender man with a wiry frame and bristling red hair cut very short on his head. His face was attractive in a bland, nondescript sort of way. He looked younger up close than he had at the dance—maybe only twenty-one or -two.

Sean felt anger seeping up through his veins as he thought what this man had put his lover through with no apparent motive. He gripped the grouting tool he was using, reminding himself to play it cool. Rather than accusing the guy outright, he'd see what he could gather by way of information.

"Yep," he answered. "Though just about every morning is good on this island." He thrust out his hand. "Sean Evans at your service. If you need anything like a cold drink or a fresh towel, I've got both handy."

"Thanks," JD said, nodding. "I'm just going to swim a few laps. Got to keep my boyish figure." Putting his hands on his hips, he swiveled coquettishly and laughed. Sean watched him, trying to understand what would have compelled this guy to tell such a bald-faced lie about someone he barely knew. Ryan had told Sean JD was

primarily Anthony's client. Ryan had only massaged him a couple of times when Anthony couldn't fit him into his schedule. Despite his despicable character, Anthony was a very handsome man, his dark, sensual looks hard to resist. Even Ryan had been taken with him, seduced at first by his ripe, virile sexuality. He guessed JD must have succumbed to that same charm, perhaps hinting he'd like more than a back massage. Maybe Anthony saw his opportunity to strike at Ryan before he struck first. It was all surmise of course.

After swimming for about fifteen minutes, JD pushed himself out of the pool and hoisted himself over its edge, dripping water where Sean was working. "Hey, I'll take a bottle of cold water if the offer's still good," he said, smiling at Sean as he passed his tongue over his lips in what he probably imagined passed for a sensual gesture.

Normally Sean would have handed him the bottle and moved away, eager to return to his work. Now however, he brought JD a bottle from the bar and sat next to him at the pool's edge, dipping his own bare feet into the water. "I think I've seen you around," he offered. "You're a friend of Anthony's, right? Anthony Keller?"

Sean watched as JD visibly colored, turning a bright pink. "Yes!" Ducking his head, he added in a dejected tone, "I mean he's my massage therapist. You know, at the spa. I wouldn't say we were really friends. I mean, why?" Suddenly he looked up eagerly. "Did he say something to you? Has he talked about me?" He smiled, raising his eyebrows and nodding slightly as if willing Sean to confirm this.

"Well, yeah," Sean said, not sure what he'd say next, hoping his brain would come up with something. "We're, uh, we're pretty close. Not intimate!" he hurriedly added as the smile fell away from JD's face. The guy was clearly smitten. "Just buddies. You know, we both work here and all that. He, uh, he mentioned you a couple of times. Young guy with short red hair, he said, really hot."

"*He said I was really hot?*" JD must have realized he shouted because he lowered his voice and said, "Uh, sorry. I, uh, I kind of like the guy." He brightened again, repeating with wonder, "He said I was really hot." JD looked so pathetically delighted Sean felt almost bad for what he was about to do, but then he remembered what this punk had done to Ryan, no doubt hoping to get into Anthony's little white shorts.

"Yeah. I'd watch out though. Anthony's a very intense guy. When he's interested in a guy, he puts them through some really weird tests. He says he likes to find out about a guy's loyalty before he's willing to take him to bed. I guess in a way you should be honored. He doesn't give the test to just anyone. He must be really into you."

JD tilted his head, confusion and eagerness doing open battle across his features. "You, um, you know about that?" He narrowed his eyes. "He told you?"

"Sure. It's no big deal. Just the guys over at the spa fooling around. I'm sure they didn't take it too seriously." He forced a laugh and moved in for the kill. "He said when he asked you to pretend that other guy, what's his name, Ryan something, had touched you, you know, inappropriately, that you passed the test with flying colors. I'd expect him to ask you out any day now."

JD had the grace to look slightly ashamed. Yet after a moment he brightened. "Do you really think he'll ask me out? I mean, I was really hoping if I went along he'd notice me more." Conspiratorially he leaned toward Sean, speaking softly as other people began to arrive for their morning swim. "That's why I went along when he asked me. I mean..." he blushed again, this time with chagrin. "I know it was kind of a crummy thing to do to Ryan. But Anthony has been driving me *crazy*. I can't think of anything but him. I used to try to get *him* to, uh, touch me, but no way, he was all business. I even offered to pay him, you know, tip him really good, but he just grinned and said it was against resort policy to consort with jail bait. I'm *not* jail bait! I'm almost twenty-two, for god's sake. He knew I was hot for him. He used to tease me. You know, move his hands real close, get me really hot and hard for him, and then—nothing!

"When he asked me to lie for him," JD spoke in nearly a whisper, clearly embarrassed now, even ashamed, "I thought maybe he'd like me then. Want me." He looked up at Sean, his voice suddenly defiant as he thrust out his chin. "Or at least he'd owe me."

Sean put his hand on JD's arm. At least the guy had the grace to seem ashamed of what he'd done. Men had committed worse acts in the name of desire. "I have to level with you, JD," Sean said. "I'm not really friends with Anthony. Ryan is my lover. My best friend in the world. What you did could have cost him his job here. It did cost him the respect of his colleagues."

"Oh my god..." JD said, putting his hands up to his mouth. "You tricked me... You bastard, you tricked me!"

"No, please." Sean held up his hand. "Calm down. I don't intend to use the information. I just wanted to know what really happened. This might be hard for you to realize, given how taken you are with Anthony, but the guy's a jerk. If you really want to know what happened, he made the moves on Ryan, and when Ryan didn't want to play, he decided to blackball him. He's not a nice guy, JD. I admit he's hot—but so what? There are dozens of hot guys on this island, am I right?" He smiled gently, hoping to ease the sting of his words. "You seem like a bright guy. You said you're what, twenty-two?"

"Almost," JD answered.

"Did you come here alone? I mean to the resort."

"No, I came with three of my college buddies. Graduation gift to ourselves. Actually I'm kind of seeing one of them. He doesn't know about Anthony." He snapped his mouth shut.

"Don't worry," Sean said. "I won't tell. But if I could give you some advice? Anthony's not worth the hassle. He's a bully. You'd probably end up getting hurt and hurting your friend in the process. Just my opinion. Do what you like with it."

"You gotta believe me, I didn't mean to hurt Ryan. I don't really know what the hell I was doing, to tell you the truth. Thinking with my little head instead of my big one I guess." JD grinned sheepishly. "I've been working up the courage to cash in on the

favor with Anthony, but somehow the timing never seemed right. I haven't been back to the spa since then. Maybe I knew deep down it wasn't right." He grinned ruefully and then looked up with a worried expression. "Are you going to report me to someone? Get me thrown off the island or something?"

Sean shook his head. "Nah. That's not my style. Look, I'm not going to tell you what to do, but if you wanted to set things right for Ryan, you could go to Jiru and just explain what happened. Listen, you're not the first guy to make something up because you're in lust. You just didn't think through what it might do to an innocent person caught in the middle of a dirty trick."

JD hung his head miserably. Sean touched his arm and said earnestly, "Listen, JD. It's not too late to set it to rights. Just tell Jiru you were confused and you made a mistake. Tell him Anthony dared you to do it as a joke. Whatever you want to say."

He held JD's gaze until JD looked down, blushing yet again. "So you're, uh, taken, huh?" Tentatively JD put his hand on Sean's thigh.

Sean laughed at the guy's sheer audacity as he answered, "I am. By the man you slandered. By the man you could have caused to lose his job. I hope you'll see it in your heart to do the right thing." He stood, causing JD's hand to fall away. "I have to get back to work now. Have a good morning."

* * * * *

"Ryan, could you come in here a minute?" It was nearing the end of the shift and Ryan had just finished his last client of the day. *What now*, he wondered. *Time for another lecture about keeping my hands to myself?*

He followed Jiru into a massage room. "Close the door please," he said. Ryan obeyed, wondering what new lie Anthony had told to ruin his life.

"I owe you an apology, Ryan."

"For...?" Ryan asked, raising his eyebrows and folding his arms over his chest.

"For this whole thing with JD Reed and Anthony."

"Oh, so you believe me now?" Ryan couldn't help the angry tone in his voice.

"I do. I'm very sorry. I've known Anthony a lot longer than I've known you, and when the client also came forward, how could I think otherwise?"

"So what's happened to change your mind?"

"The client came in this afternoon while you were in session. Admitted he'd lied because Anthony asked him to. He said Anthony said it was all a practical joke, no harm done. He said he realized later maybe there *was* harm done, and he wanted to set it right. Do the right thing I think he said. I want to do the right thing too. Which starts off with apologizing to you."

Ryan leaned against the wall. "No kidding." He shook his head slowly. Jiru was looking at him expectantly. He smiled, relieved to be vindicated. "Apology accepted."

Jiru bowed formally toward him. "Thank you."

Ryan couldn't help asking, "So what happens now?"

"You have the right to know. I haven't yet said anything to Anthony. I'm too disgusted to even speak to him right now. My next step is to discuss this situation with Gerald and Robert. What Anthony did was inexcusable. I'll get their advice on how to handle things." Ryan nodded, the smile widening on his face despite his efforts to control it.

Wait 'til I tell Sean, he mused to himself. He won't believe it.

Chapter Twelve

Ryan pulled nervously at the knot of his tie. How different this felt from his interview at the resort club. That had been almost a lark—just something to tide him over until he was ready to return to the real world. Gerald and Robert hadn't been interested in his experience or qualifications. He recalled with a grin how disconcerted he'd been by Robert's frank admission they were more interested in how he looked in a bathing suit than if his references were good. Of course, he had only been trying for a temporary job as "eye candy". Now the stakes were much higher. He was interviewing for his dream job. Wasn't he?

Until he'd landed in the lush paradise of Club Eros, Ryan had thought his career path was clearly defined. He'd move his way up the hotel management chain, eventually managing his own. While it could be a real headache, he'd always prided himself on rising to the challenge of handling the countless little things necessary to keep an operation running smoothly. This was an incredible opportunity—one he couldn't pass up, even if it meant leaving paradise.

As he sat on the rather uncomfortable chair in the waiting room outside the office of Bob Hicks, head of operations for the Florida division of Carrington Hotels, Ryan realized he was clenching his jaw. His muscles had tensed into their old familiar position of fight or flight. The headaches he'd used to get daily while working in the hotel business had all but disappeared in the last few months but now one seemed to be working its way around his skull, gripping lightly but with the promise of more.

He closed his eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath. This was just nerves. Interviews were stressful. He glanced at his watch, which felt heavy and cold against his wrist. He had stopped wearing it on the island since it interfered with massage and he had no need of it during his off time. Sean didn't even own one.

Sean. The image of his streaked blond mop of hair falling over his eyes as he looked up with a smile made Ryan's heart clench with love. When Ryan said goodbye to him the night before, it had felt as if they were parting forever instead of just for two days. More for himself than for Sean, Ryan had said over and over, "It's just two days. We'll only have to spend one night apart. I'll do the interview and come right back. You won't even know I've gone."

Sean had smiled that heartbreakingly sweet, sad smile and nodded. "I'll be waiting."

The door opened and a pretty young woman with short dark hair stuck her head around the corner. She was holding a clipboard at which she glanced as she said crisply, "Ryan Weston? Mr. Hicks will see you now."

Ryan stood, his leather loafers pinching feet used to only sandals or sneakers for the past several months. He followed the woman, anticipation mingling with dread. For a moment he wondered why he was there.

* * * * *

There was a light knock on the door. When Sean opened it, he had to laugh. Kenny Spencer hadn't wasted much time. Ryan had only left a few hours before. He stepped out onto the porch. "Hi there," he offered.

"Hey, Sean! I heard you were all alone. Thought I'd see if you'd care to join me for dinner or a drink?"

"Word travels fast, huh?" The speed with which information zipped through the island grapevine never ceased to amaze Sean. He wondered what the scuttlebutt was regarding Ryan's departure.

"Well, I heard your friend Ryan had returned to Florida a little early. Lover's quarrel? Or did he just get tired of our little paradise?"

"Neither," Sean snapped, annoyed with the suppositions. Kenny was watching him, desire crouching like a tiger in his dark eyes. Despite himself, Sean's body responded to the silent invitation. Ignoring his rising cock, he said, "He's got a job interview. He just went to check it out. He'll be back tomorrow night."

"Ah, I have twenty-four hours to try to win your heart." Kenny laughed, throwing back his head theatrically. "I'm teasing, relax. I just thought we could share a drink. Grab a bite. No big deal."

Sean realized he had been dreading the night alone without Ryan. He'd grown used to the companionable meals shared together and most especially to having him in his arms each night. Perhaps Kenny's invitation was just the thing to stave off the loneliness...at least for a while. "Okay," he said. "I am hungry actually. Will Mario be joining us?"

"Mario?" Kenny looked blank for a moment. "Oh! That was weeks ago! A flash of passion in the pan of love, ancient history. Since Jeremy, I've been a free spirit. I don't want to be tied down to one guy. Too many gorgeous men here to restrict myself." He stroked Sean's arm, running his fingers along the inside of his elbow. Sean felt a shiver along his spine as his cock stiffened farther to attention. He pulled away. "Excuse me," he said rather abruptly. "I'll just change into some jeans. I'll be right out. Make yourself comfortable." He waved toward the lounge chairs on the porch.

After dinner they walked along the beach, watching the sun dip below the horizon. Kenny had been entertaining during the meal, describing his various lovers both among the staff and guests at the resort. At one point he'd reached across the small table and put his hand over Sean's. "But I would trade them all for one night with you."

Gently Sean had disengaged his hand. "Kenny, last season you could have had me with a snap of your fingers. I used to watch you and Jeremy making out in the hot tub

and imagine that was me in your arms. You have to know I find you very attractive. But my heart belongs to someone else now. Like you said, bad timing."

Now as they walked together on the cooling sand, Sean's thoughts were on his lover perhaps having dinner with his sister or some friends. Sean didn't have an outside line in his bungalow. Ryan had given him his sister's number in case of emergency. Did missing him so much it physically hurt constitute an emergency? He grinned ruefully to himself. It was only a day and a half! He would distract himself by letting Kenny flirt with him. Where was the harm in that? Ryan would return tomorrow night. Until then Sean wouldn't worry about the future. He'd just focus on getting through this night.

"My roommate rarely sleeps at my bungalow," Kenny said suddenly, jerking Sean from his reverie. "I have the whole place to myself most of the time. Let's go and have a drink. It's too early to say good night."

"Why not?" Sean agreed, and they headed inland toward the employee bungalows.

"Welcome to my humble abode," Kenny said, waving his arm around the living room, which pretty much looked like all the other employee bungalows with its white rattan furniture and brightly colored throw rugs over smooth stone. "Shall I whip up a batch of margaritas or would you be interested in sampling the smoothest rum on the planet?"

"Rum sounds good, thanks." Sean settled on the living room couch while Kenny moved toward a liquor cabinet. He took out a bottle and two tumblers. "This is not just any rum, my friend." He held out a bottle of orange-hued liquor, the label sporting a yellow map of Barbados. "This is aged rum, made for sipping. The best Barbados has to offer, which of course means the best the world has to offer!" He laughed heartily. "I've been saving this bottle for a special occasion. I can't think of anyone with whom I'd rather share this smooth bit of liquid heaven."

As Kenny handed him the heavy glass, their fingers touched and blue eyes stared into dark brown, the moment ripe with possibility. Sean was the first to look away.

He sipped the amber liquid and savored its smooth burn. Kenny knew his rum—the flavor was distinct and the aroma was wonderful with hints of butterscotch and honey. "This is excellent," he said.

"Indeed," Kenny nodded, tipping his glass back to empty it. He poured himself another and held out the bottle. "That was just the warm-up. Now we can take our time." Sean grinned and tossed the rest of his back as well before holding out his glass for more.

Kenny settled himself in a chair opposite the couch where Sean sat. They sipped their rum in companionable silence for a while. Kenny had poured several ounces each time into his glass and Sean was already feeling the effects of the strong liquor. When Kenny offered the bottle again, he shook his head. "I'd better slow down," he said.

Kenny chuckled. "What, that little bit? Can't hold your liquor, eh? Maybe I'll get you drunk and have my way with you!" He stood and moved to the couch, sitting close to Sean. Their thighs touched, only thin white cotton and faded denim separating them.

Sean felt the electricity zip between them. The alcohol had left him feeling loose and perhaps less careful than he should have been. Instead of pulling away, he let Kenny's thickly muscled thigh press against his own, enjoying its warmth.

He drank the rest of his rum and held the glass between his hands. When Kenny leaned over, brushing his lips against Sean's, he didn't kiss him back nor did he turn away. Kenny smelled nice. The thought of letting him make love to him just to keep away his own demons was so compelling he nearly brought his arms around Kenny's neck—he nearly parted his lips. He knew he was drunk, but did it really matter? Ryan would never know, and anyway, he shouldn't have left him. He let his mind drift as Kenny's large hand moved over his thigh, his lips still on Sean's.

Sean knew he needed to react, to stop Kenny before things went too far. If only he hadn't had so much to drink... Kenny's hand slid along his thigh, finally coming to rest on the mound beneath his zipper. His tongue continued to press insistently against Sean's closed lips. Sean's mind suddenly sprang back on.

What the hell was he doing?

He twisted away from Kenny's embrace and stood, his legs a little unsteady. "Hey, I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression, but I'm not available." He walked around the low coffee table and fell heavily into one of the chairs opposite the couch. Reaching for the bottle, he poured himself a few fingers, aware his hands were trembling. He knew if he'd sat next to Kenny a moment longer, he would have succumbed. As it was, his cock was still hard in his pants, the feel of Kenny's lips still warm on his own.

Kenny leaned back, his legs spread wide, his arms extended over the back of the couch. White teeth gleamed against his dark face as he grinned. "I almost had you, eh? Jesus, man, what a shame you're such an old-fashioned guy. Saving yourself for your true love." He laughed with affection.

"Yeah," Sean grinned. "What can I say? I've waited all my life for him. Now that I've got him, I'm not going to blow it with a one-night stand. Even though I do find you sexy as hell, believe me."

"I do believe you," Kenny said, staring pointedly at Sean's erection. Sean crossed his legs, feeling his face heat. Kenny made no effort to hide his own sizable package. Instead he leaned forward to take the bottle from the table between them. He poured himself an inch or two and sat back. "I believe you love this guy. But if I may ask, what about him? He's interviewing for a job in Florida. He's a seasonal employee with a contract that's up in a month. Where does that leave you? I can't see you living anywhere but here. You're like me. We wouldn't survive in the rat race. We live at a different pace. What happens in April? Does your Prince Charming turn back into a toad?"

To Sean's own surprise, he began to cry. Tears that had been waiting heavily behind his eyes since he'd kissed Ryan goodbye early that morning now slipped past defenses lowered by rum. He wiped at his eyes, embarrassed.

"Hey, hey there," Kenny crooned, leaning toward Sean. "It's okay. I'm sorry. It's none of my business. I apologize."

"No, it's okay. I'm not really crying. I'm just drunk." He tried to laugh but didn't quite pull it off.

"Let's sit outside," Kenny said, standing. "Get some fresh sea air, look at the stars." He stood and offered his hand to Sean, who reached up and took it, allowing Kenny to hoist him to a standing position.

They sat side by side on the porch stairs. The night air did feel good against Sean's face. He closed his eyes and lifted it to the sky, wondering what Ryan was doing just then.

"I was in love with Jeremy," Kenny offered softly. "He was the one who ended it. I decided then I wasn't going to fall in love again—ever. It's not worth the price you pay when it's over. No thank you."

Sean glanced at Kenny, surprised by his admission. He could hear the pain behind Kenny's words. "So it wasn't because he wanted to go back to the States and you didn't?"

"No, not really. I mean, I would have gone anywhere just to be with him. If you're really in love, it doesn't matter where you are as long as you're together."

"But you said a minute ago you couldn't take that fast-paced lifestyle? That you couldn't see yourself anywhere but in the Caribbean?"

"I said it, yeah," Kenny admitted. "This is home to me. But I would have moved for him. If he'd wanted it, that is. Turns out the little white boy wasn't comfortable bringing his big black lover home to mom and dad. I was a part of his fantasy life. Then when the season was over, I was too—just a part of the Club Eros scene I guess—not transferable to 'real life'." The bitterness was palpable in Kenny's words. The potential similarity to Sean's situation was frightening.

He felt a wave of nausea roil through his gut. It had been a mistake to drink all that alcohol. He drew his hand over his face. He felt clammy and a little sick.

Kenny slapped his thighs and gave a snort. "Hey, I'm sorry. That's ancient history now. I'm completely over it! I'm supposed to be cheering you up. Instead I'm bringing us both down."

"Nah, that's okay," Sean said, wondering silently if any relationship ever worked out. "I'm sorry to cut the evening short but I think I should go." He stood and suddenly the sky seemed to wriggle and swirl in a sickening way overhead. He sat down again hard.

Kenny put a steadying hand on his shoulder. "I think you need to lie down, my friend. You look a little ill." He stood and firmly gripped Sean's elbow, helping him to stand. "Come inside and take a rest. Then I'll walk you home."

Sean followed him inside and allowed Kenny to guide him into his bedroom. He felt like an idiot but he was too dizzy to protest as Kenny gently pushed him to the bed.

He closed his eyes and lay still, flat on his back. He felt the bed shift as Kenny lay beside him. "Kenny," he murmured, his eyes still closed. "Don't—"

He felt Kenny's fingers on his lips. "Don't worry. I know you're not feeling so hot right now. I'm not going to try anything, I promise." He caressed Sean's cheek a moment. His hand felt cool and comforting against Sean's face. He sighed, his eyes still closed. Kenny moved closer. Sean could feel his warm breath against his neck. He felt Kenny's arm drape over his chest as he snuggled against him. He turned onto his side, away from Kenny. It felt good as the large man spooned him, pressing his pelvis against Sean's ass, wrapping his strong arms around him.

As Sean drifted into a rum-soaked sleep, he murmured, "Good night, Ryan. I love you."

"I love you too," Ryan answered, though it was only a dream.

* * * * *

"So how did it go? Tell me every detail!" said Susan, Ryan's younger sister by two years. Like Ryan, she had blonde hair, green eyes and a long, lean body, though hers curved in all the right places. Every person in the restaurant had turned to admire the handsome pair as they were escorted to their table by the hostess. They barely noticed, both being accustomed to such looks all their lives.

Ryan was staying with Susan at her Palm Beach townhouse since he'd given up his apartment when he took the job at Club Eros. Susan was living with a man who traveled a lot for his company and at present was out of town, which suited Ryan since he didn't really feel like being on his best behavior for the guy.

"I think it went well," he answered. "My old boss Pete Rhodes got the job as manager and he recommended me for the number two position. They're staffing up for the grand opening. It seems like a great opportunity." He looked up from his salad. "They haven't actually offered me the job yet. They said they still have three more candidates to interview. They'll let me know next week."

"Is it something you want to do?" Susan asked. She dipped a large shrimp into cocktail sauce and put it in her mouth.

"It's funny," he said slowly. "If you'd asked me that a few months ago, I would have shouted yes! But now I'm not so sure. A lot of things have happened since I took the job at the resort. It's not a slam dunk anymore. I have some decisions to make."

"Seems like a no-brainer to me! The perks and the bucks of being in the hotel business have to *way* exceed rubbing people's backs for an hourly wage, even if it is in the Caribbean! You work hard enough and you just might find yourself running your own hotel in a couple of years. That's nothing to sneeze at!" At twenty-three, Susan had just finished her MBA and landed a good job with an investment bank. Unlike Ryan, who had always considered himself more laid-back, she was self-described as "driven" and couldn't really relate to anyone who wasn't. She was definitely her daddy's little girl as their father was fond of saying.

"Well, there's more to it than that." Ryan wasn't ready to tell Susan yet about Sean. It wasn't that he was ashamed. He just wasn't ready. It was going to be a shock, no matter how he packaged it. He was in love with a man! She would probably be okay with it, but what about his parents? How would Mom and Dad react to learning their heretofore straight son was head over heels for a guy? Though they'd always seemed pretty tolerant of people's differences, how would it be when it was their own son? Ryan was glad they lived in Naples, some two and a half hours away. He'd called them when he'd arrived at Susan's place that morning, but they understood he didn't have time to visit on this short stay. He could figure out later what he'd say about Sean. If he said anything at all.

They were distracted by their arriving main course. As the waiter placed Susan's lobster tail and baked potato in front of her, she smiled up at him. "I'll need more sour cream." Ryan watched with amusement as the young man blushed and nodded, clearly taken with her beauty.

"How's Haley? Do you ever see her?" Ryan asked.

"Sure. She works in the same building I do. We have lunch from time to time. In fact I mentioned the other day you were flying in and she perked right up. I think she regrets giving you your walking papers. I know she would love to hear from you."

"You think?" Ryan wondered what it would be like to see his old girlfriend. He was curious to see if there was any spark left. Being back in the real world with women smiling at him, touching his arm and grabbing his attention with their low-slung jeans and pushup bras, he'd recall his heterosexual desires, dormant these past months, but not, he realized, dead.

"Shall I give her a call?" Susan asked, pulling out her cell phone.

"I don't want to put her on the spot."

"No, of course not. Just calling to say hello isn't any big deal. In fact it's the polite thing to do seeing as I mentioned you were coming through town." Assuming the matter was settled, Susan flipped open her phone and punched in the number. "Hi, Haley? It's Susan. Listen, I have my brother with me. He just wanted to say hello." She held out the phone with a smile.

"Hi, Haley? How's it going?" Ryan said, feeling a little awkward.

"Ryan! It's so great to hear from you!" He'd forgotten how sexy Haley's voice was, low and smooth. His cock stirred reflexively. Though they had never really connected on an emotional level, they'd always had great sex. They engaged in a few minutes of small talk and then she said, "I would *love* to see you. Any chance you could pop by before you head out of town?"

Ryan hesitated. Was it fair to see her just to check his own reaction? On the other hand, why not? She seemed eager to see him. They had, as Susan had noted, parted as friends. "Sure. You still live in the same place?"

"I do. And lucky for you I have no plans tonight. I'm going to take a nice hot bubble bath while I wait for you," she purred. "I can't wait to see you." They agreed on a time and said their goodbyes. Ryan clicked the phone shut and handed it back to Susan.

"What's the matter? You look kind of worried. Don't you want to see her?"

"Sure, I guess," he replied ambivalently. "I kind of got the feeling she still thinks of me as more than a friend. I don't want to lead her on."

"So don't. Think of it as an opportunity to clear the air. Anyway, I wouldn't worry about it. She's kind of seeing this guy. Nothing serious but they've gone out a few times. She probably just wants to see you now that some time has passed. Make sure you're still friends. You can take my car. I have to work tonight anyway on a presentation. If you want to leave, you have the excuse that I need the car back by a certain time."

Reassured by his sister's sensible words, Ryan nodded. He turned his attention to the stone crab claws piled on his plate, extracting and dipping the succulent meat in melted garlic butter. Sean would love these, he thought to himself.

* * * * *

Haley was as beautiful as he'd remembered with long, silky auburn hair and delicate features in a narrow face, her huge blue eyes shining up at him as she opened the door. "Ryan!" she cried, throwing herself dramatically into his arms.

He held her, feeling her full breasts press against his chest as she buried her head in his neck. Her perfume was too strong—it made him want to sneeze. Ryan felt a sudden ache as he recalled Sean's fresh, sunny scent, so masculine and alluring.

She felt different from Sean too, so delicate and soft. He closed his eyes, trying to recall the electricity that had once flowed between them. The circuitry was no longer connected it seemed. It wasn't that he didn't like holding her, but the thrill was definitely gone. He'd never been in love with Haley and as he stood with his arms awkwardly around her, he knew it with certainty. What he'd shared with her in the several months they dated had approximated love, but he'd had no real concept then of what it was to truly connect with another human being—to feel a kindred closeness that went beyond words.

She pulled away, her voice breathless as she said, "It's so great to see you, Ryan. You look incredible. But then you always looked incredible."

Her laugh was low and sultry. She tossed back her long hair as she stared up suggestively with those big blue eyes. She was wearing a tight silk top with spaghetti straps, cut low to reveal plenty of cleavage. Pink capri pants hugged her narrow hips, her flat midriff bare. She was lovely to look at and Ryan's cock stirred despite himself.

He followed Haley into her living room and allowed her to get him a beer. She sat down on the sofa close to him, her long, slender thigh touching his. He shifted, crossing his legs.

Haley asked him about his resort job and he gave vague answers, leaving out everything important and shifting the focus to her.

She went on at some length about her job in real estate and the real-estate market in general while he smiled, nodded and tried to listen. Haley loved to talk and though he made an effort to focus, he began to drift, his eyes glazing, the smile fixed on his face. He remembered now how boring this absolutely beautiful woman could be. He felt guilty for the thought and tried to ask a few relevant questions to show he was paying attention.

Leaning forward so her luscious breasts nearly spilled out of her top, Haley fixed her wide-eyed gaze on Ryan's face and said, "I've really missed you, baby." She brought her face very close to his, letting her long lashes flutter shut, parting her lips in a clear invitation for a kiss.

Ryan recoiled, taken aback. He realized he had no desire whatsoever to kiss this woman. Whatever spark there had once been between them was definitely gone, at least for him. All he wanted at that moment was to disappear and magically reappear in Sean's strong, safe arms.

After a moment Haley opened her eyes and furrowed her brow. She was not, Ryan knew, used to a man turning her down. "What's the matter? Don't you want to kiss me? There was a time when you weren't able to keep your hands off me."

"I'm sorry, Haley. I think we've got our wires a little crossed here. I just came by to say hello."

"Come on, baby. You know you want it." She pressed her breasts together with long, slender fingers, the nails painted the exact pearly pink of her tank top. Her nipples were poking through the thin fabric. Ryan stood, uncomfortable and embarrassed. She stood and tried to press herself against him, apparently not willing to take no for an answer. Ryan thought she'd probably never *had* to take no for an answer with that gorgeous body and lovely face.

"Look, I think I'd better go," he said, gently disengaging himself from her embrace.

With an angry toss of her hair, she retorted, "What's the matter? You turned gay on me or something?" The question was clearly a rhetorical one and Ryan didn't respond. Putting her hands on her hips, she added, "I'm the one who broke up with you don't forget."

"I haven't forgotten," he replied evenly. "You were right to do it. We never really connected, Haley. We were never a couple except physically. We just had good sex."

"At the time that was all you seemed to need," she spat. "I was the one who wanted more. You weren't there for me. You always held yourself back." Her voice was bitter. The fighting and recriminations at the end of their relationship came tumbling back into his mind. What had he been thinking to come by tonight?

"Look, I apologize if I've led you on somehow. I think I'd better go."

"I think so too. Give me a call when you come to your senses."

Chapter Thirteen

Ryan climbed aboard the ferry for the island, eager to return. He'd only been gone two days but it felt like two months. He found a spot on the upper deck of the small boat and sat back, dropping his duffel bag on the floor at his feet. He leaned back, closing his eyes, trying not to count the seconds until he saw Sean again.

"Hi, stranger." Sean's mellow baritone made Ryan jump. His eyes flew open and standing in front of him was the one man he wanted to see.

"Sean!" He jumped up, opening his arms with a laugh. "What the heck are you doing here?" They hugged, holding each other as if they'd been apart for months instead of days. When they finally separated, they sat together on the bench and Ryan said, "This sure is a great surprise! For a second I thought I conjured up your voice because I wanted to see you so much."

"Yeah?" Sean said, grinning widely. "So you missed me?"

"You have no idea!"

"Well, I missed you too. I had a buddy of mine with a private boat bring me to Barbados in time to meet the ferry. I thought it would be fun to surprise you."

Ryan ran his fingers through his hair, pulling it into a ponytail before letting it drop to his shoulders again. "Boy, it's good to be back!" He looked at Sean as he tried to frame his thoughts. "It's strange because I spent my life in Florida and have only been in the Caribbean for a few months, yet somehow this feels more like home. I was actually thinking that way—I can't wait to get home."

Sean smiled. He seemed about to say something but apparently changed his mind. After a beat he said, "So tell me about the interview. How did it go?"

"I think it went really well. The money's excellent. Good benefits. It'd be a lot of work though. Fifty, sixty-hour weeks easy, especially at the beginning while I'm still feeling my way with new staff and procedures. My old boss Pete puts in very long hours and expects everyone else right alongside him. It would definitely be an adjustment after the easy pace at the resort."

"Sounds very intense. So did you accept?"

"They didn't offer it yet. Still interviewing they said. I gave them the resort's main phone number. I'll ask at the front desk that they get the message to me. Said they'd get back to me by next week."

"Do you want it? Are you going to take it if they make the offer?" Sean was staring out to sea, one arm lightly around Ryan's shoulders, the other over the back of the bench. Despite his calm demeanor, Ryan could feel his tension.

He put his hand on Sean's leg. Sean sat still, eyes straight ahead. Gently he said, "I haven't decided. If they do make me the offer, I'll want to go back and discuss it with them. I'd like you to come with me. Will you do that? Just for a day? Can you be spared from the pools? I'll go on my day off, we don't even have to stay overnight."

"Why do you want me to come? Moral support?"

"I want you to meet my sister."

* * * * *

"I got the job!" Ryan came bursting into the pool shed where Sean was stacking supplies. "The front desk called over at the spa a couple of hours ago! I had back-to-back clients so I couldn't even get away for a second to tell you!"

Sean wiped his hands on a towel and said, "Let's go sit by the pool and you can tell me all about it." He hoped he had kept his voice neutral as he followed Ryan to a table beneath a large, striped umbrella. His stomach was rapidly tying itself into knots. They only had a short time left together until the season ended. He'd hoped to enjoy them in peace but this job offer had definitely complicated things.

They sat, watching men sleek as seals swimming and tossing a volleyball in the shallow end of the pool. Ryan turned to Sean and said, "They want me to start a week before the opening. That gives us time to find a place and settle in before I start. You could be looking for something in the meantime too. There are tons of jobs in the hospitality industry in Palm Beach. Or you could just take it easy for a while. Check things out. Get a feel for the place. I think you'd like it there. I mean, it's not like here," he waved his arm in a sweeping gesture, "but then what is? It's got great beaches and all the amenities of a big city."

Sean held back a sigh. He didn't *like* big cities. He didn't want a job in the hospitality industry. But he did want to be with Ryan. The question was, what sacrifices was he willing to make? And how would those sacrifices affect their relationship? He reached out and squeezed Ryan's warm, firm thigh. "Listen, I'm really happy for you, Ryan, if this is what you want. You know I love you. I want to be with you. I'm willing to go and check things out. But I think you should be very clear that I'm not sure I could handle that lifestyle. I don't want to work fifty or sixty hours a week. I don't care about the money. I have everything I could ever want right now."

As Ryan frowned, he added, "I don't want to mislead you. I don't want you to think just because I'm willing to go back with you for your second interview that I'm ready for such a lifestyle change. I've been giving this a lot of thought. If I went with you, just for you, but not for myself, it might be the beginning of the end for us. Resentment and frustration could end up destroying us."

Ryan was quiet for a while. Finally he nodded. "Okay. Maybe we're getting ahead of ourselves. I'll slow down and take it one step at a time. I'll get an appointment to see Pete and Mr. Hicks and discuss the deal in person. You come with me and just get a feeling for the place. I haven't accepted the job yet. I'm not one hundred percent sure I

want it. When I was away from the island just for two days, I missed it so much. Not just you but the whole place. It really is like a secret paradise. I feel so comfortable here now. It's funny too when you think about what a fish out of water I was when I first got here!" He laughed and Sean couldn't help but laugh with him, recalling how affronted he had been by the teasing advances of the guests he had been hired to prance around for.

Ryan sobered and continued. "But you know I'm just a temporary employee. I have to earn a living. My job here is over when peak season ends."

"Have you asked if you could stay on? We've talked about this before." Sean wanted to tell him what Robert had said, how he didn't know how he would survive without Ryan's expert fingers to soothe him, but he didn't want Ryan to think he was interfering or trying to manipulate the situation. It had to come from Ryan or not at all.

"No. Do you think I should?"

"Only if it's something you want to consider. It's not like you would be signing your life away. There's no contract for year-round employees. If they do want you to stay on, you're free to quit whenever you want if it isn't working out for you. I imagine there would still be plenty of opportunities if you," he paused and amended, "if *we* wanted to go to Florida or somewhere else at some point in the future."

Ryan leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers behind his head. "Imagine, living in paradise full time." His voice seemed wistful, suffused with longing, as if such a possibility could never be more than a dream. Despite himself, Sean felt a tendril of hope rise in his heart. "You know, seeing my sister again made me realize what a different pace the world moves at back there. At least in my circles. Susan's in investment banking and she sometimes works nearly around the clock when a big deal is in the works. She's making money hand over fist but I doubt she has the time or energy to enjoy it. Both my parents have always worked long hours. I used to resent it as a kid—no one there after school to give me milk and cookies." He laughed. "But I grew up thinking that's what you did. I got my degree in hotel management and hit the ground running. If I hadn't had the rug pulled out from under me with my last job, I'd still be doing the fifty-hour workweek thing and would never have allowed myself to consider anything else."

"My dad was always harping on getting a college degree. You were nothing without one, he always told me, and I believed him. I mean, granted," Ryan shrugged his shoulders in acknowledgement, "it's definitely easier to make a living if you've got one. But that doesn't mean it's the be-all, end-all for everyone. I guess what I'm trying to say is I never made the conscious decision to go to college. It was decided for me. Even the hotel management thing. Dad thought that would be a marketable degree in a place like Florida. If I'd said I wanted to major in fine arts or be a welder, he would have had a heart attack."

"This experience has really made me stop and think. Until I got here, I really didn't appreciate that the quality of the work you do and the satisfaction you derive from it is

much more important than *what* you do. I think I do appreciate that now. I understand it."

Sean nodded. "I feel the same way. Before I came here, I spent a couple of years in college with the intention of going on to medical school. I hated most of my courses and realized pretty early on I wasn't cut out to be a doctor. Both my parents and two of my brothers are doctors and it was just understood that was the path I was to take. When I dropped out, it was the final straw. Not only was I gay but a college dropout to boot. I think they were waiting for heroin addiction next." He laughed. "But seriously. I love what I do now. It's satisfying work and I do it well. I'm happy here. Maybe I could be happy in Florida too. I'm not saying I couldn't be." He paused and said softly, "I do know I'm happy when I'm with you."

"Me too." Ryan smiled. "Maybe for now that's enough."

* * * * *

"I brought you a present from Palm Beach," Ryan said. He pulled out a plastic bag from his duffel and handed it to Sean. "Sorry, I didn't wrap it," he grinned. "I got them from a boutique Susan dragged me into."

Sean took the bag and reached into it, pulling out a handful of long, brightly colored silk scarves. He looked up with an uncertain smile. "Uh, for me? I'm more of a jeans and T-shirt kind of guy."

Ryan laughed. "Not when you're naked and tied to the bed! I've been fantasizing about this since I saw them. You remember how hot it was when you tied my wrists? I thought maybe we could give these scarves a try. They're perfect for tying your wrists and ankles to the bedposts. Then I could take my time—have my way with you. You wouldn't be able to resist my formidable charms." He waggled his eyebrows and laughed.

Sean stared at the scarves and back at Ryan. It was hard to believe this was the same blushing guy who only a few months before had never even kissed a man. He had to admit the idea was an exciting one, though also a little scary. "I've never been in that position," he said. "I've always been the one in control if there was any bondage play."

"Well, I found it not only super sexy but freeing in a way. You *can't* resist what's being done to you so you don't. You let go. Want to try it? If you don't, we stop." As he was speaking, he reached into the duffel and pulled out another bag. "Look what else I got," he said, thrusting the bag toward Sean.

"You were a busy shopper," Sean observed wryly. The bag contained several fat candles. He held one to his nose. "This smells wonderful. What is it?"

"It's the closest I could get to the aromatherapy candles we have at the spa. This one is a combination of cedar, rosemary and spruce. It's very calming. I've got some of your favorite almond massage oil too. Tonight is going to be your night. I want to lavish you with attention. Think you can handle it?"

Sean smiled. Ryan really did know him very well. As much as he adored making love to Ryan, he sometimes had a hard time just lying back and receiving. He was that way in most areas of his life, he realized. He found it difficult to let anyone do anything for him. He used to think it was just fierce independence, but since love had pierced the armor around his ego, he'd come to realize it was partly fear. If he was completely self-sufficient, then no one could ever hurt him. He knew with Ryan things were way past that though. Ryan had the ability to make him happier than he'd ever been or dreamed of being. By the same token, he had the ability to destroy him and break his heart. Love was a scary thing, he thought ruefully, but he wouldn't trade it for the world.

Ryan was busy setting candles around the room and lighting them. He turned off all but one lamp on the far side of the room. While Sean stood watching, Ryan pulled down the bed covers and tied the scarves to the bedposts, draping them on each corner of the mattress.

"Don't be nervous," he whispered, moving close to his lover. Gripping the hem of Sean's T-shirt, Ryan lifted it. Sean raised his arms, allowing him to pull the shirt from his body. "Hmm," Ryan murmured as he slid his face down Sean's chest. "I love the way you smell." Sean felt Ryan's tongue licking down his sternum before lightly flicking at his nipple. His cock was rising rapidly in his jeans and when Ryan knelt to unbutton his fly, his bulging erection pulsed just beneath.

Ryan licked at Sean's rising cock through the thin cotton of his underwear as he pulled at his jeans, dragging them down Sean's legs. "Sexy man," he said, patting Sean's package. "You're ready for me already. I like that." He pulled Sean's underwear down and his cock sprang free. He moaned as Ryan lowered his head and took the shaft between wet, eager lips. They hadn't made love since he'd left two days before and Sean was more than ready.

To his dismay, Ryan stood, leaving his glistening cock unattended. Ryan took his hand and pulled him gently toward the bed. Sean felt another moment's unease. "I don't know, Ryan. I'm not sure I'm ready for that..."

"Okay, we don't have to. Just lie down and let me take my time with you. I want to make love to you. Please?"

How could he resist such a sexy plea? Sean lay down on his back and closed his eyes. The scent from the candles was light and sensual, mingling with the fresh sea air. Candlelight flickered on the walls and ceilings. The white curtains blew gently against the open windows.

Ryan knelt next to him by the side of the bed. "I'm just going to massage you a little, get out any lingering stress before I ravage you," he grinned. He squirted a small amount of almond oil on his fingers and rubbed his hands together. With sure, firm fingers he massaged Sean's shoulders and arms. Sean allowed him to raise his arms, extending them as he massaged his biceps and triceps, moving slowly down his forearms to his hands and fingers. Next he focused on Sean's thickly muscled chest and abs. He grazed past his erect cock, ignoring it for the moment as he concentrated on his thighs. He moved along Sean's legs to his feet, literally relaxing him down to his toes.

"That's your gift, Ryan. That's your true gift," Sean murmured, feeling so relaxed he could barely form the words.

Ryan knelt up next to his ear. Sean could feel his long, soft hair fall over his chest as he whispered, "Want to try it? I'll just do your wrists, not your ankles. It's really a symbolic gesture as much as anything. A giving over of yourself to me."

Sean opened his eyes and looked at Ryan. His eyes were dilated in the flickering semidarkness, the black pupils rimmed with green as clear as a calm sea. The love in them was unmistakable. "Yes, okay," he whispered.

Gently Ryan tightened the slip knots he'd prepared at the end of each silky scarf around Sean's wrists. He adjusted the knots on the bedposts, pulling Sean's arms taut to either side over his head. Sean swallowed, a soupcon of fear rising in his belly, though his cock remained rigid with anticipation.

"You okay?" Ryan asked, watching his face. Sean nodded slowly. He had to admit despite the fear, perhaps a little bit because of it, he was super turned-on. "You look so hot like that," Ryan said as he pulled his own clothing from his body.

Lying next to Sean on the bed, he began with a butterfly brushing of lips over Sean's chest, stopping to lick and bite his nipples until they were hard and shiny with his kisses. Next he began to stroke the flesh on his inner arms. It tickled a little and Sean pulled at his restraints, testing them for the first time. Though it was only silk, he was bound as surely as if Ryan had used rope. Sean felt his heart flutter in his chest. He took a deep breath, distracted by Ryan's fingers swirling toward his sensitive underarms.

"I'm ticklish," he said, jerking against the silk and opening his eyes.

"Shh, I know you are. I'm not tickling you—I'm stroking your skin very lightly. Let the sensations move over you. Stop trying to control your response. Just flow with it." He bent down and kissed Sean's eyelids closed. Sean couldn't help but smile, Ryan's words recalling his own advice. Had the student surpassed the master?

He made an effort to empty his mind and focus on the sensation without anticipating how it would feel. Ryan's touch was still light but Sean found he could tolerate it now. Beyond tolerate it—it began to feel good, as soothing as his massage but with a sexy underlay.

The fingers began to travel down his body, moving with tantalizing slowness toward his groin. He felt Ryan shifting on the bed and craned his head to look just as Ryan closed his mouth over his cock. He dropped his head back to the pillow with a moan.

As if he'd been doing it for years, Ryan steadily lowered himself until Sean's cock was wedged in his throat. He pulled up just as slowly, milking his shaft with his throat muscles and tongue. Sean wanted to reach down and pull Ryan up into his arms. He realized with a jolt this was part of what Ryan had been talking about—his inability to simply receive. He gave another tug at the scarves but they were as secure as before. Ryan's words from earlier in the evening floated back to him... *You can't resist what's*

being done to you so you don't. You let go. And finally he did, surrendering to the delicious intensity of Ryan's amorous attentions.

Ryan continued to suck and kiss his thick shaft, his hands cupping and stroking the soft sac beneath. All too soon he felt his balls tighten in anticipation as his orgasm gathered force inside him. His cock was pulsing with a pleasure so fierce he felt as if it were going to explode. All at once it did, shooting hot seed against the back of Ryan's throat as Sean moaned, pulling hard against the scarves that bound him. Ryan held his cock, only releasing it once he'd sucked all the pearly sweetness from it.

Sean lay still, his heart thundering in his chest. All at once Ryan was beside him, quickly releasing the slip knots around his wrists. He wrapped himself around Sean, his erection thick and hard against his side.

"Now," Ryan whispered, "I want to make love to you."

Though he'd just come, Ryan's words sent a jolt of desire flashing through him. He allowed Ryan to push him gently to his side, savoring the feel of his erect cock nestling between his cheeks. "Do you want me, Sean, hmm? Are you ready to receive your lover? You ready to take it for me?" Ryan's voice was low and seductive. It was a side of Ryan Sean hadn't seen before and he thrilled to it, falling deeper into the sensually submissive web Ryan had woven around him with the scarves and his sexy, dominant behavior.

As Ryan busied himself for a moment with a condom and lubrication, Sean lifted himself to his hands and knees. He lowered his head to the bed, resting his forehead against the cool sheets, his ass offered up for his lover to plunder. He felt Ryan's strong hands lightly spreading his cheeks as the head of his cock pressed against his nether hole. He experienced the slight initial pain as Ryan's cock slipped past the sentinel of muscle and made its presence known.

The pain was quickly replaced with a buttery heat, melting through his body as Ryan began to swivel and thrust inside of him. Each thrust sent shivers of pleasure directly from his ass to his cock, heating his blood. Ryan, gentle at first, began to use him hard and he loved it. He pushed his ass back to meet each thrust, reveling in Ryan's passion as he slammed himself against him.

"You're so tight!" Ryan moaned after only several minutes. "I'm not gonna last long—it's fucking incredible." He began to buck behind Sean, uncontrolled tremors taking over as his body released its passion. He draped himself over Sean's back, wrapping his strong arms around his torso as his body shook.

"Ah god! Sean!" One final thrust sent them both falling to the bed. Sean could feel Ryan's heart pumping against him, still caught in his embrace. After a minute or so he lifted his shoulder slightly and Ryan understood, falling back onto the bed beside him.

Sean rolled over and quickly stripped the used condom from Ryan's shaft and tossed it into the trashcan. He lay next to his lover and pulled him into his arms. "You are something else," he whispered. "I don't think I could ever let you go."

"You won't ever have to," Ryan murmured thickly, nearly knocked out from his orgasm. Sean turned to look at his face, the finely chiseled jaw, the long straight nose, the dark blond lashes brushing his cheeks, the full, lush mouth with lips parted as his breathing finally slowed. He brushed a tendril of hair lovingly from Ryan's face and felt something in his heart crack. *I hope you're right, my love*, he thought, and sighed.

* * * * *

Ryan kept sneaking sidelong glances at Sean as they walked through the airport toward the exits. He was more anxious than he'd expected to be, though Sean in his gentle way had tried to warn him this wasn't going to be easy.

"My family's really cool," he kept insisting when Sean suggested they might not take instantly to the idea of his being gay or bisexual or whatever he chose to call himself. "I've had gay friends. Well, acquaintances anyway. Nobody batted an eye. Hell, this is Palm Beach—half the population is gay!"

Now though, he didn't feel so confident. Susan was picking them up. He'd told her he was bringing a friend back with him. "Someone who's thinking of moving to Palm Beach," he'd said, not mentioning the friend was his lover or that if he did come to Florida, they would be living together. Hell, he told himself there was plenty of time. He didn't have to divulge his personal life to his sister or anyone else for that matter.

"Is that her? She looks exactly like you only female." Sean pointed to a slender young woman striding toward them. She was wearing a clingy sundress that emphasized her long waist and high, firm breasts. Her wavy blonde hair was flying as she hurried toward them.

"Susan!" Ryan waved. "We were just going to go out to the curb and wait for you. The flight was a little late."

As she reached them, she and Ryan embraced. She stepped back and gave Sean an appraising once-over. "Well, *hello*." Sean was wearing a light blue T-shirt that offset his very blue eyes and golden tan skin. His broad shoulders and bulging triceps strained against the soft cotton. His shiny streaked blond hair hung untidily over his eyes as it always did. Ryan couldn't help a swelling of pride as his sister openly admired his lover.

Sean smiled and extended his hand. Susan took it, giving him the firm shake she'd no doubt learned in the masculine world of investment banking. She seemed to hold Sean's hand just a little too long as she gazed up at him. Ryan said abruptly, "So where're you parked? Let's get out of here." Susan dropped Sean's hand but she continued to stare at him. "Earth to Susan," Ryan said, lightly punching her shoulder.

She turned to look at him. "What? Oh, by the curb. I'm double-parked too, so we better move it."

They were all hungry so they decided to head out for a bite to eat before Ryan went in for his second interview. Sean was rather quiet during lunch, mostly listening to Susan describe daily life at an investment banking firm—the competitiveness of her

colleagues, the subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle sexism, the hectic pace and the obscene amounts of money to be made if one played one's cards right and didn't mind occasionally bending the rules.

"How about you, Sean," she said finally. "What do you do? When you're not working at the resort I mean."

"I clean pools and hot tubs. I maintain the pool areas. I teach scuba diving sometimes. I live on the island year-round."

Susan squinted at him as if she hadn't heard him correctly. "You clean pools? For a living?"

Sean smiled and nodded. "Yep. I find it a very peaceful occupation. And when I'm not working, I like to swim and snorkel. I like to dive and explore parts of the island where the guests and other staff never go. It's a calm life. It makes me happy."

"Wow. I think I'd go stark-raving mad after one month of that!"

"To each his own I suppose," Sean offered. "I wouldn't last a minute in your investment bank. Just the thought of having to dress in a suit and tie every day would be enough to put me off. Not to mention selling my soul to make a buck."

Susan frowned and Ryan interjected. "Well, I have to put on a tie today. I have to admit, I sure haven't missed wearing a suit these past few months." He looked at his watch. "We'd better get the bill so we can check into our hotel and I can shower and shave before I go."

"I thought you were staying with me," Susan said. "Sean could stay in the guestroom and you could sleep on the futon in the living room. David's out of town again. I would *love* the company." Her gaze again lingered over Sean's handsome face.

Ryan glanced at Sean and back at Susan. "No. Thanks. We've already reserved a room. Er, rooms." Ryan felt his skin heating and realized he was blushing. He felt confused. He'd thought he was going to come right out and tell Susan he was gay and they were lovers, but the timing hadn't been right. Now he was overtly lying—pretending they were going to get separate rooms and lying by omission as he let his sister fawn over and flirt with his lover.

Both Susan and Sean were looking at him, he realized. Susan narrowing her eyes as Sean simply waited, his eyes kind, a small smile hovering on his lips. He couldn't help but smile back at Sean. He wanted to take his hand but he didn't quite dare. Just looking into Sean's eyes calmed him. He could do anything—he could face anything—as long as Sean was by his side.

"Oh my god," Susan said softly as she watched the two of them. "Ryan, do you have something to tell me?"

Chapter Fourteen

Sean looked up as he heard the card key sliding in the lock. A moment later Ryan came in, pulling at his tie as he entered the room. "Man," he said, "it feels good to get this thing off!" He tossed the tie over the back of a chair and shucked his suit jacket before falling back into the oversized hotel chair.

"So?" Sean said, hoping he sounded casual. "How did it go?"

"They made the offer firm. I said I just had to tie up some loose ends and I'd let them know by the end of this week." He looked up hopefully. "We could make a try, Sean. Susan was okay with it. I'm sure my parents will be fine too."

"It's not your family's acceptance of us as lovers that has me worried, Ryan. I don't know if I can live here. It feels, I don't know, kind of plastic. I miss my tropical paradise."

"You could try! Just give it a try. If it doesn't work, we could go back to the Caribbean."

Sean couldn't keep the sarcasm out of his voice as he said, "So I should just tell Robert and Gerald to keep the spot open for me because I might be coming back? But I might not. Connor will be leaving at the end of the season but so what? I'll tell them not to worry about taking care of the pools and hot tubs. Just hire someone temporary who I don't have time to train, and then fire him the minute I come back. Think that'll fly?"

"Well, I hadn't thought it through just that way," Ryan said hesitantly.

"I know," Sean said more gently, feeling like a bully. "I'm sorry. I'm acting like a jerk. Maybe there's a way we can work it out. Obviously you want to do this."

"It's a great opportunity."

Sean was quiet for a while, thinking out what to say. He wasn't going to be the one to tell Ryan he couldn't explore his great opportunity. This seemed like something Ryan was determined to do with or without him. At the same time, he wasn't willing to throw over his life at the resort for a maybe. He had to know this was what Ryan really wanted before he would consider such a final step.

"Maybe the thing to do is accept the job and leave the resort once the season ends next week. Find yourself an apartment. Give it a try for a month. If it seems like something you want to keep doing, we'll consider more options then. Maybe I could take a leave of absence, though I'm not sure if they'll go for it. They might not be able or inclined to find someone temporary. But like you said, I'm sure I could find something else, even if the two of us decided to return to the Caribbean." Sean hoped his voice was steady. He held his breath, waiting for Ryan to respond.

"You mean leave you? Take the job and move back to Florida and leave you behind?"

"Not forever. For a month. There is the chance you won't be happy there, you know. We might have ruined you." Sean tried to grin. "The transition from the easy pace and lavish lifestyle of resort club life to a sixty-hour week with a tie knotted around your neck and those uncomfortable-looking shoes you're wearing." He pointed to the stiff leather gleaming beneath cuffed pant legs. "It might be tougher than you think."

Ryan smiled, looking down at his shoes. The smile slid away from his face as he added, "I don't know what to do. I don't know if I could survive a month without seeing you."

"We would see each other at least once or twice. I've got a bit of savings for another plane ticket and you'll be raking in the dough, right?" He tried to keep his voice light. "Anyway, we still have a week to think this over." He stood and pulled his T-shirt over his head, smiling as Ryan made no attempt to hide his hungry gaze. "Now get naked and make love to me."

* * * * *

It felt good to knead the man's firm muscles. Ryan was standing over his client, rubbing scented oil into his flesh as the man sighed with appreciation. He felt totally at ease, in his element in his massage room. The work was physically involving but almost meditative for him. He ended his shift relaxed and happy, feeling he'd done a real service to the men who sought him out to ease their knotted muscles.

The thought of the job awaiting him back in Palm Beach filled him at once with excitement and trepidation. He recalled the hectic days, the pressure of responsibility, the headaches when things went wrong. None of that existed here. He almost felt as if he were cheating—life was too easy in this tropical paradise. On some level he didn't feel he was really pulling his weight. Somehow he'd internalized the message that in order for work to be valid and worthwhile, one had to suffer. If the work was fun and easy, it was suspect. "That's why they call it work," his father had been fond of saying if anyone complained in his presence about their job. Didn't he owe it to himself to take the job back in Florida? After all, he had nothing else lined up. He would be twenty-six soon with no car, no house, no savings to speak of. Wouldn't it be irresponsible to pass this opportunity by?

"Where's the man with the magic fingers?" Robert's deep bass boomed through the spa. Ryan glanced at the clock on the wall. He was nearly done with this client but he had another one scheduled right after.

When he was done, he left the man alone to dress and came out into the main area, wiping his fingers on a small white towel. "There you are! I've got this kink in my neck. I think I slept funny. I know you can fix me right up."

"Hi, Robert. I'm sorry, I think I have a client coming in a few minutes."

"Not anymore you don't." Robert grinned. "One of the perks of being the boss. I had Jiru check the schedules and he was able to put him on Justin's schedule with just a few minutes' wait time."

"Fine by me then," Ryan smiled. Though he'd been almost frightened of the large, leering man when they'd first met, he'd come to like him. His off-color jokes still made Ryan blush but he was a kind man who ran a high-class operation.

Robert sighed with pleasure as Ryan went to work on him. After a few minutes, he turned his head and said, "The season's almost over. Gerald and I have been talking it over and we'd like to offer you a full-time position, if you were interested. Anthony Keller had put in for a year-round appointment, but seeing as we fired the little bastard, he obviously isn't a candidate anymore. Since you joined the spa team, there's no one I'd rather go to. My offer of year-round employment is totally selfish."

Ryan was at once flattered and vexed by his offer. He'd convinced himself to accept the hotel job, trying it for a month as Sean had suggested. Though he dreaded the thought of a day without Sean, he felt he had to give the management job a try. He realized now he'd purposely failed to apply for the year-round spa position because that just threw another wrench into his plans. Now Robert had thrown it for him.

"I don't know what to say," he said finally. "I have a job waiting for me back in the States. A really excellent position in the hotel industry."

"As a massage therapist?"

"No," Ryan replied, "as a hotel assistant manager."

Robert laughed. "Why the hell do you want *that* kind of headache? Gerald and I used to try to manage this resort on our own, but it got too big for us and frankly we're lazy. We'd rather tan on the beach and mingle with the guests than actually handle the day-to-day nightmare of running this place! I can't believe you're leaping voluntarily into the fray." He sighed heavily. "Well, you're young yet. I guess that explains it. You're willing to toss away the offer of paradise to make a few bucks." He shook his head, adding, "Youth truly is wasted on the young."

When the massage was over and Robert was dressed, he came out of the room to where Ryan was folding a fresh stack of towels just out of the dryer. "Think it over, Ryan. You're a real asset around here. I'll have Gerald pull together the numbers. The package includes benefits and paid vacation. The best food the area has to offer. You won't find a finer stretch of beach anywhere in the world. Nor will you find a sexier group of drop-dead, gorgeous men." He guffawed and said in a stage whisper, "Don't tell Gerald I said that. But seriously, it's a sweet deal no matter how you look at it. Just ask Sean."

* * * * *

"I got this in Barbados the day I met your ferry." Sean held out an oblong box with a ribbon tied around it. They were sitting together in Sean's secret hideaway. It was the evening of Ryan's last night on the island. In the morning he was flying back to Florida

while Sean stayed behind. Sean had come so close to chucking it all nearly a hundred times during the past week. He would leave the island and start a new life with his lover in Florida. It would all work out because true love would conquer all.

Yet he was too honest with himself to go forward with it. Until Ryan had made a firm decision about the new job, it would be folly to toss away the life he loved here on the island. If he went now, he knew in his gut he would end up resenting Ryan and being angry at himself. If Ryan did decide the job was for him, that would be a different story.

Sean would then have to face the decision he wasn't yet ready to make. Though he knew it wasn't fair to Ryan, he found himself secretly hoping Ryan hadn't found his dream job. He hoped Ryan would miss the island as much he knew he would if forced to leave. As much as he wished he were different, he simply wasn't cut out for the life Ryan offered him back in the States.

Yet the thought of losing the one man he'd ever loved was slowly but surely cracking his heart in two. He told himself to have faith—things would work out for them as they were supposed to. All he had to do was be true to himself and open with Ryan, the rest would play out as it should.

Ryan took the box with pleased surprise. "For me?" He pulled at the satin ribbon and opened the box. Inside were two identical necklaces. Each had a small heart-shaped pendant on a long silver chain. Ryan lifted one out and said, "That's really pretty."

Sean took it from him and said, "Let me put it on for you. And you can put the other one on me. Whenever we feel lonely or miss each other, we can touch the heart and know it won't be long before we see each other again." They'd already made plans to meet on Sean's next day off, a week hence. Sean blinked back the tears that pricked his lids as he secured the clasp behind Ryan's neck.

"You're a real romantic, you know that?" Ryan turned toward him, smiling. He was fingering the little heart. "Way worse than any girlfriend I ever had."

"I admit it. I'm a hopeless romantic." Sean laughed too, warming in the love light shining from Ryan's eyes.

"Maybe a hopeful one," Ryan said. "Not such a bad thing to be." He placed the second necklace around Sean's neck and they leaned back together under the rising moon. In the morning Ryan would be leaving, possibly forever. But they still had a long, lovely night and Sean didn't plan to waste a second.

"I want to make love to you right here under the stars," he whispered. Slowly they began peeling one another's clothing from each other's body until the two men lay naked, silvered by the moon. They moved into one another's arms, their lips meeting and parting as they kissed. As it had since the first time they'd met, Ryan's scent still managed to intoxicate him—the hint of sandalwood and lemon that were in his cologne mingling with his own natural essence, designed specifically, it seemed to Sean, to drive him wild.

He ran his hands up and down Ryan's strong, sexy body, lingering at his cock before pulling him close into an embrace. He gripped Ryan's strongly muscled ass, gently massaging it as he rubbed his cock against Ryan's. His mouth was actually watering at the thought of taking Ryan's smooth, long shaft into it.

As if they'd discussed it beforehand, the lovers pulled back and shifted until they lay head to toe, curling into each other with one mind. Sean lovingly took Ryan's cock between his lips, reveling in his taste. He moaned against the rising shaft as he felt Ryan's warm mouth against him. As Ryan's cock elongated, he felt it snaking back toward his throat. He suckled it to full erection before pulling back to lick and kiss the silky-soft skin.

For a moment his mouth went slack as he felt Ryan grip his cock with strong fingers. He continued to lick the head of Sean's cock as he stroked and pumped the base. The pleasure was so distracting it was hard to focus. Ryan's cock nudged in his mouth, reminding him of his delicious duty.

For each jolt of ecstasy Ryan's mouth, tongue and fingers sent shivering through his body, he licked and suckled Ryan's cock in return, stroking his delicate balls. He wanted to take his time and savor every second. He wished time, just for once, would cooperate and stop for them. Instead it seemed to speed up as Ryan began to thrust, panting against Sean's cock as his balls tightened beneath Sean's fingers.

Sean slid his finger down along the cleft of Ryan's ass, touching his puckered entrance and lightly pressing against it. Ryan moaned and arched his hips as he ejaculated suddenly at the back of Sean's throat. Sean wished he could take him deeper, take all of him into himself somehow and never let him go.

His mind finally emptied of everything except the intensity of sensation. Ryan continued to lick and stroke him until he too exploded, his body rigid as tremors of shuddering bliss eddied through him. He lay completely spent, his body limp against the quilt beneath them. He wanted to swivel his body so he could take Ryan in his arms but he just couldn't summon the strength necessary to do it.

Ryan had the same thought in mind and, summoning more stamina than Sean had at that moment, he twisted around until he could take Sean into his arms. They exchanged a light kiss before falling apart, each lying flat and staring up at the now-dark sky studded with silver stars.

He felt Ryan's hand drop lightly onto his chest. "I wish this night would never end," he said softly, echoing Sean's thoughts. He wanted to say it never had to—that they could share a hundred nights, a thousand nights just like this one, if only Ryan would stay.

Instead he said nothing.

As Ryan slipped his hand into Sean's, he clasped it, wondering how he would ever let it go.

* * * * *

Ryan sank back against the hard faux leather sofa and loosened his tie, pulling it from around his neck and tossing it beside him. He glanced at the briefcase bulging with work he'd planned on tackling this evening and looked away. Reflexively he clicked on the remote, staring blindly at the rented TV screen. Everything in the small apartment was rented—he'd sold his old furniture when he'd lost his job and didn't yet have the money to buy what he wanted.

The day had been hectic and exhausting. The hotel hadn't yet opened but staff was on hand, being trained and introduced to the routines and standards senior management was putting in place. One employee had quit without notice and they were scrambling to replace her. Another employee had been caught stealing the silverware in the dining room and was promptly let go.

Though it was exciting to have a staff of his own to oversee, it was stressful as well. The headache that had bloomed during a seemingly endless, tedious staff meeting still lingered. Ryan realized midway through the long day he'd been clenching his jaw. It still ached, though not nearly as much as his heart.

They'd been apart just over a week. He and Sean had talked over the phone several times, but it had been awkward and painful, at least for Ryan. He couldn't bear to hear Sean's soft, deep voice, reminded keenly of his absence by its sound.

They had planned to meet that Saturday night, but Ryan had been called in for the weekend by his boss to work out their game plan before the rest of the staff arrived. When he'd explained this to Sean, the silence on the other end of the line had been deafening.

Finally Sean had said, "I understand, Ryan. You do what you have to."

"Next weekend, I promise," Ryan said. "I'll try to come out to you instead so you won't have to get someone to cover." *And so I won't get called in*, he thought.

Yet today as Ryan was finishing some paperwork in his office, his boss had stuck his head in his door and said, "Got any plans this coming weekend? I thought with the grand opening next Tuesday, we could spend some time going over the last-minute things that always pop up. Plan on bringing your toothbrush. We'll probably pull a couple of all-nighters." Ryan groaned inwardly but didn't dare refuse.

Just six months ago he would have given his eye teeth for this job. Yet as the days passed, he found himself less and less eager to go to work. Here he was actually dreading the thought of going in the following day. His mother had been calling daily, glad to have him home, wondering when he was coming by for dinner. So far he'd put her off, too exhausted at the end of the day to even think about the long drive to Naples.

He pushed himself up from the couch and went into the tiny kitchen. Opening the refrigerator door, he pulled out a beer. "How am I going to tell Sean I can't see him again this week?" he asked himself aloud.

Sinking into a hard plastic chair, he looked around the drab room, recalling the bungalow's warm, sunny kitchen. He smiled as he thought of the morning after they'd

shared their first kiss. So much had changed in his life since that day. Not only the realization he was in love with a man but his attitude about so many things.

Though he'd told himself it mattered, he couldn't seem to get excited about his new higher salary or the health and life insurance benefits. He had to force himself to feign interest when his boss went over the budget and targeted growth projections for the hotel during its first six months. His mind wandered constantly, jerking itself back as he tried to force himself to pay attention to things he needed to know if he was to succeed in his new position. He'd been so excited to get the job, proud of his sister's and parents' congratulations, certain Sean would come to see this was the right move for him – for them.

Sean had tried to warn him it might be an adjustment after the easy pace on the island. He'd dismissed him out of hand, confident he could throw himself back into the intensity of a real job. For a moment he allowed himself the daydream of walking away. Returning to the simple, satisfying life he'd stumbled on at the resort. He saw himself mixing his massage oils, setting the bottles in a neat row before placing a freshly washed white cotton sheet at the foot of his massage table. Why was that work somehow less worthy than this?

Yet he couldn't just walk away. Pete was depending on him. He couldn't just back out of his new job. Not only would he be letting his boss down, he'd be ruined in the hotel industry – tagged as unreliable.

He had yet to tell his parents about Sean. So far Susan was the only one who knew. She had been incredulous at first, demanding to know why he'd kept it a secret all these years. "It was a secret from me too," he had admitted. "I was so shut down, I didn't even know I was attracted to men. Sean helped me realize a lot of people, men especially, aren't very in tune with their real feelings. They do what's expected of them and behave in the way they're expected to. I never gave myself a chance to experience my real emotions. I know now it's why I never connected with the women I dated. They used to say I was cold – withholding. I didn't understand it was because my emotional connection was with men."

He'd been forced to confront the issue during the first few days on his new job. Though he was still sexually attracted to women as well as men, Ryan now admitted to himself he preferred men. It was just his genetic makeup. At work things had become a little awkward with Roberta, the front desk manager. He was used to women finding him attractive but in the past he'd at least considered them as potential sex partners just as a matter of course, flirting back if the girl was good-looking enough. Now he found he'd lost his interest in the game. When Roberta, quite an attractive brunette in her late twenties, had subtly and then not so subtly let him know she was interested, he'd finally said, "Sorry, I'm involved."

Yet he hadn't said he was involved with a *man*. He allowed her to presume he was with a woman, not even correcting her when she said, "So who's the lucky girl?"

It had been so easy back at the resort. Everyone was gay and that was that. If he were to make his life here, he knew he couldn't hide what and who he was. Nor did he

want to. So why had he blushed and turned away at her question? Was some part of him ashamed to be labeled gay?

Sean would understand. He'd warned Ryan it was going to be disconcerting to be thrown back into a world that assumed he was straight. Ah dear, wise, kind Sean. He'd left him in paradise to leap onto the treadmill of corporate life. For what? Money? Power? His parents' approval? All he really wanted, he suddenly knew, was to be with Sean back on the island.

He put his head in his hands, allowing himself for the first time to actually articulate the fear that had been growing in the pit of his belly since the first day he'd joined the ranks of Carrington Hotels. "What have I done?" he said softly to the empty room. "I'm in the wrong place but how in god's name do I get out?"

* * * * *

Sean lifted the yellow T-shirt and held it to his face, inhaling deeply. Mixed with the fresh cotton smell was Ryan's cologne and his own sensual essence. Sean had pulled the T-shirt from beneath the bed that morning, discovering it as he was changing the sheets on his bed.

He recalled the morning when the shirt must have fallen beneath the bed. Sean had stayed later than he usually did that morning. He often left before Ryan even woke. That morning he had lingered for some reason, watching Ryan dress and move about the room getting ready for his day.

He remembered how sexy Ryan had looked in the tight yellow shirt against his tan skin, clinging like a lover to his bulging biceps, the material pulled taut across his broad shoulders and back. On an impulse he'd playfully tackled Ryan, knocking him to the bed. He caught him in a wrestling hold and pinned him down, dipping his head to kiss his lips. At first Ryan seemed to surrender, letting Sean plunder his mouth with his tongue. All of a sudden though, Ryan had come alive, twisting his body and using his legs so that in a moment Sean found himself the one pinned beneath his lover.

Playfully they'd wrestled, pulling each other's clothing from their bodies as they tussled and laughed. Hungrily Sean had licked Ryan's smooth body, drawing his tongue over his nipples, down his belly, teasing past his rapidly rising cock to suckle his balls. He couldn't get enough of Ryan's smooth, supple skin. He loved the feel of his long, lean muscles beneath it.

"I have to go," Ryan had managed to gasp between sighs of pleasure as Sean stroked his shaft while planting kisses all over his body. Sean knew he should stop but he loved the look on Ryan's face as he held his cock while licking his way back up to Ryan's parted lips. He'd meant to stop sooner but had lost himself in Ryan's sensual heat, reveling in his strong, hard body as he again began to slip down toward Ryan's shaft, his own cock throbbing with desire.

Time had almost gotten away from them. Ryan was the one who stopped Sean just as he'd knelt, eager to take Ryan's shaft into his mouth. "No," he begged weakly,

though his cock strained toward Sean's lips. "Don't...oh, don't do that. Don't, Sean. I'll never get to work. I'm going to be late as it is."

Grudgingly Sean had let him up, annoyed Ryan was tied to a schedule but not wanting to get him in trouble. He'd been tempted to stay behind and masturbate, fiercely aroused from their little tryst, but he'd decided to save himself for Ryan later that night when the hours stretched ahead of them until dawn...

Sean sighed and again pressed the soft shirt to his cheek, stroking it as if it were Ryan's skin. It had been so hard to stifle his disappointment when Ryan told him he had to work on the day they'd planned to meet. He'd wanted to beg, to wheedle, to insist Ryan keep their date, but he knew that wouldn't be fair. Ryan's first week on the job was important. Sean well knew first impressions lasted. He knew Ryan would want to put his best foot forward, even if it meant sacrificing what little time they might have had.

Sean knew he had to prepare himself. This might well be the beginning of the end. Ryan might become so consumed with his new job that the resort and his love affair might begin to recede in importance. Removed from the lush, easy life on the island, he might forget the man waiting here, he might deny the love they'd shared, writing it off as a fling. He fingered the silver heart at his chest, his own constricting at the thought Ryan might forget him. He gripped the necklace in his anguish, inadvertently tugging so hard the thin silver chain was ripped from his neck.

He looked down in horror, suddenly sure the broken chain symbolized a loss he knew he couldn't face. He stood abruptly, annoyed with his melodramatic musings. "This is ridiculous. What I need is a good swim in the ocean to clear my head." He strode from the bungalow, leaving thoughts of Ryan behind in a puddle of yellow cotton, the silver heart and broken chain nestled in its folds.

Chapter Fifteen

"Pass the asparagus, son." Bill Weston, Ryan's father, beamed at him as he handed him the bowl.

"We're so proud of you, Ryan," Jane, his mother, added. "We knew you'd get back on your feet. Now you're on a path straight to the top! You'll probably be running the entire operation before you know it. Maybe the whole chain soon after that!" She patted his hand enthusiastically and he tried to smile. He had been dreading this dinner but knew he had to face it—either now or later.

He drained his wineglass and took a breath. "Here's the thing. I, uh, well, I resigned yesterday. I told them I realized it just wasn't right for me. I wanted to let them know before the place opened."

His father nearly choked on his mouthful of food. "You *what*?" he roared, his face reddening. "Westons are not quitters! You got the best job you've ever had and you *quit*? What the hell for?"

"Bill, calm down," Jane said softly. "I'm sure he has a good reason." She turned to stare at Ryan, her mouth tight with disapproval despite her understanding words.

"These past months at the resort club have really changed my perspective on a lot of things. I've realized, having stepped off the corporate treadmill, I really *like* being off it. Living in the Caribbean was like being in a paradise. A real paradise. And my work—it was very satisfying."

"You liked being a *waiter*?" his father said incredulously. "Is this what we spent over a hundred thousand dollars on tuition for?"

"No," Ryan said, flushing. He felt himself reverting to the defensive posture he so often seemed to fall into with his father. He made a conscious effort to remain in the moment, focusing on the positives. "Not that so much. But being a massage therapist was actually a very satisfying occupation. I liked the work and making people feel good. And the pace of life there is so different. Everything isn't about money, at least it isn't for me. It's about quality of life."

"As I understood it," his mother said, "that was a temporary job. A seasonal thing."

"Well, that's just it," Ryan said excitedly. "They offered to make me a full-time employee. Year-round. Free room and board and the food is fantastic."

"And the pay is what? Minimum wage?" his father shot back. "Working for room and board at some resort—is this how you want to spend your life? This is what you're throwing away your college education for?"

"Dad, calm down. I'm not throwing anything away. I'm twenty-five years old. I don't want to find myself stuck in a rut twenty years from now, bitterly regretting my

career choice, feeling trapped and miserable.” His father, an insurance salesman, whom Ryan had always suspected felt exactly that way, scowled down into his roast beef.

Finally he said, “Well, you’re ruined in the hotel business. You left them hanging. Number two man bails just before opening day. That’s the most irresponsible thing you’ve ever done. I can’t believe it.”

Ryan felt anger rising through his chest, words threatening to explode from his lips – words he knew he would regret. He forced himself to take a deep breath. He had expected this kind of reaction from his father. All his life he’d allowed him to dictate his path, always striving to please him and not always succeeding.

The decision to quit hadn’t been arrived at lightly. He’d sat up the entire night before, unable to sleep, desperately wishing he’d arranged for Sean to be near a telephone so they could talk it over before he did anything rash. Yet as the hours ticked by, he’d realized he’d already made the decision. The struggle was in how to break it to his boss – and to his parents.

His boss had surprised him. “Ryan,” he’d said, patting him on the back. “I’m kind of relieved you came to this decision when you did. I know you pretty well, you know. Even back at La Maison you were exhibiting signs of burnout. You’re a great worker and I was pleased to get you for this position, but I have eyes in my head. Since you got here, your heart’s obviously been somewhere else. You haven’t been truly focused. I see your eyes glazing during meetings – you seem lost in a fog. I was waiting for the old drive to kick in, the old fire you used to have. I figured maybe you just needed a little time to adjust after your vacation in the Caribbean.” As Ryan took in his words, he continued. “But apparently it’s more than that, isn’t it? You’ve come to the conclusion you aren’t cut out for this anymore, am I right?”

As Ryan nodded he added, “Better you figured it out now than six months from now when I’d really be pissed off.” He grinned, leaning back in his large, black leather chair. “Don’t worry. I’ve got three guys who were very good candidates. I would be surprised if at least one of them wasn’t still available. Just give me a day or two.”

Desperately relieved at how understanding his boss had been, Ryan had readily agreed. As he’d left that evening, he felt as if a crushing weight had been lifted from him. He allowed himself to finally admit the utter dread with which he had come to regard the prospect of the new demanding job without Sean by his side. He wondered suddenly if the massage job would still be available at Club Eros. He would call that evening and let Robert know he was interested. He laughed aloud with joy and excitement at the thought of returning to the bungalow, surprising Sean as Sean had surprised him that day on the ferry.

“Ryan, your father is talking to you.” His mother’s voice, sharp with reproach, interrupted his thoughts.

“I’m sorry. What did you say, Dad?”

“I said, is that job going to be enough to pay your student loans. Because you can sure as hell bet I’m not paying. I shelled out all I planned to on you, Ryan. I’m done.”

He brushed his hands together, demonstrating how done he was. Ryan knew his dad was just reacting right now, disappointed and afraid Ryan was making a poor decision. He tried to keep that in mind as he bit his tongue to keep from snapping back.

Gently he said, "I'll be fine, Dad. Don't worry. Have I ever come to you since college? Even when I was out of work for a while? I can take care of myself. I'm a grown man. Maybe I'll even be able to pay back the money you shelled out for school. I would like to someday —"

"No," his mother interjected. "We did that because we wanted to. It's what parents do." Jane and Bill glared at one another for a moment. Bill was the first to look away. In an artificially bright voice Jane added, "I saw Elizabeth Baxter the other day! That lovely girl you used to date before Haley." Ryan recalled his mother had already been planning the wedding on that one, actually telling Elizabeth she hoped they would give her many grandchildren. Unfortunately it was the day before Elizabeth had left Ryan for another guy she'd been seeing on the sly. "She was *very* interested to hear you were back in town and not seeing anyone. I know she would love a call. She was such a sweet girl."

Did he do it? He'd already dealt them the first sucker punch. Did he deliver a second just to get it all out of the way? Or should he keep his private life private? Who he slept with, who attracted him, what business was that of his parents? He thought of Sean, his handsome face, his kind, wide smile, his bright blue eyes. His heart ached as he recalled the tears brimming in them when they'd said their last goodbyes.

He not only wanted people to know he was in love with the most wonderful man on the planet, he wanted to shout it to the world! If he was serious about coming out in an open and honest way, why continue the charade? By outright lie or by omission, not telling the people closest to him about the most important thing in his life was dishonest. He'd told his dad he was a grown man. His parents were grownups too. How they chose to deal with his information was their business.

His mother was smiling hopefully at him, waiting for an answer regarding Elizabeth. Like a diver poised on the edge of the board, he steeled himself for the plunge.

"Mom," he said softly. Turning to his father, he added, "Dad. There's something else I have to tell you."

* * * * *

"Hello, Robert? This is Ryan. Ryan Weston."

"Ryan!" Robert's voice boomed over the line. "Tell me you've reconsidered! My back is in knots without you."

Ryan laughed. "Well, yes! That's why I called. To see if the offer was still good for a year-round position."

"Even if we'd filled it, I'd fire the bastard on the spot. But no, we've begun the interview process but haven't made any decision yet. The job is yours if you want it."

"I want it. I just need a few days to settle things here and then I'll report for duty. Oh, and Robert? Could you not mention this to Sean? I want to surprise him with my news."

"You got it."

* * * * *

Ryan and Sean had arranged a phone call for the next evening. They only spoke every few days since neither particularly liked using the telephone. Even so, Sean found himself counting the minutes on the days Ryan's call was due. Ironically, that night he'd nearly missed it, having wandered farther down the beach than he'd realized, lost in thought.

He'd been trying to convince himself he could live in the States again. Palm Beach had beautiful beaches. They could be happy there. Why was he so stubbornly selfish to insist this life was the only life for him? Didn't partners compromise? The days once so peaceful, full of quite joys and satisfaction, seemed empty now that Ryan was no longer there.

Surely he could find that same peace and contentment again as long as he had Ryan by his side? Glancing at the setting sun, he realized he'd better hurry or he'd miss Ryan's call. He was going to tell him straight out he'd made up his mind. He would move to Florida and they would make a life together there if Ryan would have him.

Jack, the resort's accountant, was manning the desk since a full-time receptionist wasn't needed during the off-season. He was typing something into his computer when Sean breathlessly raced to the front desk. "I was wondering where you were. Ryan Weston, holding on line three." Jack held out the phone with a smile. It was cordless and Sean walked over to a corner of the room facing the wide picture window as he said, "Ryan?"

"Sean! I was worried you'd forgotten our phone date." Ryan laughed and Sean's heart clenched with bittersweet happiness. Just Ryan's voice was enough to make him smile. He realized he was grinning so hard his cheeks hurt.

"I'm sorry," he replied. "I didn't forget. I was coming to a decision."

"Yeah? What decision is that?"

"I'm ready to move. I want to move to Florida and make a go of it with you there." There was silence at the other end of the phone. Then Ryan began to laugh. "What's so funny? You think I'm kidding? I'm not kidding! I've been doing a lot of soul-searching this past week and a half, and I know now that home for me is where you are. Even if it's Timbuktu."

"Sean, that is the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me. Have you said anything to Robert and Gerald about this?"

"No, not yet. I wanted to tell you first."

"Well, do me a favor. Don't tell them until I get there, okay?"

"You're still coming this weekend?" Sean was grinning again, wide as a Cheshire cat. "You had mentioned you might not be able to."

"Nope. Got out of it. I'll be there! Three days until I can hold you again. Until I can kiss you again."

"I can't wait."

"Meanwhile, don't say anything to Robert or Gerald, okay? There's something I want to discuss with you first. Promise?"

"Well okay, but how come? Shouldn't I let them know as soon as possible so they can line up a replacement? That'll be that much sooner we can be together."

"A few days won't matter. I can't tell you yet. Just trust me on this, okay?"

A little mystified, Sean agreed.

* * * * *

Sean stood at the large window of the airport in Barbados, watching as the passengers descended from the plane onto the tarmac. From inside the small terminal he could make out Ryan's long blond hair, shining like gold in the sun. He strode quickly toward the building. Once through the gate, his gaze landed on Sean leaning against a wall, his hands shoved in his jeans, his repaired necklace once again around his neck.

When he saw Sean, Ryan's face lit up with such evident joy Sean was deeply touched. His dark thoughts and lonely nights these past days had sometimes focused on the sincerity of Ryan's feelings. How could he have just gone and taken a job, placing career over their love? What had meant everything to Sean had just been a gay fling for Ryan, nothing more. Even as his mind lurked in these dark, unproductive places, a part of him knew it wasn't true. Yet seeing that sunny smile so spontaneous, so heartfelt, scattered once and for all the ashes of doubt and mistrust.

"Sean! What're you doing here? You're supposed to surprise me on the ferry!" Ryan laughed and they hugged, gripping hard as if they'd been apart for a very long time. When they finally let go of one another, Ryan said, "I have to go to baggage claim. I brought an extra suitcase."

"For a weekend?"

"Yeah, well. I had some stuff I wanted to bring. You'll see. Sexy stuff."

"Oh no," Sean laughed. "Not more scarves!"

"Much better than scarves," Ryan said with a sly grin, comically waggling his eyebrows.

* * * * *

In fact Ryan had clothing and personal possessions in the large suitcase he'd packed, knowing he planned to stay far longer than the day and a half Sean was expecting. It was all he could do to keep from blurting out he was home for good. Yet he kept the secret a little longer, wanting to wait for just the right moment. He didn't want to share such an important decision in public.

When they finally arrived at their bungalow Ryan followed Sean in and dropped his suitcase on the floor, closing his eyes and holding out his arms as if welcoming an old friend. In the few months he'd lived there, he'd come to think of it as home. He loved its sense of space, even though the room wasn't a large one. The design was open and airy, the white furniture and pearl gray stone floors giving it a clean, fresh feel. He peeked into his room, the room he'd basically stopped using since they'd begun sleeping together each night, wrapped in each other's arms. They could turn it into a den or something, he thought happily, once he told Sean his news.

Without discussing it, they both headed toward Sean's bedroom, stopping by the bed only long enough to pull off their clothes before tumbling together to the mattress. Ryan had meant to tell Sean then, but Sean found his mouth first, locking it into a long, lingering kiss that wiped Ryan's mind clean of thought.

They leaned into each other as they kissed, breaking away every few moments to smile and whisper. "God, I missed you," Ryan murmured, nuzzling against Sean's cheek. "I hate being away from you."

"You don't have to be. Not anymore," Sean answered, seeking Ryan's lips again. Ryan pulled Sean close, pressing his cock against Sean's belly. He could feel Sean's erection hard against him.

"I want to make love to you," he whispered in Sean's ear. "The way you did to me that first time." Sean rolled to his back, his eyes glittering, his lips wet and parted. Ryan reached into the nightstand, pulling out a condom and lubricant. In seconds he was leaning over his lover, running his finger gently along the cleft between Sean's ass cheeks. Sitting back, he licked the fat, spongy head of Sean's cock, savoring its musky heat.

Sean groaned, arching up toward him. "Make love to me." He lifted his hips, offering himself to Ryan, who didn't need a second invitation. Carefully he pressed the head of his cock against Sean's tight, puckered hole. Gently he eased himself inside, all the while watching Sean's face.

Sean reached down, grabbing his own shaft in his hand, slowly moving it up and down. Ryan found himself captivated by the sensual motion. It was incredibly hot to watch Sean fondle himself, his strong hand moving over his blood-engorged cock, his head thrown back with an expression of absorbed lust on his face. The voyeur in Ryan almost forgot what he was doing, so intent was he on watching his sexy lover.

Almost, but not quite. For as Sean moved, Ryan's cock slipped in a little farther. Refocused on his task, he pushed into the yielding opening, groaning with pleasure as the tightly muscled tunnel gripped him. He began to move in and out, reveling in the

clench of muscle trying to keep him in and then thrust him out. Sean's hand was still on his cock, moving in sensuous, seductive movements. Unconsciously Ryan began to move in rhythm with Sean's hand, gliding in and out of his ass, though never quite all the way out.

Their sighs and moans became a steadily rising chorus of ecstasy. Having been apart for so many days, it wasn't long before they were both panting, near the edge all too quickly. Ryan squeezed his eyes shut, unable to focus any longer on Sean's sexy performance. He thrust deep inside his ass, his hands pressed against the mattress on either side of his lover. Sean's eyes were shut too, his mouth slack, his fingers flying over his cock.

Ryan felt himself hurtling over the edge of orgasm, nearly losing consciousness as he ejaculated in staccato bursts. Sean wasn't far behind, spurting his pearly seed across his stomach and chest. On an impulse Ryan leaned forward, licking the salty offering from Sean's hot skin until there wasn't a trace. Carefully withdrawing his cock from its warm hiding place, he tossed the condom and collapsed beside Sean, whose face had the beatific expression of a baby drunk on mother's milk.

They lay in bed for at least an hour, sometimes lightly dozing, sometimes talking in soft murmurs as they allowed their bodies to recover. Ryan, ready to share his secrets at last, said, "I told my parents about you." Sean, who was stroking Ryan's hair as he rested his cheek against Sean's chest, said, "Yeah? How did that go?"

"Not so great but not so bad either in retrospect." Ryan didn't mention the conversation that had preceded it, still saving the news like a secret jewel he would soon reveal. "My mom was going on about some girl I used to date and how great it would be if I called her now that I was back in town. I decided it was as good a time as any to take the plunge and admit the 'awful truth'." Sean could feel Ryan grinning against his chest. Ryan continued. "I said, 'Mom. Dad. I have something to tell you.' I guess they knew by the tone of my voice it was serious because they both stared at me, not even chewing as they waited for I don't know what."

"That must have made you a little nervous."

"A lot nervous. But I imagined you there with me. I thought about all your advice and I knew I could handle it."

"So I take it they didn't receive the news with unmitigated joy?"

"Not exactly," Ryan laughed. "I told them I'd met someone. Someone at the resort. I told them I was in love. For the first time in my life I was in love with someone."

"But that's wonderful, dear!" Ryan imitated a woman's voice, making it higher pitched than any woman would really speak. Sean couldn't help but laugh. "'What's her name?'" Ryan went on in singsong. "'Do we know her family?'"

"His name," I corrected her. They both looked completely blank. My dad caught on first. His face got all red and he spluttered for a few seconds before finally repeating, "His name? Did you say *his* name?" This time the voice Ryan used was booming and

full of anger. Sean gently stroked his shoulder, aware this was probably easier for Ryan to relate with his face hidden, aware he was using humor to cover the pain that must be there. Ryan boomed again, “‘You mean to tell me my only son is a goddamned queer?’ ‘Bill!’” Again the breathless high-pitched imitation. “‘The word is *gay* and since when did you become a bigot?’” Ryan gave a long sigh and then continued. “Since I saw Mom was going to be the sympathetic one, I began to speak only to her. I ignored my father’s snide comments and tried to tell her what had happened. Not the details of course. They still don’t know this is a gay resort and I don’t plan on telling them anytime soon. One shock at a time, I suppose.” He laughed ruefully and Sean laughed with him, giving his shoulder an affectionate squeeze. “I explained how it just sort of happened. That you are the first person I’ve ever been able to connect with on an emotional level, and that we realized we were physically attracted as well. I even tried to explain your continuum theory but they looked kind of blank about that so I just dropped it.”

“You okay with it? I mean with their reactions?”

“Yeah, I guess. My dad actually called me later to apologize, though I’m sure my mom put him up to it. They’re really okay – they just need some time to get used to it. Hell,” he added, raising his head to smile at Sean, “I needed time to get used to it! My mom’s biggest thing was grandchildren. She kept saying over and over, what about the grandchildren. It was kind of weird. Dad finally told her to knock it off. He reminded her she had another child and unless Susan was keeping similar secrets, she’d get her damned grandkids someday.”

Sean leaned down to kiss the top of Ryan’s head. “I’m really proud of you, Ry. I know that took a lot of courage to stand up and tell them.”

Ryan sat up and crossed his legs. “Sean, I have something to tell *you*.” The sheet was casually draped over his cock and one thigh. Sean resisted an impulse to pull it away. He could tell from Ryan’s tone it was something important. In spite of himself he tensed, waiting. Unconsciously Ryan fingered the silver heart pendant on its chain. Sean had been pleased to see he was wearing it still. “I told them something else before I dropped the gay bomb on them.” He paused a beat before adding, “I told them I’d quit my job.”

Sean cocked his head, confused. For a second he thought Ryan must mean his resort job. But that didn’t make sense. He hadn’t quit, he’d just left at the end of the season as initially agreed. “Wait,” he finally said. “What? You told them you quit your job? Your hotel job?”

Ryan smiled and put his hand on Sean’s arm. “I did. I quit. I resigned. I gave them my two-week notice.”

“But,” Sean struggled to a sitting position, facing Ryan, “I don’t understand. I told you I’d move! I’m willing to go to Florida! You don’t have to quit. That was what you wanted – the dream job you’d gunned for, no?”

“I know you said you’d move, and that was the most amazing thing ever. Here you were willing to give everything up – this great life you’ve carved out for yourself in this

little corner of paradise. You were ready to give it all up for me. I can't tell you what that means. But I didn't quit the job for you, Sean. At least not directly. I took to heart what you said about resentments building between us if one or the other of us went against their heart in order to please the other. I thought about this long and hard. Each day I was there it just got worse."

He shook his hair from his face and tucked it behind his ears, leaning forward with an earnest expression. "Remember when you said this place might have ruined me for returning to the real world? Well, you were right. I was getting more stressed each day. I found myself daydreaming during important meetings. I was missing you, sure, but not just you. I miss my massage therapy, believe it or not. I miss taking care of my clients. I miss the easy pace here—the time we have to enjoy a beautiful sunset. Shit, there wasn't one day I got out of work before the damn sun had already set! I realized I'm going to be twenty-six next week and I was locking myself into something that wasn't right for me! I want to be here. Here with you in paradise. Our own personal piece of heaven right here on earth." He smiled shyly at Sean.

Sean shook his head in stunned amazement. He really had been willing to give up his life here in order to be with Ryan. And he realized he too hadn't done it for Ryan but for himself. He'd come to the conclusion his life would be happier and more fulfilled with Ryan in it, and if that meant leaving a place and a job he loved, it no longer seemed much of a sacrifice. Ryan hadn't cajoled or convinced him—he'd arrived at the decision on his own.

"Ryan," he said, "if it's not too late to change your mind, I'm ready to try it back in the States."

"I want to be here, Sean. Right here. Yes, because of you, but not only because of you. I want to be here for *me*."

"And what about Robert and Gerald? Are they onboard?"

Ryan grinned. "Yep. They can keep a secret too, thank god. I told Robert three days ago when I made the decision. I asked him to let me tell you in person."

Sean was nodding his head. "So *that's* why he came by the pool the other day with this shit-eating grin on his face. He asked me how I was doing. I probably mumbled something incoherent at him. He kept grinning like the cat that ate the canary. I thought it was a little odd at the time but I forgot about it until now."

The realization all his dreams were coming true was finally beginning to hit home. Sean leaned back against the headboard, almost dizzy with emotion. Ryan wasn't here for a day and half! Ryan was home to stay. "I've heard fairy tales can come true, but until now I didn't really believe it. Welcome home, Ryan." He opened his arms and as Ryan moved into them, he knew he was finally home as well.

About the Author

Claire Thompson has written numerous novels and short stories, all exploring aspects of Dominance & submission. Ms. Thompson's gentler novels seek not only to tell a story, but to come to grips with, and ultimately exalt in the true beauty and spirituality of a loving exchange of power. Her darker works press the envelope of what is erotic and what can be a sometimes dangerous slide into the world of sadomasochism. She writes about the timeless themes of sexuality and romance, with twists and curves to examine the 'darker' side of the human psyche. Ultimately Claire's work deals with the human condition, and our constant search for love and intensity of experience.

Claire welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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