



Joanne Kells

HELD CAPTIVE



Held Captive

Joanne Kells

I would like to thank my wonderful husband and children who have been so patient with me. They have supported me so much since I started writing again. Your encouragement has been truly outstanding.

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Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Aaron stood watching the waves take away his dreams, held captive in the mind of the boy he used to be. His life seemed void of the things that made it a life. His was a life numbed by the passing of time, and now a childhood crush was reborn. He remembered how it was back then, and how it was now.

While growing up, Aaron craved Nathan's attention. He felt a stream of light rip through his subconscious when he was alone at night. Frustrating dreams would wake him in the secrecy of his room, where darkness allowed his mind to wander. He felt safe because no-one could witness his thoughts and desires. He would stroke himself, thinking of his best friend's brother, hoping the sounds he made would not be heard when he finally came. Nathan's touch was always out of reach, but his presence was constantly there.

Now Nathan was visiting, looking at Aaron as he always had—as his brother's best friend. Every time Aaron was around him, Nathan seemed untouchable. Time always stood still, inevitably making it seem that much longer because of the gut-wrenching knowledge that he would never have Nathan. Now Nathan was back with his partner Greg, and they seemed happy most of the time; in love and content.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Aaron thought of this as he watched the waves crashing upon the shore. The heaviness of need thrashed and crushed his heart, which felt full of loss. He was restless, confusion plunging him into the waves of uncertainty; they almost called to him, spurring him on. Out here he was free, challenged by the elements. On dry land, he was sinking fast but safe on solid ground.

He wanted to feel Nathan's touch, warmth, and breath against his skin. Even with the ocean's constant flow, he knew that Nathan would be swept away by the undulating undercurrents and be the island always out of reach.

He wondered whether he should stay away and not keep going back to Dan's house whenever he could. The night before, beers were drunk, stories told around the campfire on the beach. Nathan sat huddled up far enough away from Greg for Aaron to notice something wasn't right. Dan made jokes about the hot women wanting his body every five minutes and how he needed a rest. But Aaron said very little, rendered speechless as always whenever Nathan was around.

At times Aaron felt Greg's eyes piercing straight through him: he would look up and wonder what Greg's problem was. They were looks that could shoot down a fighter plane. Last night had been no different. The party at the beach turned out to be nothing more than a silent fight for territory, where uncharted waters lay ahead to be conquered.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

However, he couldn't stay away no matter how hard he tried; he always found his way back. To be near Nathan was better than not seeing him at all.

"Hey."

"Hey, I dropped by to see Dan."

"That's cool; I think he's on the phone. You want to come in?"

Nathan had opened the door with nothing else on but a pair of faded blue jeans, slung low on his hips, coupled with his incredible smile. Aaron was fully aware that at some point he would have to speak, but Nathan's body—along with his light blond trail down to unseen treasures—rendered him completely speechless for the umpteenth time. Aaron's fight to regain control came at a price, as his eyes lingered far too long on the area where it was rude to stare.

Dan thumped down the stairs two at a time, waking Aaron out of his treasure-trail fantasy. Nathan saw shock and confusion written all over Aaron's face as he continued to stand behind the threshold that came between them. He recognized *that* look in his brother's friend, Aaron's deep brown eyes showing an unforgotten longing, plain and simple. There was a fleeting look at each other before Dan smacked Nathan on the back, oblivious to anything.

"Hey Aaron, let's go get us something to eat, I'm starved. Later, bro."

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Aaron followed Dan and chanced a glance in Nathan's direction before he looked away quickly. Nathan felt the warmth building up within him again. He knew the feeling only too well as he watched Aaron walk away, watching the way he moved. He was left with *those* uneasy feelings again which he wished he didn't still have. Each time they saw each other, the knot in Nathan's stomach was more difficult to ignore.

"Something to eat" was normally Harry's Good Food Restaurant near Jacksonville Beach, Florida, and good food it was. Aaron and Dan saw some of the old crowd headed in the same direction. It wasn't the same though—it had been years since Aaron had felt the sweet breeze of life sweep over his body with carefree abandon, like when he was sailing. That relaxed young man had been lost years ago, leaving just an ache, empty and deep—that was the only way to describe it. He had been seventeen years old, the age where things were irreversibly set into play.

Aaron recalled the years spent at the restaurant as they walked toward the entrance. Harry's was a restaurant that he had taken Ginny to many times, but not anymore. Those were times when responsibility was left up to the grownups. Time passed them all by, and Aaron knew just as much now as he did then. There was nothing new, because new would mean that he had to accept change. He was more than ready when he was seventeen, desperate in fact, but now, well, he didn't know how.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

He couldn't remember a time when he didn't feel different, and he was so tired of the constant pain twisting at his heart. There were seven years where Ginny had always been so close by to make him feel normal. Now, Nathan—and he felt as if he was back to square one and on his own more than ever.

Aaron remembered how hurt Ginny had been. His unwanted memory of six months ago, when they had finally had “that talk.” When she had seen in his eyes everything that she had suspected all along but had been unwilling to accept.

“Saw Ginny the other day. I take it she's still mad at you, because she ignored me.”

Knocked sideways by Dan's adept capacity to read his mind, Aaron took a deep breath. This wasn't the first time, and it probably wouldn't be the last, where Dan was able to jump into his very thoughts. Sometimes Aaron believed Dan was a secret agent ready to unmask him.

“Yeah, you can say that again. She doesn't talk to me anymore. Feel so bad about how I treated her over the years—just wonder whether she'll ever forgive me.”

“Can't think like that—you just have to let go and move on. Why'd you break up anyway?”

“Because things became difficult.”

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

“Oh... difficult.” Said more under his breath, but Aaron also knew that Dan wouldn’t even attempt to understand, which was fine by him. He didn’t know how to explain it anyway.

“I think she knew it was coming. Doesn’t make it any easier though; we just drifted apart.”

“In what way?”

“In every way. Something was missing. I don’t know, just....”

“I don’t think it’s possible for Ginny to have anything missing.”

“Shut up. Jesus, all you think about is sex. That’s my ex you’re talking about.”

“I’m just messing with you, chill out. I need food, and I’ve just seen Shelly go inside—I’d like to give her my number if you know what I mean.”

“Jesus, you are so sick.”

“Yeah, and she loves it.”

Heads turned at the sound of the ding of the old wooden door when Aaron and Dan walked in. Aaron allowed himself to be welcomed and enveloped in past and new conversation for a while at least. Inevitably his thoughts were drawn back to Ginny but for the wrong reasons. They had everything to do with who he was and how hurt she had been because of

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

it. Their last real talk had been about their flagging relationship, which ended with the realization that they had been pulled apart because of their inability to talk to each other about what was wrong. He knew Ginny had seen something in him, something which he wasn't willing to admit, but he knew it to be there all the same. Admitting that he only went out with Ginny because it was easier than admitting what he really wanted and had lost didn't seem to be the obvious choice.

However, that night, Ginny had done it for him. She said it out loud, asked the inevitable question. Aaron's only response was to nod, still so scared to see it for what it was. Now, old wounds were being re-opened, scrubbed, and left to bleed. Those familiar temptations, strong and unyielding, to scratch an eternal itch were knocking at the door. It scared him to death because he knew, in spite of everything, that once the itch was scratched he wouldn't be able to stop.

Now, Aaron lay awake unable to sleep—something he did a lot lately. Just staring into empty space, he wondered what things could have been like if his life path had been different. He turned down college after graduating in favor of looking after his mother, who was sick with cancer. His father had left them when he was very young, never to be seen again. Aaron really had no other choice, and after his mother's death two years later, it took him a long time to put the pieces of his life back together again. He managed to get into teaching college, struggling between working and getting to class to further his education. Through his love of boats and water, he was guided into the yachting world by a close

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

friend of his mother's. He thought it was a perfect life, becoming a deckhand, enjoying the freedom that the open water offered him. Where no one asked questions and he could remain invisible. Then months at a time escaping on yachts of all sizes, sailing rough and smooth waters around the world.

It was the ideal life for him to hide from who he was, to run away from the world he didn't feel he belonged in. With no mother or father to guide him, he felt lost, alone. He would leave Ginny for long periods of time, thinking that she would get tired of him, but she would wait for his return, hoping that whatever was wrong with him would finally be right. But that was always the problem—it never would be. So he kept sailing until running away became harder because the ghosts of something lost years ago haunted his days and nights and everything in between. The ocean became lonelier the more he had no one to share it with. That's when he made the decision to settle, give Ginny time, and work towards the Royal Yachtmaster certificate to become an instructor.

The relationship with Ginny remained stable for a while, but finally, and long overdue, he couldn't hide who he really was from her when he was finally around long enough for her truly to see him. For Aaron, Nathan was always present in his memory, and he wondered what his mother would think of her son and his secret thoughts, whether she would be proud of the thing he found difficult to accept but even more difficult to ignore. He cried long and hard on those days because he would never get to find out. He missed his

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

mother's love and warmth, wishing over and over again that he could have been honest with himself but more importantly with her. Knowing the life he yearned for, and the things he wanted out of it, kept him from going insane.

Aaron looked beyond the darkness of the room and wondered what his life would have been like if he hadn't run away from Nathan that night on the beach seven years ago. He felt his skin tingle as it always did when he thought of that time long ago when, for the briefest of moments, he had been free to give into his feelings.

"Hey, Aaron, what you doing all the way over here? The party's over there."

Aaron looked over to see the flickering fire; his friends were laughing, seeming to be having a good time. He was sitting on a rock overlooking the calm of the water, hoping that Nathan would leave the group to find him. Something had happened between them that summer, something unexpected. The need Aaron had to be around Nathan all the time left him unable to think of anything else. Shoulders rubbing together when they walked back from the beach, rapid and excitable conversation about music, art and writing, were moments he cherished. Underlying it all was the desperate understanding that Nathan was heading to new pastures after the summer, moving to New York where he would take a piece of Aaron with him. Aaron had been so scared of what he was feeling but even more scared to not feel it at all. That night he wanted to be on his own with Nathan, if nothing more than to "just be," because time was running out. All his confusion, his

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

hopes, and his dreams were moving away, leaving him all alone with feelings he didn't know what to do with.

"Just needed some time to think, you know."

"Ahhh, thinking's overrated!"

"Yeah well, seems I'm doing a lot of it lately."

Nathan sat down beside Aaron, rubbing shoulders, which by now was as familiar to Aaron as feeling the sea washing over his skin on a hot summer's day.

"So what's got you thinking, little dolphin?"

He swallowed hard. Little dolphin was Nathan's endearment given to him years ago because of his love of the ocean. He couldn't stop the blood rushing to an area of his body that was hard to ignore.

He tried to concentrate on the view ahead, unsure what to say, his heart thumping.

"You think you'll come back for visits and stuff?"

"Of course. I might be back before you guys know it! I might crash and burn out there."

"I doubt it."

"Why d'you say that?"

"Because you've got talent, real talent."

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Nathan leaned his bodyweight briefly against Aaron, pressing their shoulders harder together.

“Thanks Aaron, I appreciate that. You know, you have a special something too. I see how you come to life when Richard invites you to race his yacht with him. You look so at home. I can see real peace in your eyes, an amazing contentment when you’ve been out on the ocean all day. Promise me you’ll do something with it, keep sailing, do something worthwhile with the love you have for it.”

They looked at each other then, the swell in Aaron’s heart superseding anything that the sea could produce. He could feel Nathan’s breath, see the longing in his eyes; he was sure of it. Aaron was seventeen and knew nothing but found everything when he finally took that small step between fantasy and reality. It was so much better than good, so perfect. The sweet, chaste kiss that followed encapsulated Aaron’s wants and desires. As their lips touched, he felt Nathan pull back from the unexpected sweep of Aaron’s tongue against his mouth gently seeking entrance within. The resistance lasted no more than a second, and then Nathan allowed Aaron to explore.

Aaron moved one hand around to gently cup the back of Nathan’s head. Breathing grew in urgency as their kiss deepened, tongues tasting each other for the very first time. Aaron’s inexperience showed in the urgent need surging within him, pushing his tongue further in. He heard deep, lustful moans before Nathan suddenly pulled back, the older man shaking and holding onto Aaron’s face with both hands.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Aaron tried to kiss him again, searching for his mouth, demanding the kiss back. The last intimate touch was the brush of Nathan's lips against his own before Aaron heard the words that would haunt him for years afterwards.

"No, Aaron, please, I can't."

Lying in bed now, those words could still bring the numbness of time and loneliness into his very soul if he allowed them to. He had left Nathan on that rock and had run away, confused, uncertain, and desperate. The truth was, not much had changed since then.

IT WAS a few days later when Aaron took the book out of its hiding place, smoothing over the front cover with trembling fingers. He had bought it as soon as it came out. Every page secretly turned gave him comfort and brought him a little bit closer to Nathan. Within the pages, Nathan had created a fictional world where, although names and places had been changed, the story seemed all too real and familiar. It took Aaron years to understand why Nathan had said those words to him that night on the beach. At the age of twenty-one and reading it for the very first time, Aaron had more understanding of what Nathan had felt all that time ago. After all, it was a story that he knew all too well. Sunken deeply into the weathered pages, Aaron realized the turmoil Nathan had gone through that summer. Where

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

temptation had threatened to unravel him, the only answer had been to do nothing about it.

Aaron quietly sat on his bed and sighed, knowing that Nathan's visit was nearly over. He stayed away from the house because he didn't really trust himself. Nathan had a partner, and it seemed that no matter what the story was in Nathan's book, things had changed for the author now. Seven years since that kiss, three years since the book had been published; everything seemed to be a life time ago. The time for them to be together had long passed. Every time he saw Nathan, the yearning and ache got a little worse, his desire to touch and be held threatening to pull him down like a drowning man.

He absently got up and made his way downstairs and into the kitchen to get a soda, placing the book on the work surface. It was Saturday, normally a time for him to go yachting with his mother's old friend Richard. However, not today; Richard was away for a couple of weeks, so Aaron had arranged to see Dan instead and go to the beach. Aaron missed Richard's presence and had been so grateful for all his help and support over the years. He was the closest thing Aaron had to family. When he wasn't around, it reminded Aaron of how alone he truly was in a house where his mother had been sick for so long.

There was a knock at the door. Aaron looked at his watch; Dan was early. He promised to be on time, but Dan more often than not had his own agenda about what "on time" actually meant. Being early, however, was a first. They

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

had arranged to take the hour's ride to a secret beach spot. Aaron needed to get out and forget for a while. The water always gave him that much-needed freedom.

He opened the door and just stared, the drowning man inside him clutching at an invisible life raft that didn't seemed to be doing its job well. Squeezing the door's frame, Aaron's fingers ached with the willingness he had to remain upright. Nathan stood still, looking directly at him. Aaron felt a huge need to look away, but it was impossible. Nathan was here, on his front porch. It was impossible to do anything but stare.

"Hi, Aaron."

"Umm... hi... what... thought you were Dan. What are you doing here?" The words choked him.

Nathan put his hands in his pockets and toed the ground. Aaron could see his awkwardness. Why would he come here when they couldn't even be around each other anymore?

"Want to talk to you, before I leave, please."

Aaron didn't want to let him in; couldn't let him in. Being alone with Nathan would be just as impossible as turning him away.

"Okay."

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Nathan walked past him and into the sitting room. Books on the ocean and boating were stacked precariously on the dining room table. A painting of a yacht plunging into rough water hung above the fireplace. The realization of how dangerous the ocean could be was there for all to see.

“Wow!” Nathan stood looking at it; the striking colors of blue and gold sky and the whitewashed swell of the ocean were an outstanding contrast. “It’s amazing, Aaron, beautiful.” He turned to look at Aaron who had moved and was now standing beside him.

“Thanks, my mom painted it—a memory of a day out with Richard and how rough the sea was then. She was amazing with color.”

Nathan kept looking at him. Aaron could feel his face becoming red with the uncertain heat that was building slowly in the room like a simmering volcano. He didn’t want to talk to Nathan; there was too much left unsaid for so long.

“You want a drink?” was all he could think of to say. He didn’t wait for the answer as he walked away, his only concern to get as far away as possible from Nathan.

He felt Nathan behind him as he opened the refrigerator to get a soda, realizing too late that the kitchen wasn’t the place for them both to be. Nathan had his book in his hand when Aaron turned around, his private world invaded finally by the one person he didn’t want to show it to.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Aaron felt his body shaking as he reached out his hand to take the book from him. Instead, Nathan didn't let go. Both hands gripped the book that was all about everything that once was and could have been. Aaron pulled a little harder to free the book from Nathan's grasp, only to pull Nathan with it until toes were touching and their warm breath mingled together.

"You read it?"

"Yes, I... I..." The words fell away, and Aaron was confused about what to say. He couldn't explain the comfort the book had given him over the years.

The silence was piercing, broken only by the sounds of the two men breathing hard. The attraction, stronger than it had ever been, surged forward as Nathan put his other hand up, stroking the line of Aaron's jaw. Aaron leaned into it, closing his eyes and savoring his touch.

"Aaron," Nathan whispered. Aaron opened his eyes to see the desperation and confusion Nathan's eyes held. Like that time before, it was a pure need to connect to his soul mate, the one person he needed above anyone else—the only person who could make him truly whole. He tentatively moved his face closer, Nathan's mouth slightly open. Aaron let go of the book, bringing his hands to either side of Nathan's face. Though he searched for anything that would tell him to stop, there was nothing but the longing he could see deep within Nathan too.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Aaron had spent seven years of losing so much of himself without Nathan that he felt broken and incomplete. So, when the surrender came, it came with a force that neither one could stop. Mouths crashed together, fused to each other, and the men held on for dear life as the book fell to the floor, neither wanting to let the other go. Moans muffled with breathless desire showed their frantic urgency. All their wants poured into each other with the explosion of suppressed longing and desire that stirred within them. Where tongues were twined, Aaron and Nathan melted together with desperate need, both men unable to think of anything but their long overdue union.

Aaron heard himself moaning loudly, unable to stop as he started backing Nathan quickly towards the stairs, needing to feel his touch all the way down. The kiss was not nearly enough as they both pushed and pulled at each other, not knowing what body part to touch first. They needed each other all at once. The insane feeling Aaron felt growing by the second had been something uncontrollable for years when he thought about a moment like this late at night, in bed alone. To have Nathan within reach, to have him in his grasp, to finally make contact was all he ever wanted.

The kiss was nothing like the first time, when it had been unsure, inexperienced. This kiss was a hurried persuasion, a declaration of what was to follow. Aaron couldn't control what was going to happen now; he needed to feel Nathan inside him. He needed to have the light switched on in his body. Darkness had been ever-present through the

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

years without Nathan and Aaron was tired of feeling lost within it.

“Nathan... Nathan... Nath—” He could barely get the words out, full of whispered wonder that this was finally happening.

They looked at each other for the briefest of moments before everything seemed to get out of hand. Nathan was just as desperate as Aaron, pushing all his body weight onto him. Aaron found himself lying on the stairs with Nathan attacking his neck, fingers digging into his dark hair, sharp teeth biting and soft lips frantically kissing.

“Uh! God, Nathan....”

Nathan stopped for just a moment but only to breathe in Aaron’s scent, sighing loudly into Aaron’s neck. Aaron felt the vibrations resonating throughout his body. His eyes rolled back in his head. He was dazed with desire for the man who lay on top of him and pushed his hardness against Nathan’s, aching, throbbing, and grinding, needing release from the pent up hunger that was seven years old.

“Aaron... this... God....”

Nathan started rocking his hips back and forth, pushing into Aaron. Aaron’s hands were everywhere, trying to get at Nathan’s skin, needing to feel him. The stairs were digging into his back, sending shockwaves of heightened pleasure throughout his body. Nathan was on top of him, reminding

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

him how good it was to be touched by the person who made him feel alive.

“I need... need you, please.” Aaron was pulling at Nathan’s jeans, wanting access, demanding it. He was yanking furiously at Nathan’s zipper as they continued to kiss, their tongues deeply embedded in each other’s mouths, neither wanting to part.

“Up... stairs.” They fell over each other to reach the bedroom, out of breath as Aaron opened the door, hazy with lust and desire. He rushed in and turned around, looking at Nathan, who hesitated, standing at the threshold. Aaron could see a flicker of uncertainty in Nathan’s crystal blue eyes. He held his breath, willing it not to happen again, not to be rejected again.

Inner turmoil from both sides sparked up the electricity in the room to fever pitch. The tension was unbearable, but then, finally, Nathan was pushing Aaron onto the bed, crushing him all over again with his firm body. Aaron finally had the man he had waited for all his life in his arms. Both men were unable to think of anything or anyone else but each other.

DAN sat in his jeep and looked at the house and then back at his brother’s car. He toyed with the idea of jumping out, walking to the door, and banging on it but knew that

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

seven years had been long enough for both of the men inside. He had warned Nathan of the dangers all those years ago but still he saw his best friend and his brother becoming closer and closer. It was impossible not to see it if you knew what to look for. Dan was, at that time, the only one who had known that Nathan was gay. Dan could see Aaron crushing on his brother: secret looks he gave Nathan, conversations with Dan that always seemed to come back around to talking about his brother. Dan had a feeling then that it could turn out badly. He saw it in Nathan's eyes every time Aaron was near him, then the self-doubt, guilt, and disgust that came with it. He remembered their conversation after Aaron had run away and left Nathan distraught on the beach. Dan had secretly stumbled on them talking and then had witnessed the kiss and Nathan pulling away, and had heard his words.

When Aaron had run off, Dan had come out from under the cover of darkness and walked over to Nathan. Dan had hugged him; maybe he should have been mad with him, but he knew the situation. He could see that, for Nathan, Aaron was untouchable but also that he found it impossible to stay away from him. Dan could almost feel the crackle of electricity between them, an invisible force drawing them together even before that summer.

Nathan had told him that night that if it had gone any further, he didn't think he would have been able to control himself. He didn't want to be seen as something that he wasn't: a pervert seducing the boy who was not yet a man. Nathan said it was his duty to protect Aaron from how

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Nathan truly felt about him. He'd felt the weight all summer of being eight years older, the adult who constantly needed to hold back. He told Dan he didn't know if Aaron really knew what he wanted anyway. How could he? He was so young. Dan remembered how crushed his brother had been when Aaron had run away, how utterly devastated.

After that summer, Aaron fell into Ginny's arms. Nathan kept asking about Aaron, thinking maybe he should talk to him. Dan was left with a dreadful decision of whether to tell him that Aaron had moved on. When he finally had no other choice because of Nathan's constant questioning, he finally told him. It broke Nathan's heart all over again. Silent despair followed, and Nathan never mentioned Aaron's name again and simply stayed away.

Dan thought for almost seven years that maybe, just maybe, Aaron had been experimenting, that he was just young and unsure of himself. He thought that it had all been too much back then with his mother's diagnosis confusing Aaron about his feelings for Nathan. He never talked to Aaron about Nathan because it looked as though he had made up his mind who he was and what he wanted, staying with Ginny on and off for so long. Now he knew differently because the look in his friend's eyes the last two weeks had been the same as that summer. All at once realization hit Dan like a wave crashing upon the shore. Aaron's eyes only lit up when Nathan was mentioned in conversation or when he was close to him. As he pulled away from the house, leaving them alone, he now recognized something about Aaron's eyes that he had been too blind to see over the years:

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

a look that was suddenly present when Nathan had left for New York at the end of that distant summer. Aaron's eyes had remained lifeless and lost for a very long time.

AARON could feel the pull before it actually happened. He couldn't explain how or why, just that Nathan had slowed down as if he was thinking again, hesitating. He felt Nathan on him, hard and wanting, his kiss deep and long, sinking his fingers into his hair, his body willing, almost crying softly into him with frustration against Aaron's mouth, but he was pulling back in a way that wasn't physical. It was more than that. Something inside Nathan was telling him to stop. Aaron moaned loudly as he felt Nathan's breath on his face. They should still be kissing but they had stopped. Nathan rested his forehead against Aaron's. He was breathing erratically as his body froze.

Aaron lay underneath him, not believing what was happening as Nathan started to get off him.

"No. No!"

Aaron pulled him back down, refusing to accept it. He knew Nathan wanted him, could feel it.

"I have to—"

"No! No... not again, please."

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Nathan pulled with more force until Aaron lost his grip on his arm. Nathan spun himself around, sitting on the edge of the bed, holding his erection as if to hide it, as if he were in pain. Aaron still lay on his back not believing that this was happening all over again.

“I can’t do this, I’m sorry, I...”

“I’ve heard that before.” Aaron sat up, shaking, wanting him back. A fire was ignited that could never be put out, not this time, not ever.

Nathan stood up and started pacing, his erection still cupped in his hand. Aaron followed, not taking no for an answer. Grabbing Nathan, Aaron drew him in, pushing him up against the bedroom wall, and demanded access to his mouth. Nathan didn’t give him any resistance, didn’t fight him, and Aaron pushed into him for just a second before he started to undo his jeans.

“Aaron.”

Aaron ignored him as he kissed Nathan again, not wanting to hear anything else, scared to hear what Nathan had to say.

“I need you... want you... want this... please.”

Aaron could feel Nathan’s heat, his breath, and physically touched his desire as he finally grabbed hold of what was rightfully his. He felt the wetness forming around the tip, Nathan’s length hard in his hand as he started to

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

stroke him gently. Aaron thrust his tongue back into Nathan's mouth. He felt more alive at this moment than he ever had. Nathan felt the same; he could feel it oozing from every part of his body.

Nathan's book had held him captive for more years than he cared to remember. It filled him with hope. He'd thought it was over until Nathan came to see him and now, now he knew what he had to do. Nathan wasn't Greg's; Nathan was his. What mattered was what was happening between them right here, right now.

Aaron grabbed hold of Nathan's hand and guided it to the ache that only he could take away. He heard the low desperate moans coming from Nathan as Nathan rubbed his hand over Aaron's erection, held in by jeans that were now so tight they were hurting him.

"God Aaron... Aaron." He could hear Nathan's desire, see it as they looked at each other, both utterly gone to this, undone and lost to it.

"Touch me, please... please."

With shaking fingers, Nathan undid Aaron's jeans, both men's breath warm and wanting as they looked with eyes so deeply drawn into each other. Aaron slowly rubbed at Nathan's hardness as he felt him delving inside the denim. Nathan wrapped his fingers around Aaron, bringing his hardness out, stroking in time with Aaron as their wet tips grazed over each other. Desire filled both men with the need for touch, both men looking down, watching their wetness

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

mingling together. Their holds were firm and determined; both needed to feel the other in this way. Aaron held the back of Nathan's neck with his other hand, pushing his face forward, straining to get his tongue into Nathan's mouth. Eyes closed, sweat built up and lust increased as both men sped up in their need to touch and be touched. Nathan moaned with total desire and passion as he brought his arm around Aaron's waist, pushing their lower halves firmly together, no space between them. Their hands were hot, stroking frantically. They were lost in each other.

Aaron pulled his head back, meeting Nathan's gaze, needing to get air into his lungs, delirious, feeling Nathan's hand, tight around him, loving the feeling, loving him so totally.

"God, Nathan... God..."

"Yeah, you feel that... feel me?"

Aaron couldn't speak; this was all so new to him but so familiar. He had dreamed about a moment like this for years. Having Nathan touch him in this way, he couldn't hold onto the feeling long enough. He was coming too soon, unable to hold anything back with this man finally by his side.

"Mmm... gonna come Nathan, sorry, can't hold it... God."

"Yeah, come. Come for me Aaron... come for me."

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Aaron dropped his head onto Nathan's shoulder as both men worked each other to completion hard and fast as lustful groans rang out in the room. They rocked in time with each other, hips swaying back and forth, bodies pushing into each other, until there was nothing left but to release what they had been holding onto for years. They came just as fast, groaning heavily into each other as tongues combined, frantically tasting, lost in their own reverie. Nothing could compare to this first time feeling each other, making love in this simple way, to holding and being held—a dream fulfilled.

“Jesus, Aaron.” Nathan's eyes said a thousand things all at once. The men's hands and jeans were full of come and their pent-up need for each other.

Aaron felt his body shaking as he held on, not caring about anything. He had Nathan here. They were joined together.

The room was stifling as they slowly moved apart, crackling with words still unsaid. Nathan needed to speak, Aaron needed to listen. They cleaned themselves up as best they could, T-shirts on the floor proving convenient, neither wanting to move from the sanctuary of the room. They were dazed and unsteady. Once they were outside, then what?

“Aaron, I... shit.” Nathan placed his hand onto Aaron's damp cheek, almost scorching him. It took all of Aaron's willpower not to drag him to the floor and devour him, start this thing all over again.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

“I know.”

Nathan’s body stiffened slightly, his blue eyes finally telling a different story. He moved away as if it was torture to do so. Aaron took a step forward. Nathan put his hand out as if to stop him.

“No... no, please, I have to talk to you; I can’t with you touching me. I can’t think straight.”

Aaron backed away, not wanting to hear it. He leaned against the wall, looking at Nathan, who seemed so torn. He felt an overwhelming pain welling up inside himself. Maybe Nathan had come here just to give him the good news himself.

“Why are you here, to tell me you’re getting married?”

Nathan stood motionless.

“What? Who told you that?”

“Greg called, this morning. Told me he proposed to you, and he asked me to leave you alone.”

“Shit! Jesus, he had no right... no right to do that. Shit! This is all fucked up....”

“Well he seems to think he has every right. Is... is it true?”

“Would it matter to you if it was?”

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

“What?”

“You heard me, Aaron.”

Nathan stood his ground, not looking away from him.

“Because it’s not about what we’ve just done and whether it happens again. We both know the answer to that. It’s about the last seven years. The fact that you look at me, touch me as if you can’t get enough, but no one knows that you’re gay—still! Have you any idea what you’ve done to me... how fucked up I’ve been?”

“What I’ve done to *you*? *You* pulled away from me that summer. *You* moved to New York. No contact, nothing.”

“Well *you* didn’t wait too long before you decided to move on. God, *shit*, not that I’m blaming you for that, you were seventeen, but....”

“What, what the fuck? I wanted you. You know that.”

“Aaron, did you really know back then what you wanted? Do you know now?”

Aaron looked away from him, unsure how to say what he had only thought about for years.

“You know, it took me six years to move on. Six years to try and put that summer behind me. No, that’s not even true. I’ve never put you behind me, and deep down Greg knows that. My whole fucking life has revolved around you, Aaron, not being able to touch you. God, you were so young.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Thinking about you all the goddamn time, even before that summer. Forcing myself to stay away from you was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, not wanting to confuse you. I fell in love with you, and then the next thing I know, you seemed to suddenly make up your mind that you were straight and I...."

"What? What did you just say?"

They looked at each other, Nathan's eyes looking so sad, so desolate. Aaron could see the years of loneliness in them, because he felt it too. The magnetic pull they had was impossible to ignore any longer as they both found themselves in the center of the room, touching each other again, drawn like moths to a flame. Nothing could stop it—nothing could ever stop who they were when they were together.

"I fell in love with you." Nathan's jaw was clenching up, his blond hair dripping with sweat as he tried to control his emotions.

Aaron put his hand around the back of Nathan's head, pulling him in, resting their foreheads together.

"And now, do you still love me now?"

"Aaron?"

"Answer me."

"I have a man who wants me... knows who he is."

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

“Do you love him?” Aaron’s heart was thumping uncontrollably.

“Despite what he did this morning, he’s a good man.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“He loves me.”

“I love you.”

Nathan’s breathing started to quicken.

“I love you Nathan... love you,” he whispered as he placed a gentle kiss on Nathan’s lips. The kiss was returned so willingly. Nathan ran his fingers through Aaron’s hair, making Aaron moan. The kiss lingered for so long, the two men tasting each other, wanting each other more than ever.

“I thought you had second thoughts, that you had forgotten me.”

“Nathan, I wanted you so much back then, wanted to be with you, but you pulled away and then you were gone. I couldn’t deal with it. Ginny just... well it was easier to hide behind her because she loved me. I was so afraid of how I was feeling about you, and then Mom was so ill, I lost myself in her illness, and Ginny just kept coming by to see us both. Finally, after years of pretending, she asked me what was wrong. I couldn’t lie to her or myself anymore and told her. She took it so badly, Nathan. I’ve hurt her so much, felt so bad for so long, so alone without you.”

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

“God, Aaron, I’m sorry, I thought... I had no idea.” His palm rested on Aaron’s cheek, radiating his warmth right to his very core. Nathan moved even closer to him if that was possible.

“Why did you come here today?” It was the merest of whispers in the heat and quietness of the room.

“I needed to know.”

“Know what?”

“If the book was real or just fiction.”

“That depends on your answer to my question.”

Nathan looked at him, ghosting a finger over Aaron's lips.

“The answer is... yes. Always yes.”

“Yes?”

“I never stopped loving you.”

THEY stood by the front door, but Nathan was not nearly ready to go back to Dan’s house. He knew there were things that needed to be said and talked through. The briefest of moments between walking out of the bedroom and standing

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

by the front door gave rise to panic and thinking of a life without Aaron. It would be impossible to leave each other behind again. They belonged together; they always had, and now the task ahead saddened him greatly. Nathan didn't know why Greg had said what he did. They had been together for a while and there had been obvious tension the past two weeks, probably longer. They didn't have any real arguments but they had been treading water, finally feeling the slow drift away from each other. Today, everything had changed, and it could never go back to what it was.

Nathan faced Aaron, not wanting to part from him. Worry was written all over Aaron's beautiful face, and Nathan couldn't hide how he felt, either. Aaron's body screamed for Nathan to stay and make love to him, never to leave him again. Being fused together body and soul was what mattered, but this wasn't the right time. He had done enough damage.

"I wish you didn't have to go, now that I've got you back."

Nathan brushed the back of his hand over Aaron's face, looking into eyes of melted chocolate that showed love and warmth. He took a deep breath, frustrated with himself for the wasted years. If only they had both known how the other felt.

"I have to talk to Greg. I need to know he's okay. What he did today is out of character."

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Aaron nodded, moving naturally into Nathan's embrace, aching for the full weight of the man on him but willing to wait. He didn't want to hurt Greg and knew how Nathan must be feeling. Aaron felt uneasy about where both he and Nathan suddenly found themselves and where Greg stood in it all.

"I know; I just don't want to lose you again."

"You won't lose me, not ever again."

Nathan kissed Aaron gently. He wanted to savor Aaron's taste, his smell. He wanted to hear Aaron moan into his mouth when he kissed him, which he did over and over again. He wanted so desperately to move inside him, stretch him, make him his. Nathan found himself moaning too with the sheer need he had for Aaron. It was intoxicating, having Aaron so near, time standing still as they held onto each other tightly. They were trying to keep reality at a distance because all too soon it would catch up with them, and he didn't want to be pulled under, not anymore. He wanted to stay afloat because he finally had his lifeline back.

"Shit, need to leave now, or else I'll never go," Nathan whispered, having to drag himself from Aaron's embrace to open the door but not having the will to walk through it.

Outstretched arms lingered, fingertips touched as Nathan held Aaron's stare on the front porch.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

"I'll call you later, okay, Aaron... talk to Dan. He's known for a long time how I've felt about you, but I asked him not to say anything."

Aaron stared at him, his mouth hung open slightly.

"He knew? How... did he take it?"

"He's been a good brother to me and a good friend to you. When I needed him, he was there for me. It will be all right, Aaron, just talk to him."

"I will. I'll call him now."

Nathan walked down the steps, his feet heavy, hoping and willing things to be okay between him and Dan. As he looked back, Aaron was leaning against the doorframe, and his heart swelled. All he could think about was how much time they had both lost.

NATHAN drove up his brother's driveway, looking at the house. The front door seemed like a barrier, not the welcome it normally was. He noticed Dan's car was not around and felt relieved. Maybe that was for the best. He hoped that Aaron had called Dan to talk to him about the situation.

He parked the car and felt the sharp prickle of pending confrontation. Unrelenting, forceful butterflies pounded against his stomach, not like the gentle flutter he felt when

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

he knocked on Aaron's door earlier. He walked in and immediately saw the suitcase at the bottom of the stairs. He took a deep breath as he made his way toward the kitchen and saw Greg sitting down outside, facing the pool. Nathan walked cautiously toward him, noticing Greg's head was bowed, leaning on his hand.

"Hi."

Nathan stood by Greg's chair, looking down at him. Greg looked up, squinting against the hot day and the bright sun. The pool twinkled in the sunlight, rays bouncing off the surface like prisms of rainbow color. Greg's eyes looked heavy, as if the world was caught up in them somehow, weighing them down.

"Hi."

Nathan noticed the book in Greg's hand and frowned, seeing the similarity of thought between the man he had just left and the man he was with now. Both had a copy of his book, and the look on their faces was so similar—full of things unsaid. Nathan sat down next to Greg, his gaze moving from the book to meet steel grey eyes.

"Where did you find that?"

"Dan had it in the bookcase in the den."

Nathan nodded, clasping his hands together, wondering why Greg was looking at it now.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

“Didn’t think he would have it on display.”

“He’s prouder of you than you think, Nathan, all your family is. You have to know that.”

“Yes, I do.”

They looked at each other, Greg silent and watchful, waiting for Nathan to say something else. When he didn’t, Greg looked beyond him to the ripples of glistening water. Nathan followed his gaze and felt a sudden mellowness that the water always cast over him. There was no shouting, no arguments, and no judgments. Sometimes Nathan wished for noise; too much silence unnerved him.

“Why did you tell me to go and see him, Greg?”

“I felt you had unfinished business.”

Nathan nodded but was dissatisfied with that. “You never told me you spoke to him this morning.”

“I know.”

Nathan looked back at him. Greg was still looking out at the water, the book clutched tightly in one hand.

“Why would you tell him that you proposed to me when you didn’t?”

Greg looked down to the open book, hesitating for a time, as if he were reading it to himself. Nathan was just about to speak again when Greg started to read a paragraph

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

where secrets were revealed. The book was a pure reflection of a longed-for love never realized.

“He thought back to that time of dreams when he had seen that boy, his boy, alone, a silhouette against the backdrop of darkness. A guiding light drawing him in as always, sitting on a rock, looking out to sea, beautiful but out of reach. What he would have given to be his, to hold him and never let him go. He once had that small window of opportunity where he could have taken it all, and taken him along with it. He could have shown him how they could be together, but the timing was always so wrong. He was never able to get that window back, where they could explore what they might have had together. He found out that the boy, his soul mate, made a decision in his life that didn’t include him. He was broken and wondered whether he would ever recover, whether he wanted to.

“And so, when he found a man to love, he would give as much as he could, as much as his heart would allow. There was a heaviness he felt deep within his chest. His heart was carved in stone, surrounded by a cast-iron chamber where he felt nothing could enter or escape. Time would always stand still, where his heart would be held captive but continue to beat for the boy who took his breath away.”

Nathan had never heard the words spoken out loud. They gave away everything about how he felt all that time ago, and he knew that nothing had changed.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

“Life shouldn’t imitate art, Nathan; it’s not fair on me or you or him.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Do you think that I want to be the man you settled for? I see the bigger picture and I don’t want to be one part of a broken puzzle. Coming here, finally meeting your muse? Well, it didn’t take a lot of working out to know who the book was about. Names may have been changed but you can never take the look away that people have when they’re in love. You’ve never looked at me the way you look at him.”

Nathan closed his eyes.

“I’m sorry Greg, so sorry.”

“I knew what I was getting myself into before we got together. *Held Captive* is all about making do, settling for second best, being held to the past. I don’t want to be a character in your book, Nathan. Settling for me because you can’t have him isn’t the ending you wanted, is it?”

“So you forced his hand?”

“I made him see what he could lose the second time around if he let you get away again. I wanted him to have something to think about: that you could be with someone else, married to someone else, and he could lose his chance again.”

“Why would you try and get us together?”

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

“I would have thought that was obvious.”

Nathan looked at him and frowned, shaking his head, not understanding.

“Because I can’t compete with him.”

Nathan saw the sincerity and honesty behind that remark. No games, no regret. He got out of his chair and looked down at the water, wishing he could jump into the cool depths below, submerge himself. He looked back at Greg, taking in a deep breath.

“I don’t know what to say.”

Greg stood up and walked over to him, leaving the book on the chair.

“I was angry with Aaron for the hurt I felt he caused you—staying away, not coming to find you. The past two weeks I’ve seen the way he looked at you but didn’t make a move because you were with me. I respected him for that, but I know that I’m not the one, and he knows it too. I can see it so clearly now that I’ve met him. I can’t compete with your soul mate, Nathan.”

“God, Greg, I’m so sorry. I never meant to hurt you, never thought I’d still feel this way. I thought the feelings would fade. I....” Nathan’s eyes were full of remorse.

“It’s all right; I know.” Greg put his hand on Nathan’s arm, rubbing it gently. Nathan could see hazy dew forming

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

in Greg's eyes that he quickly wiped away. "Just promise me one thing."

"Anything!"

"I know you have more books inside you. I was your friend and your editor long before we got together. Aaron wasn't just your muse for *Held Captive*, he's the key to everything else as well. It's about time you start writing another book, Nathan, and when you do, promise me you'll make sure that the ending is right, and that you don't settle again."

They looked at each other, and Greg smiled slightly. Nathan was grateful that yet again Greg had shown him true affection and understanding. The sickness in Nathan's stomach finally stopped as Greg hugged him tight. He hoped that they could go back to the friends they were before. Being together never felt right, but nothing ever did because it always came back to Aaron. Through all the pain, Greg had been Nathan's strength when he was down, made him laugh when he wanted to cry, and gave him praise when he doubted himself. As the sun beat down on them, Nathan thanked Greg with all his heart for setting him free.

THE words settled onto Aaron's ears with relief: "I'm on my way over." His heart was thumping in his chest. He had gotten into an enlightening conversation over the phone with

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Dan half an hour after Nathan had left to see Greg. Aaron stood in the hallway in shocked silence at first because Dan had known so much more than he had let on over the years.

“Why didn’t you say anything, Dan?”

“Because you never said anything to me. Look, I could see that my brother liked you; it was obvious. I saw you guys together, on the beach that summer, kissing—and then how upset you both were, how upset he was when you left.”

“What?” Aaron’s mouth hung open as he listened to Dan, his mind full of the thoughts of what Dan would have seen and heard that night.

“Look, he wanted to protect you. He’s so much older, Aaron. It doesn’t seem like much now, but you were only seventeen and the timing was way off. He was hurting so much; I couldn’t comfort him. He was my brother, and I felt I needed to protect him just as much as he needed to protect you.”

They both fell silent for a moment, lost in their own thoughts, before Dan continued.

“God, Aaron, do you know how much he loves you? He wrote a book about it, about you, for everyone to read. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to work out that it was about you. He still loves you—you know that, right?”

Aaron clung to those words, closing his eyes and wishing that Dan could have talked to him back then.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

"I know. Wish we could have talked, Dan."

"Me too." There was another silence as the best friends thought what a difference it might have made—but things were so complicated back then, so delicate. Like an unfolding flower in the first throes of blooming, only to be blown away by the constant breeze.

"Nathan asked me not to, Aaron, because your mother became sick. He knew that there would be no room in your life for more confusion. Then Ginny came on the scene. I told him, Aaron—told him that you had moved on. To the outside world, to me, it seemed that you were okay with things. I'm so sorry, so very sorry. I should have kept my mouth shut."

Aaron breathed in deeply; how could he blame Dan, when for years he couldn't even admit to his best friend that he was gay?

"It's not your fault."

"But—"

"Seriously Dan, it's not anyone's fault. It just comes down to cruel circumstance. Like you've just said, bad timing. However, the timing has to be right now because I won't be without him anymore. Even if I have to fight tooth and nail to show him how much I love him."

"Thank God, finally! Good to hear you say it Aaron, because if you don't sort all this out I'll personally knock those

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

stubborn heads of yours together. Now, go get your man. Talk to you later.”

When Dan hung up, Aaron just stood with the phone in his hand letting the words wash over him. “Your man” - nothing in his life had ever sounded so good.

Waiting for Nathan seemed like the longest time he ever waited for anything. He hoped that the talk with Greg had gone well and that Nathan wasn't coming over to tell him something he didn't want to hear. His palms were sweaty, his head whirling. His hands shook almost uncontrollably. He looked out the window over and over again. Willing Nathan's car to turn the corner, Aaron paced back and forth, his heart not calming down. He sat down eventually, making himself crazy with the thoughts spinning around in his head.

Then he heard the car driving up outside and glanced out the window. He saw Nathan get out of the car and walk toward the house. He ran to the door like the seventeen-year-old boy he had been not so long ago and opened it knowing how desperate he must look. Nathan stood still on the bottom step, looking up at him, eyes locking, sinking into each other. Aaron knew at that moment that Nathan was here for him, and not to push him away again.

“How did it—” Before he could say anything else, before he realized what was happening, Nathan was in front of him, pushing him back into the house and shutting the door behind them.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

At that moment, their erratic breathing seemed to take them both into some kind of blissful hyperventilation as the air was pushed out of them. Lips locked, tongues connected, and they simply couldn't breathe. A current flowed through them from one to the other. The freedom suppressed for so long was now unhindered—fully charged and ready to explode. They moaned and grappled for skin—another connection that needed to be made—unable to get their clothes off fast enough. Nathan took his mouth away from Aaron's, leaving Aaron half-dazed and needing more. Nathan cupped his face, both bodies leaning into each other.

"Have you spoken to Dan?"

"Just now. He's okay with it. Why didn't you tell me he knew about that summer?"

"Too many words; couldn't think straight earlier. All I could see was you. Then I realized I should have said something to you when I pulled up outside his house."

Aaron smiled a little, liking the fact that he could render Nathan speechless and forgetful.

"Make it up to me right now," he whispered, holding onto Nathan's hips and bringing their lower halves closer together.

And then there was no holding back; there was no need anymore. Both men reached the same point at the same time. It had taken so many years to stand on common ground. Aaron trembled in anticipation of what was to come

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

as he took hold of Nathan's hand, almost dragging him up the stairs and into the bedroom. Every step of the way, his life had been a slow buildup of tension and strain to keep everything together, unable to let go. Now that letting go was finally allowed, he wanted to take full advantage of it.

Aaron turned to face Nathan. He felt flushed, excited, and nervous as he gently pulled Nathan to him. His hands glided like velvet brush strokes down Nathan's arms, marveling at the smoothness that reminded him of warm water flowing over his skin. He had never actually done what he hoped they were about to do. He could never think of anyone else but Nathan. He wasn't completely naïve and had at least felt the difference between being with a man and a woman. He had kissed, touched, and stroked both rough and smooth skin, but had never gone all the way.

He had been curious to know if he was truly what he thought he was. Those few small introductions proved to him what he liked, and he knew at some point he would need to do more, but he always held back. Then Nathan came back, and everything made sense. He realized he had been holding back because of him, waiting for Nathan to be his first, middle, and last. It was always about Nathan and always would be.

Nathan brought his lips to Aaron's. He felt the stubble, the roughness like a wakeup call to all his senses as their tongues explored, tasting the sweetness of time now given back. Aaron moaned into Nathan's mouth, his body tingling with the expectation of giving himself finally to the one he

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

had been waiting for. He pulled his head back, their lips leaving a lovers' string with the wetness they had created between them. Nathan's breathing was like his own—quick, needy, and desperate for it all.

Their upper halves were uncovered quickly and without much thought. All that remained were the garments covering what was needed to make this work. Nathan ran his tongue and lips down Aaron's neck, and he felt his hardness growing, itching to get out of the confines of his jeans, bumping rhythmically with the mound he felt within Aaron's shorts. He felt his fingers tremble as he started to slide the shorts down Aaron's legs, taking his underwear with them, until they were around Aaron's ankles.

Aaron's erection stood proud, glistening with that sweet syrup of need that was all for Nathan to take and make his own. He knelt down and looked up at Aaron, his lips in line with the shining, wet head. Nathan placed his hands on either side of Aaron's hips. Aaron's heart was almost jumping out of his chest. He watched as Nathan slowly moved his head forward a little and then licked the wetness away from the tip. A feeling like no other, Nathan's tongue was like a gentle breeze as Aaron felt the tickle of air graze over him. He placed his fingers in Nathan's hair, feeling its softness against his fingertips. Anticipation tingled deep within the pit of his stomach as he waited for Nathan's mouth to cover him completely, which he did with agonizing slowness. Nathan lovingly flicked his tongue over the head. Aaron felt Nathan's mouth form a sheath of warmth around him.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

“Mmm, Nathan... God that feels so good” He said it in a whisper because he had waited for this moment for so long it almost felt magical and unreal. He was back on that rock again, nervous and unknowing and so in love, so very much in love with the man who held him in his mouth. Aaron watched Nathan’s head as he started to move up and down his length. Aaron’s legs went weak and his heart almost stopped with what he saw before him.

He felt Nathan’s hands press deeply into his flesh as he continued on, working his tongue up and down his shaft and then encasing Aaron’s balls in his mouth. Aaron started to move his hips in time with Nathan, feeling his hot mouth surrounding him, overwhelming him completely. All Aaron’s feelings mixed together, creating such delicious flavors of desire, heat, lust, want, need, and desperation, but above all love. He knew he wouldn’t last long if Nathan kept doing what he was so very good at.

“God, Nathan, Nathan, you have to stop, or else....” Nathan slowly withdrew and looked up, his eyes a hazy, unfocused glow of pent-up longing for everything Aaron. Aaron looked down, stroking Nathan’s face, memorizing the look Nathan had, his wet lips, his eyes, his body, and then he pulled him up so they were standing face to face. This was all so new to Aaron; he didn’t want the first time to be rushed but he knew that it would be. They had waited so long, and he wanted Nathan so desperately. He wanted to make love, he wanted to savor this moment, but he needed Nathan inside him and then the rest would just have to follow.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Nathan leaned his forehead against Aaron's, closing his eyes, trying to steady his breathing as Aaron unfastened his belt and slid down his zipper. Their breathing joined as Nathan felt his jeans fall to the floor. He kicked off his shoes and felt Aaron surround him with his hand, groaning at the touch like a man finally finding the answer to the universe—a discovery that was searched for and never found... until now.

“Aaron, my Aaron.” Nathan kissed him as though he were a treasure. His tongue moved inside Aaron's mouth like he had finally found the gold at the end of the rainbow, a precious taste of richness. Aaron's hand gripped and continued to fondle, rub, and caress. The hardness in his hand showed signs of its own desire as Aaron brushed over the wetness with his thumb. He was getting carried away, floating high on the amazing things that Nathan could do with his tongue.

It seemed like forever that they were rooted to the spot, tasting and touching, but finally wanting so much more.

“I want you, Nathan. I want you inside me so much.”

They looked at each other, each knowing what the other needed as Nathan gently pushed Aaron onto the bed, stroking and kissing him. Aaron continued to warm him with his hand, up and down, fast and slow. Nathan's body covered Aaron's, hot skin glistening as they began another journey of discovery. Aaron arched his back as Nathan made his way down his body, touching every part, kissing and

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

licking, the sensation of finally having Nathan on top of him making this journey indescribable.

He felt Nathan move off him and watched as he took something out of his pocket and then climbed back onto the bed. He moved back on top of Aaron, showing him what he had to help them on their way.

“I want to put it on you.”

Nathan stroked his cheek, and then their mouths collided, tongues connecting like a sizzling hot spring before the rip of the packet and trembling fingers fumbled, trying to position the condom over the tip. They opened their eyes and smiled through the kiss. Then they both looked down, as Aaron could finally focus long enough to roll the condom all the way down Nathan’s erection.

“Have you done—”

They looked at each other, Aaron shaking his head.

“No. I want to see you Nathan; I want to see your face when you’re inside me.”

That’s all it took before Aaron felt the cold liquid Nathan also had in his hand being applied lovingly around the tender ring of muscle. Nathan placed Aaron’s legs onto his shoulders. His finger rubbed at Aaron’s opening as they looked at each other. Aaron groaned over and over as he felt the finger sink into him, moving around and around. Then another, as Nathan prepared him for what was to follow.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Aaron could see the effort it took for Nathan to hold back as he stretched him—the feelings were so good, just as he had known they would be. Aaron caressed Nathan’s hair and then ran his fingers down his face. Nathan looked at him, his passion clear and his restraint waning.

“Do it.” Aaron whispered, his voice lost. All of his concentration went into wanting this moment in time, waiting for the sting of pleasure to penetrate his very being. Nathan didn’t hold back, not anymore; he wouldn’t be able to even if he tried. Aaron finally felt what he had always wanted to feel: being filled by the man he had always wanted to give himself to. His hips moved up, and then his body arched as he felt the slow slide of Nathan’s length nudging into him a bit at a time. They both groaned with the sheer pleasure the pain produced. They both felt more alive in that moment than they ever had. Nathan was inside Aaron where he belonged. Aaron’s senses filled and he moaned with a mixture of pain and passion, a true concoction of lust and desire. Nathan hovered above him, fighting off the urge to plunge right in, trying to gain access slowly, to have Aaron and claim him completely.

“God, Aaron, I don’t want to hurt—”

“Just move... please.” Nathan was shaking, so desperate to go slow but needing to sink straight in. He moved slowly at first, but as the feelings grew, so did his urgency, moving faster and faster until he was all the way in.

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

“Oh God, don’t stop, don’t ever stop.” Aaron looked into Nathan’s eyes, keeping up as Nathan thrust within him, through the pain to pure pleasure. Nathan continued to withdraw and thrust, changing angles, hitting that spot where Aaron felt the stab of unbelievable ecstasy behind his eyes. He pushed his hips up while Nathan pushed down, completely connecting over and over again.

“Aaron, I love you... God, love you so much.” Nathan felt the warm sheath of the man he loved and wanted more than anything. Their bodies glistened with sweat; their fingers entwined as Nathan moved Aaron’s arms above his head, kissed his neck, and heard the light moan as he sucked at Aaron’s skin.

Then, as if all at once, they both felt the rise together, Nathan thrusting, his tempo accelerating, as finally Aaron moved one hand from Nathan’s and took hold of himself, needing the release, needing to anoint Nathan with everything he had to give him. He felt Nathan moving within him and then it all became too much, his stomach tightening, his balls aching. He could no longer hold back; he no longer had to.

“God, Nathan... gonna come... gonna... oh, God... OH GOD!”

Everything that Aaron had within him was released between them, all of Aaron’s warmth, as his hand moved faster and faster. The sticky mess spurted uncontrollably, the relief final, the meaning clear.

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Joanne Kells

“Nathan... I love you; God, I love you too.” Aaron put his other hand on Nathan’s hip, his fingers digging in as he started to ride the wave, feeling Nathan pushing further and further inside him. Aaron’s entrance squeezed Nathan’s length and then there was no holding back for Nathan. He looked at his beautiful man, seeing his neck veins bulging from the sheer effort of coming so violently. And then he felt Aaron drawing him down on top of him. Nathan’s chest and stomach were pressed tightly to Aaron’s. He felt the slide of their sweat, Aaron’s come and heartbeat underneath him.

“Oh God Aaron... *Aaron...* Aaron!” Caught in a whisper, he released over and over, and over again.

As Aaron felt Nathan pulse inside him, both of them riding that wave together, ecstasy brought them to heights they had never experienced until they found each other. Both finally had all of each other. This was all Aaron ever wanted and all he would ever need.

“AS HE walked along the beach, the sun sitting high and the ocean swelling, brushing lightly upon the shore, he closed his eyes and brought his face up to meet the afternoon light. The warm breeze swept over him, ruffling his shirt, tickling his skin as it billowed in and out.

“The water slipped through his toes as his feet became embedded in the warm sand, soothing them with crystallized

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Joanne Kells

roughness. All the sensations reminded him of that summer and how lucky he was to get his second chance with the person who had broken his heart in many ways, only to put it back together again, stronger, tougher and as free as it had ever been.

“They both tried to find love without each other and carried on wishing for the thing that would make them whole, unable to see beyond the next day. He felt like a submarine submerged, forever in the dark, murky waters, trying to find his way. Now in the clear light of day, he was a ship gliding by on the horizon. Floating with ease upon the calmness of peaceful blue, he felt he was no longer holding on, waiting for the water to surround him and drag him under. They had both learned from past mistakes, from living a lie and from being set by the standards of others. They knew who they were and who they loved after years of thinking that settling was the only way to live.

“He felt arms wrap around him, gentle breathing in his ear as he was held tightly. He breathed in deeply, feeling so loved, as he eased back into the man behind him. They both looked out to sea, standing close to where the boy had once sat on that rock so long ago. Here, they stood together: the boy had become a man and free to love and be loved. Seven years of wishing for something more and the constant battle surging so deeply within them both.

“Three years on and they had finally committed to each other. To hold and be held as fingers interlaced. The vows they shared so recently, the evidence that they had survived

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Joanne Kells

through it all and had come out of it the other side. Friends, lovers, and partners in every way. The locked chamber now opened, where two hearts were beating as one, and both men were finally set free.”

Aaron held his breath. The story was about them, their struggles, their hopes and dreams and love. He stared at the book in his hands knowing the last part was pure fiction, because it hadn't happened that way. He looked out the window, imagining if it had. To have a connection that ran as deep as two hearts, two wedding bands, two lives joined as one.

The ocean sang out to him as he heard the gentle tumble of rolling waves as he sat on their boat moored in the harbor. He looked through the open window, lights of houses nearby twinkling in the distance, casting a shimmer on the restless water. Nathan had been there to guide and to encourage, to push and to support as they made their new life together. Feelings at times so overwhelming enveloped them both as they made love, catching up on lost time, exploring one another as if from new because every time was like the first.

He got off the couch and slid the door open, the book still in his hand. He stood watching the lights, feeling that summer suddenly wash over him. He lifted the book up towards his lips and softly kissed the cover. This was Nathan finishing what they had started so long ago. The summer he fell in love with Nathan was almost a dream now, ten years later, but he could still remember every detail, every time

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Joanne Kells

they spent together—every look, touch, conversation and smile, their first kiss—because all of it took his breath away.

Aaron remembered how much he wanted Nathan—to touch him, to be with him that summer. Maybe it was always that way: little pieces of memory chasing through his mind. Looking out for Nathan, waiting for him for what seemed like years until that summer when everything fell into place.

Nathan was a journalist for the local paper but had aspirations to become a novelist. Aaron was confused when Dan told him that Nathan was moving to New York. He had silently panicked, not wanting to comprehend what that might mean. Not seeing Nathan, not talking to him, being without his company, didn't seem possible.

Nathan had his own place but would come to the beach house frequently. Over that summer Aaron made sure that he was there as much as possible too.

Dan had not been well one day, leaving Aaron and Nathan alone. Although he felt for Dan, nursing his self-inflicted state, he felt a rush of adrenalin steam though his body at the thought of a whole day with Nathan. They swam in the warm water, messing around, throwing each other in. They had allowed their skin to soak up the sun, lying on towels, digging their feet into the sand. Nathan's hair glistening, his body tanned, and toned, his trail showing droplets of sweat as he lay soaking the heat up, eyes closed. Aaron wasn't seeing anything else but what was before him

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Joanne Kells

as he continued to stare through his sunglasses, standing over Nathan while he put sunscreen on.

“Hey, you’re in my light, dude.”

“Aw, you scared you won’t be able to top up your tan, huh?”

“Maybe, so move, little dolphin, like I know you can, or I’ll just have to do it for you.”

“Oh, you think you can take me out, old man?”

“What did you say?”

“You heard me, think you can take me on? I don’t know, you could get hurt if you ask me.”

Aaron had continued to stay in Nathan’s light, enjoying the teasing tone, the smile on Nathan’s face, as he squinted up to look at him, shielding his eyes with his hand.

All at once Nathan had pushed himself forward, grabbing Aaron by the ankles and tackling him to the ground. He hadn’t seen it coming as he fell in slow motion, sunglasses flying, feeling Nathan on top of him, grabbing hold of his arms and pinning them over his head. Aaron hadn’t wanted to fight back, winded, trying to catch his breath; he felt Nathan’s body weight pushing him down. They had laughed at first, Aaron aware of the hot sand sticking to his body, but more aware of their bodies aligned perfectly together. He had started to move, wiggling his lower

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Joanne Kells

half, in a merger attempt to get free, feeling the friction igniting every cell in his body. The laughter all too quickly faded as Aaron felt Nathan's grip relax, caught off guard as their eyes connected. Their breathing had mingled together, their faces so close, lips almost touching. In that split second, having Nathan above him, Aaron realized that all the times they had spent together had brought them to that point on the beach.

Friction had turned to something else, all at once, to something more. He had felt Nathan harden, rubbing briefly against his own erection before he had jumped up saying they needed to get back. He was flustered and gathered up his things. Aaron had moved slowly, dazed, and buzzing with sheer need for him, gathering his things as well, knowing he was falling in love. He couldn't have stopped it even if he'd tried, and he didn't want to because he had always felt it. That day had just confirmed what he already knew.

The kiss on the beach the night before Nathan was due to leave had been out of desperation. By then Aaron had fallen completely, wanting Nathan to make love to him, tell him that it was all going to be alright. Although Nathan had backed away he was sure that he felt the same and needed to know it. The kiss was everything he had dreamed it would be, hot breath guiding the way as their tongues connected.

Aaron had been lost to the feeling completely, but Nathan had pulled away again. All at once Aaron's world had fallen apart, Nathan telling him that he couldn't do what they both knew they so desperately wanted. He had gone

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Joanne Kells

mad that night and in the days and nights to follow. Feeling that he had lost the best thing in his life, never thinking that he would ever feel again, because he felt numb, always so numb inside.

Then, Aaron's mother died, and he could barely function. Love was put on the back burner and Ginny stepped in to fill the gap that all the devastation had wreaked. He had loved her in his own way and felt that he could live with her kind of love, because what he truly wanted was well out of reach by then.

And now that was all behind him because he moved on, the future unfolding in the pages of a book without the question being asked. He smiled as he felt arms surround him from behind, pulling him gently into an embrace, lips caressing his ear.

"Well, you can't just leave the room without saying anything."

"Oh? Now why's that?"

"Because you have my book in your hand and I want to know what you think."

"Of the whole book? Dude, that would take all night."

"Well maybe just tell me what you think of the ending."

"Oh, the ending."

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

Nathan tickled both sides of his waist, making Aaron squirm and laugh at the same time.

“Yeah, what did you think of the ending?”

Aaron squirmed around enough to come face to face with Nathan, their eyes sinking into each other. Nothing could take away this moment of a future moving forward, knowing what the answer was going to be.

“Interesting.”

“Interesting?”

“Yeah, I liked how you described the sea, how they were both feeling. It was really good.”

Nathan raised his eyebrows and simply nodded. Aaron didn’t want to make it too easy for him, wanting to tease.

“Glad you like that part, but I think what I really want to know is... if I asked you to marry me, would you?”

“Oh, *that* ending. Well, I suppose it depends if you were asking me, or whether what I’ve just read is purely fiction.”

“It depends on the answer to my question.”

“Well then, you better ask me and find out.”

Nathan smiled, holding Aaron around his waist, rubbing their noses together. Their foreheads met as Aaron wrapped his arms around Nathan’s neck, brushing his hair lightly

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Joanne Kells

with his fingertips. Holding his breath once more, he waited for the last piece of the puzzle to be put into place.

“Will you marry me, Aaron?” Nathan whispered. Aaron felt the slight tension in Nathan’s shoulders, his breathing a little faster than it had been, as he waited for Aaron’s response.

All the memories growing up with him came flooding back as Aaron saw his future in front of him, with Nathan forever by his side having everything he had ever wanted and more because Nathan came back to him. Their marriage ceremony would be for them and no one else. It was for them to show how much they cared and loved one another. All the pain had been worth it because they never gave up and found each other again. He wanted to show his love, his commitment, and how proud he was to be with the one person who believed in him. He kissed Nathan gently, feeling the excitement well up and seep into his very soul, heating it with the fire burning deeply within him. He drew back, looking down to Nathan’s chest, then back up as he placed his hand flat where his heart was beating strong and true. A heart that belonged to him and no other.

“Yes, Nathan, God, yes! I’ll marry you.”

Nathan smiled, his eyes dancing with relief and love and everything else in between. Aaron felt it too, his heart leaping out of his chest with the future promise of what lay ahead. They kissed softly, their hands sinking into hair, tongues

Held Captive

Joanne Kells

twining around each other, moving deeply within, wanting to own each other body and soul.

As they came up for air, out of breath and full of desire, needing each other, bodies shaking, there was never any doubt that this was always supposed to be their future.

They had been joined together since the very beginning, whenever that was. He couldn't remember a time when he didn't feel this way, in love and alive with Nathan Adams by his side. They were destined to be together, to ride the waves over calm and rough waters. Both had nearly drowned but had survived the most turbulent waters of all, a little older, a little wiser, and lucky enough to have saved each other along the way.

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Joanne Kells

JOANNE KELLS is forty years old, British, and lives in Dorset with her husband and two children. She started writing at an early age and eventually went to stage school in London at the age of eleven. After graduating she became an actress, writing stories and plays in her spare time until her late twenties. A road traffic accident put an abrupt stop to her acting career, and through intensive rehab therapy, she was encouraged to go back to school and retrain as a rehab therapist.

She now has her own rehab therapy clinic, but her passion for writing continues. She tries to balance her life between family, her business, and her dreams of eventually writing full time. For now she enjoys living in a romantic setting by the sea, which drives her imagination forward. She is ever thankful for all the support she receives from her family to someday realize her dream.



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