



Poseidon's
Pleasure
KC KENDRICKS

POSEIDON'S PLEASURE

...Mark leaned back and blew out a long breath. "Okay, okay. Can we not do this? We haven't seen each other in twenty years, and we're going at it like it's only been twenty minutes."

He had me again, because he was right again. Nothing would be served by sniping back and forth. Seeing him thrust me back to an uneasy era in my life. It was time for me to act like the man I was if I wanted to stay in touch with him from now on, maybe even call him friend.

"I'm sorry, Mark."

He gawked at me, then stuck his pinkie finger in his ear and wiggled it around. "I'm going deaf. I would swear I heard Brett Houston say he was sorry."

"Funny. See me laugh? I mean it, Mark. I'm sorry for a lot of things." *But I'm not sorry about those times I had you.*

He handed me another meatball. His eyes asked me to accept it as a peace offering.

"I was young, dumb and full of cum, Brett. If it was the wrong thing to do, it came naturally to me. But you know that."

I accepted the meatball, making sure my fingers stroked his as I grasped the toothpick.

"Yeah, I know. And I forgot what it was like to be young and free. I remember it better now, for some reason."

Mark's hand touched my thigh. My whole body tightened, my balls drew up, my cock swelled. I didn't want to react so strongly to him, but I was glad I did. I'd forgotten what it felt like to make love, to touch more than some man's hard dick. I ached to feel alive again...

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POSEIDON'S PLEASURE

BY

KC KENDRICKS

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POSEIDON'S PLEASURE
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CHAPTER 1

I was quite sure I'd lost my mind. A man my age had no business booking his holiday season vacation with a rainbow singles posse on a Caribbean island. The plane ride had convinced me I'd better hang with the girls, not because lesbians were tamer, but they'd at least be kinder in their criticisms when I donned my swim trunks.

This was my attorney's fault, plain and simple. I'd been in Austin's office, discussing some upcoming changes in my life, and a brochure for this little adventure was on his desk. He'd assured me I would love the Southern Cross because his brother's partner owned the place.

I now had a new creed—beware of smiling lawyers with pretty eyes.

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The pilot's voice snapped across the loud speakers, instructing everyone to buckle up. Girls and guys alike whooped and hollered, with the sound of safety catches clicking into place keeping rhythm. The young fellow beside me fastened his without a word. He'd been quiet the entire flight, but then, I thought he'd looked a little green around the edges. If we landed *before* he upchucked, I'd be eternally grateful.

A caravan of vehicles awaited the group at the airport. I retrieved my luggage, only to have it immediately whisked away by a handsome, dark-skinned man. He let me know, in no uncertain terms, that for a man with "pretty blue eyes" like mine, he'd deliver it to my suite personally.

I declined, privately amused at his flirting with me. He hadn't seen me with my shirt off, nor was he going to anytime soon.

At the resort, a younger fellow with a wide smile escorted me to my suite. The large, open room was at the end of the row with a charming little patio and a great view of the mountains. Inside, a large vase of pink lilies sat in the middle of the table. I flipped open the attached card.

*Brett, welcome to the Southern Cross. Austin's family is our family. Please join us at our table this evening.
Colby and Theron.*

Theron was the brother my lawyer spoke of with such great fondness. The "Colby" on the card was Colby Denton, the owner of the resort. Austin alluded that Denton might have some helpful stateside contacts for my latest altruistic venture, a halfway house for battered gay youth. While I appreciated the tip, I was determined to leave business behind while at the resort.

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I would join him for dinner, though. I might as well hobnob where the best booze would be, so I called the concierge desk and asked them to relay my acceptance of the invitation. A lovely feminine voice, full of the lilting accent of the islands, informed me dinner was at seven-thirty on the east terrace.

That gave me four hours to kill before I had to get ready for my dinner date. The breeze carried the scent of sea spray to me, and I couldn't resist the idea of a walk along the shore. I dug out shorts, T-shirt, and sandals, and headed for the beach to take a leisurely stroll. If the water was warm, I might even wade in up to my knees.

The wide white strip of sand was in pristine condition, obviously well maintained by resort personnel. A few colorful beach umbrellas were scattered here and there, and a single palm tree provided a patch of natural shade. Under the swaying fronds, two men sprawled, one with a book, the other with a laptop. A picnic basket with a wine bottle perched on top of it sat nearby. It was an idyllic scene, the sort one should see in an island paradise.

I made my way on down to the water's edge and started to walk toward the sun, my thoughts drifting to opportunities lost. I'd never taken the time for a romantic resort vacation with any of my ex-lovers. Maybe that was one of the reasons none of them had stayed with me. Too often, I put my work first. Now I'd reached the age where lovers were few and far between. The ones I did occasionally have...well, for one reason or another, it didn't bother me much they didn't stick around for long. I refused to dwell on a future I'd likely spend alone. I was too busy dwelling on the mistakes of my past.

There had been one fellow, twenty years ago, who still had the power to pull at my heart. I'd been a very lonely twenty-nine, and

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he'd been jailbait, celebrating his eighteenth birthday by letting me bend him over the hood of my car. We'd connected, or at least I had to him on more than the obvious level. But youth has several disadvantages, and we'd possessed them all. Neither of us could keep his dick behind his zipper. At his age, what else should I have expected? My jealousy, and his wild ways, shredded any chance we'd had for more than a series of one-nighters. The single, greatest regret of my life was that we had lost touch with each other before we'd had time to grow into a real relationship.

Off in the distance, another walker approached. As he got closer, I recognized him as the young man on the airplane. He smiled at me as he held out his hand.

"Hi. I'm Eric. Sorry I wasn't good company on the plane."

I shook his hand, pleased he'd made the effort to speak to me. "I'm Brett. I noticed you don't fly well, so I thought the best way to help was remain quiet."

"I appreciate that." He gestured at the resort. "Lovely place, isn't it?"

Eric was a cute kid, but he was also young enough to be my son. The paternal feelings I experienced when men in their twenties approached me disturbed this old "confirmed bachelor." I wasn't about to give him the impression I was interested in more than friendship.

"So far, it lives up to everything my friend told me about it." I held out my hand again. "It's nice to meet you, Eric. Enjoy your vacation." I smiled at him.

His smile held a touch of disappointment, but he nodded and walked on. I watched him go. That young man wasn't going to have any problem hooking up and having fun while here, so I didn't need to feel bad about not being friendlier.

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I checked the time and headed back down the beach. I needed to unpack and get a shower. Being late for dinner wasn't an option, not when one was dining with the owner of the resort.

* * *

The east terrace was a quiet, tranquil oasis in a hub of activity. The smallest of the three outdoor dining areas, it held about a dozen tables under a wide, vine-shrouded, wrought iron pergola. From the rustic architecture, I suspected it was the oldest patio at the resort. One table was discreetly set apart from the others, and I recognized the two men who sat behind it. Numerous pictures of them graced the walls in Austin's office and den. They rose as I walked over and introduced myself.

Theron seated me, grinning. "Don't believe everything my brother may have said about us."

I laughed. "Austin swore me to secrecy, but he did assure me I'd love it here."

Colby held up a bottle of wine up for me to read the label. I nodded, impressed at the selection. He spoke as he poured for me. "He and Steve arrived about an hour ago. I doubt they'll make dinner. Austin doesn't fly well and said he needs to recover."

Theron rolled his eyes. "You know that's probably code for 'we want to be alone tonight.'"

My host laughed. "Sure, I know it. I sent them a bottle of Bordeaux. Brett, are you attending the party tomorrow evening?"

I shook my head. "I can't see myself in a costume."

"You don't need one. Poseidon's Midwinter Palace is open to all as long as they have the essentials properly covered."

"I'll think about it."

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Theron and Colby exchanged glances. In the way of couples, I could see that one look held an entire conversation and they were in agreement over something. Our meals arrived and I was spared having to explain I felt too old to enjoy myself at most of the activities on the singles tour itinerary, but had taken advantage of the package price to get away for a week.

My relief lasted until dessert, a wonderful frozen strawberry, blueberry and cream concoction that the chef had been perfecting, and didn't yet have a name for. It was worthy of every "ooh" and "aah" we made over it.

My host poured a little more wine for each of us and we toasted the addition of Berried Brett to the menu. I was flattered beyond belief they'd name it in my honor, and told them so.

Theron put his hand on my arm. "Hey, we even have an apple dessert named after Austin, so don't let your head swell too far."

I promised I wouldn't, then he hit with his next volley.

"Brett, we need someone to preside at the party tomorrow night. How would you feel about being our Poseidon? You'd make a really sexy sea god."

Trapped, I sputtered and mumbled inanely. "Oh, I couldn't."

"You'll have fun. We have Poseidon's attire. All you have to do is be escorted in by your court and have dinner on the dais. Then you're free to mingle, or simply observe, until midnight or you get a date, whichever comes first."

I stared at him, and suddenly being Poseidon didn't sound too bad. "What happens at midnight, if I don't have a date?"

Colby grinned. "Poseidon declares his mistress, the sea, awaits him and he has to attend to her needs. Then he leaves."

"*Her* needs? She's in a lot trouble if I'm the one supposed to take care of her."

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We laughed and clinked our glasses together again. I took a deep breath. Why shouldn't I join in some of the revelry while here? "Okay, guys, I'll be Poseidon."

They clapped softly, and we had a little more wine. I did appreciate the way Colby doled out the rich Bordeaux, never putting enough in the glass to get too warm before consumption. I noticed the resort staff discreetly cleaning the far side of the terrace and checked the time. It was almost midnight.

"I'd better call it a night. Colby, Theron. Thank you both for a wonderful dinner. I can't remember when I enjoyed an evening this much." I pushed my chair back. "I'll see you about eight tomorrow night to get into my party drag."

They thanked me again for falling for their scheme, and I headed back to my suite. The resort was beautiful, even at night. A combination of solar and low voltage lighting kept walkers safely on the paths, and the ever-present breeze was heady with a rich mélange of tropical flowers and sea salt. Presiding over the party as Poseidon suddenly seemed like a lot of fun.

Mingle, they'd said, and mingle I would. Just because I was here alone didn't mean I couldn't enjoy myself. If there was one thing I knew with certainty, landing a sex partner didn't guarantee a good time, so to hell with it. I wasn't even going to look for one. I was going to look for people to *talk* with.

I rounded the corner and the low row of singles suites came into view. I stopped cold, shivering as I stared at the lone man standing beside one of the full planter boxes. His profile was somehow familiar, but it had to be the moonlight tricking my mind. I hadn't recognized anyone on the plane. It was just those unrequited yearnings I had for that one past lover, the one person everyone has they regret losing and wistfully wonder "what if?".

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He lifted a tall tumbler to his lips and the illusion faded. The man set his glass down and stepped off the flagstones into the sand.

I watched him go, uneasy with the impression of sadness he projected. It was more likely my own unhappiness affected my perceptions. Just because he appeared to be alone didn't mean he was. He could have a lover sleeping soundly, and not want to wake him or her with his restlessness. I watched as he sank down into one of the chairs in the small garden seating area that faced the mountains.

For a moment, I entertained the idea of going down to meet him, but shied away from it. The island atmosphere had me feeling nostalgic, and that's why my eyes were playing tricks on me. I couldn't let my own inability to settle down at night intrude on his privacy, certainly not because he resembled someone I used to know.

I entered my suite and closed the door.

CHAPTER 2

I slept late my first morning on St. Lucia and missed the sunrise. I didn't lament the fact too much as I opened the windows to the sultry breeze. I guess some people found sunshine and warm temperatures an odd thing in December, but I was a southern boy, having been born in Galveston, Texas. Migrating to North Carolina had put me as close to snow as I ever wanted to be.

The suite had a coffee brewer, so I started a pot and jumped in the spa-style shower. I'd never seen so many jets in one place. I turned all of them on full and let the hot water blast me from head to toe. This was definitely a fuck-me-in-the-shower set-up if I'd ever seen one.

St. Lucia had all sorts of things to see and do, and before I left I wanted to take in the sights on a few of the tamer organized tours.

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The tour package came with several passes, all good for the next seven days, so I didn't have to hurry.

It also came with a discreet, carefully worded note that basically said it was safe to have a good time on the Southern Cross grounds, but gay couples shouldn't take risks in public while on the island. I laid the note aside. The tour company didn't have to worry my behavior would get them banned from doing business on St. Lucia.

I could always go find my lawyer and his boyfriend and get snorkeling lessons. They wouldn't look at my forty-nine-year-old untanned chest and snicker. They'd be too busy looking at each other. Austin and Steve had been together about eighteen months, and I envied them their obvious joy in each other.

I poured a cup of java and tried to convince myself to go seek some sort of companionship, but what really appealed to me was taking the paperback I'd brought along out under that palm tree. If I took care of the need for solitude and rest today, I would have more fun at the party tonight. I finished my coffee, got what I needed for the beach, and headed out. To my dismay, the spot under the palm was already taken.

Well, meeting new people started with "hello." I'd go say it on my way to get a shade umbrella.

Walking across the sand, I studied the man's profile, convinced it was the same fellow I'd spotted outside last night. In the light of day, he was more than familiar.

My scalp prickled as I approached him, and the hair on my arms stood up as if in a static field. He turned, and I almost stumbled on weak knees.

Stunned, familiar, and still beautiful green eyes stared at me from under straight black brows. His shiny black hair had no hint

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of gray.

“Br...” He scrambled unsteadily to his feet, mired in the soft, white sand. “Brett?”

Sweat broke out on my back as my mind flashed with memories of holding him. “Jesus. Mark?”

“Mark, yes. Jesus, no.”

I blinked at him. A corner of my frozen heart thawed. “Still cheeky after all these years.”

His hand lifted, stretched toward me, then fell to his side. “You look good, Brett. Really good. Like life is treating you right.”

“Thanks. It is, for the most part.” I held my right hand out in that time-honored way of men everywhere. He licked his lips, and I was suddenly twenty-nine and awkward again, wondering if any man would look at me and want to take me to bed. My memory flashed back to a distant, muggy night, the air filled with ozone from approaching lightning.

The first time I saw Mark Matthews he was pinned to a chain link fence by a pack of straight bullies with more than mischief and mayhem on their agenda. The streetlight was bright enough for me to see the terror on his young, bruised face.

I laid on the horn and drove my car right into the fence beside them, not caring in that moment if I hit some of them or not. The mob scattered, and a bloodied and battered boy leaped into my car. He sobbed into his hands the entire drive to my best friend’s apartment. I took him inside and cleaned him up. He was seventeen, and I knew better than to touch him, even to administer some first aid, but I did.

After twenty years, the night he turned eighteen remained burned into my memory.

I stood there, arm extended, praying he’d shake my hand. Just

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one little touch to make him real for me again, and prove to me I'd existed as a younger man with life and energy. And dreams.

He stared at my hand for the longest time, then he pressed his palm to mine, and quickly let go. Mark motioned at his spot in the shade.

"Do you have time to sit and catch up?"

I nodded and sank down on the corner of his beach blanket. "You look good, too, Mark. You wanted to get into computers. Did you make it?"

He grinned, and for a moment I saw the boy he'd been. That younger incarnation morphed into the attractive man in front of me, and I knew the youth was gone forever.

"Yes, I did. I'm a programmer with Barton Tec, based in California."

That explained the golden tanning bed glow and a body on the lean side of ripped. I'd not known he'd left Charlotte. Our parting had been...angry.

"I'm really happy for you, Mark. I knew you could do it, though."

Mark nodded. "Yeah, you were the only one who believed in me." He shifted nervously. "What are you doing here, Brett?"

"Promise not to laugh?"

He shook his head. "Some things about me haven't changed. You'll have to take your chances."

No, some things would never change in certain people, and I braced myself to hear his bright laughter again. He didn't disappoint me.

"Well, Mark, I'm here with the singles tour group."

His mouth dropped open, then he chortled gleefully. "You? You can't get a date? *Brett Houston?*"

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I shook my finger at him. "Oh, shut up. You'll be my age someday."

"Still hung up on the numbers, are you?" Mark stretched out his long, muscled legs. "So what do you do for a living these days?"

My chest tightened. I didn't want to spill my guts to him, not when I had such a few precious minutes to find out how his life was. He didn't need to hear I'd ended up with my father's manufacturing company and I hated it. It made my life miserable and smothered me. Thankfully, that was about to change.

Mark's knowing gaze met mine. "You working with your father?"

I was surprised he remembered my rants about the situation.

"No. He died fifteen years ago. I got his stock in the company and his office. Three years ago, his partner died and I ended up with the whole thing."

A younger Mark would have asked me what I was worth, but this mature man across from me looked sad and nodded. I suspected he felt sorry for me, that my life had been mapped out for me and I hadn't escaped it. His pity rankled, and I let the opportunity pass to tell him the sale of the company was pending until after the holidays, and I looked forward to a long, altruistic retirement.

"Well, I should go. It's great to see you again, Mark. I've wondered, from time-to-time, how you were."

"I've wondered about you, too. Can't you sit and talk a little longer?"

I was suddenly sixteen again, thrilled that someone wanted to spend time with me. But the time for such hope was long gone. My heart ached—that little thawing corner throbbed worse than a

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toothache—but it would break if I stayed. The past had to stay in the past.

"I really need to be going. I should make a few calls before tonight."

"Are you going to the party? I'll be there."

But you won't leave with me, will you? "I expect to be there, with a couple of friends." I stood, and he scrambled to his feet after me.

"I'll see you there then." Mark held his hand out again. My fingers closed around his. I shivered as the air between us crackled with a weird blue electricity. The avidity with which he looked at me stunned me. Could he really be that glad to see me? His hand squeezed mine, his grip strong enough to pinch my knuckles before he released me.

"I'll see you there," he repeated, his low, rich baritone full of a promise I refused to believe in. I nodded and turned away, going only a few steps before he called to me.

"Brett?"

I stopped and looked back. "Yes?"

"Are you free for lunch?"

I looked out at the blue Caribbean Sea. Every day, those waters responded to the mysterious tug of the moon, letting it push and pull its liquid depths, no damage done. My tides were frozen, unable to believe, or hope.

"Not today, sorry. Maybe tomorrow?"

Mark smiled and nodded. "Tomorrow is good. I'll find you tonight, and we can set a time."

My throat too tight to talk, I nodded. I walked back toward the resort, making it all the way to the boardwalk, and private misery, before my resolve caved in on itself and I looked back. From his

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patch of shade, Mark watched.

* * *

Austin Michaels, my fun-loving yet capable attorney, had a perverse streak of humor. He held up the shimmering gold scrap of fabric and told me to put it on.

Right. I glared at him.

"I have no intention of wearing a g-string, gold or otherwise." I turned to Colby. "That's not my idea of having the essentials covered, as you put it last night."

With the tenacity of a good lawyer, Austin slapped it into my hand. "You'll be glad for it when you have the robe on. I was Poseidon last year, and I said the same thing. I went with everything swinging, and an hour into the party, I begged Steve to trot over here and get it for me so I could unzip a bit and let the breeze in." He leaned forward, his nose almost touching mine. "You'll roast like a turkey if you keep your T-shirt on under that robe."

Defeated, I held up the g-string and smirked. "I'll overflow that. I need one with a bigger pouch."

They howled with laughter, but it wasn't a total attempt at humor. Father Nature had made up for giving me a wimpy, hairless chest with unmanly pink-ish nips. Simply put, I was hung.

Austin clapped me on the back. "You'll be fine. Now stop being so shy and put it on so we can get going to help Colby with the last minute stuff."

I hesitated, then kicked off my sandals and pulled my shirt over my head. No one blinked at the broad expanse of blindingly white skin, so I unzipped and let my shorts drop. I shucked down my

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drawers, and four gay guys did what gay guys do. They ogled me.

"Holy Mary," my lawyer muttered. "That's some secret you've kept from your friendly attorney for the last seven years."

Steve smacked his ass. Colby and Theron were polite enough merely to grin at me. I slipped on the g-string and settled it in place. I imagined them doing the math.

If he's hanging six, then double it and subtract three...no, make that subtract two...

The opportunity to tease Austin was too tempting. I adjusted my balls again. "How's it look?"

"Like Poseidon could put someone's eye out if he—"

Steve smacked Austin's butt a second time. "Shut up, lover. It looks fine, Brett. I think it'll be a shame if we end up the only ones to see you in it."

Mark's green eyes rose up in front of me, unchanged after twenty years, but I knew better than to entertain that hope. Theron handed me the long, shimmering robe. A straightforward affair that fell straight from the shoulders to the ankles with flowing sleeves, I eased it on and zipped it up. Colby set a light wreath of fake seaweed on my head.

"Last year, we had one of the girls take the sleeves off the robe so Austin could show off his trident tat. They used Velcro to put them back on, so we can remove them if you like."

I nodded. "If I get too hot, they might come off." I looked at Austin. "Where's my pitchfork? And I didn't know you had a tattoo. Show me."

Austin handed me the trident and stripped off his pullover. I didn't care much for tats, but his was done well, a pair of entwined tridents with two zodiac signs. One spot had a bit of blurriness. I touched it questioningly.

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“Yeah, I had that spot reworked to Steve’s sign. It’s perfect now.”

I could guess whose sun sign had been there first, and my brand of gay etiquette dictated I not say his name aloud in front of Steve. Austin had been my lawyer for a long time.

“Love is grand, when you can find it. You guys are really lucky, you know.”

They all agreed and assured me I’d find someone, some day, but I knew better.

And yet, Mark was here. I’d spoken to him, even touched his hand and let him become flesh and blood to me again. He’d said he’d look for me tonight. Being older now, he might actually keep his word this time. What if he made a move on me?

I slammed the door on that thought, eddies of denial swirling my memories.

CHAPTER 3

My court awaited Poseidon's arrival as I stepped into the lobby of the main building. Six masked men, scantily clad in loincloths the color of seaweed and green body makeup, and six girls more decently covered, with sparkly designs painted on their cheeks and foreheads, bowed to me. I tapped my trident on the floor and bid them rise. They applauded softly, seemingly happy I was in the spirit of the moment. Before I managed to greet any of them, Theron announced the sea god's arrival, and my court escorted me down the steps into an amazing undersea world.

Shimmering strips of silver, blue, and gold fabric danced in the salt-scented ocean breeze. Hundreds of tiny blue and white lights lit Poseidon's realm. The musicians played a funky rock and roll march as I crossed the terrace and took my seat on the dais. The

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wait staff went into high gear uncovering the heated buffet. Colby decreed the god of the sea was to be given an offering of first food, and one of my male attendants went forward to accept a plate filled with all manner of seafood. I accepted it, and the partygoers cheered.

After that, thank God, they forgot all about Poseidon and got down to drinking, eating, talking, dancing, and drinking some more. I nibbled the delicious selections on my plate, tasting everything. My attendants, all but one, left the dais to mingle, and munch out, leaving me to sit back and enjoy observing them. The remaining member of my court leaned over, his breath warm in my ear.

“Can I get you something more to eat? Drink?”

I started, jumping as I turned to look at his eyes. My pulse fluttered. “Mark?”

He rolled his eyes. “No. Tonight I’m Nereus, father of the fifty Nereids who preside over the bounty of the sea.”

“You a father? How did that happen?”

Mark laughed softly. “I guess I spawned at the right time.”

I smiled at his quick wit. He’d had it, even as a kid, and I thought it one of his finer attributes, back in those days.

“Well, Nereus, I could use a tall, cool drink and something other than shrimp on my plate.”

“Whatever you wish, oh, Lord Poseidon.” His hand squeezed my shoulder and he was gone before I could untie my tongue and make a pithy reply. It might have helped my brain form words if my eyes could have stopped looking at his barely clad ass.

Just what did he mean by that remark anyway? He referred to dinner, nothing more, and I read too much in to it. I needed a man my own age, one who shared some of the ravages of time.

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Mark returned and set two large glasses of iced tea in front of me, warning me one was for him. A few minutes later, he brought two plates of assorted finger foods and plopped his butt down in the chair next to mine. He started peeling his pile of steamed shrimp, licking the juices that trailed down his fingers. I tried, and failed, not to remember his tongue flicking over my skin.

“So how’d you get to be Poseidon, Brett?”

“Wrong place, wrong time, is my best guess. They cornered me.”

“Aw, come on. Don’t tell me you’re not having any fun at all.” He offered me some sort of meatball on a toothpick. I accepted it and chewed; its peppery, bourbon-tinged flavor made my mouth water for more.

“I can’t say that. Actually, I’m flattered they asked. How’d you get to be a member of my court?”

“I’ve no clue. When I checked in, there was an envelope waiting for me at the front desk informing me I’d been selected, if I wanted to, so I said why not?”

I looked him in the eye. “That ‘why not’ used to get you in all sorts of trouble.”

Mark nodded and met my gaze without flinching. “I know, but I’m more careful these days.”

It was my turn to roll my eyes. “Sure, you are, Mark. I believe you.”

He leaned in, his green eyes hot and serious. “I am, damn it! I grew up. Now stop trying to make me feel seventeen again.”

Why should he get off the hook? The years dropped away, and I regressed to seventeen again, too. I drilled him with my best stare and kept my voice down. “You gave me the clap!”

Mark’s fingers closed around my wrist. “Christ! I didn’t do it

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on purpose, you know.” He scanned the crowd, and so did I. No one was paying any attention to us.

“And I don’t have it now, for your information. I don’t have anything.”

I really wanted to believe that, but I knew I couldn’t. “Bully for you. I’m not going to be your fuck buddy for the next few days, so if that’s what this is about, you can get over it.”

“Fuck bu... Have you lost your mind?”

Yes, I had, and I didn’t care if I got it back. I stared at him as he forged ahead.

“I wouldn’t fuck you again, Brett Houston, if you were the last man on the island! I loved you, man, and you just walked away like I was nothing more than dog shit you needed to clean off your shoes.”

“You told me you weren’t out fucking anyone else. That was a lie, you little twink. You tricked your way across town and back.”

Mark ripped off his mask and glared at me. “You were the older know-it-all, the one in too much of a hurry to put on a fucking rubber!”

He had me with the truth on that fact. “You weren’t the only one who was younger, Mark.”

“And that makes it all better?” He leaned back and blew out a long breath. “Okay, okay. Can we not do this? We haven’t seen each other in twenty years, and we’re going at it like it’s only been twenty minutes.”

He had me again, because he was right again. Nothing would be served by sniping back and forth. Seeing him thrust me back to an uneasy era in my life. It was time for me to act like the man I was if I wanted to stay in touch with him from now on, maybe even call him friend.

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"I'm sorry, Mark."

He gawked at me, then stuck his pinkie finger in his ear and wiggled it around. "I'm going deaf. I would swear I heard Brett Houston say he was sorry."

"Funny. See me laugh? I mean it, Mark. I'm sorry for a lot of things." *But I'm not sorry about those times I had you.*

He handed me another meatball. His eyes asked me to accept it as a peace offering.

"I was young, dumb and full of cum, Brett. If it was the wrong thing to do, it came naturally to me. But you know that."

I accepted the meatball, making sure my fingers stroked his as I grasped the toothpick.

"Yeah, I know. And I forgot what it was like to be young and free. I remember it better now, for some reason."

Mark's hand touched my thigh. My whole body tightened, my balls drew up, my cock swelled. I didn't want to react so strongly to him, but I was glad I did. I'd forgotten what it felt like to make love, to touch more than some man's hard dick. I ached to feel alive again. He smiled sadly at me.

"You were young, but you were never free, Brett. You still aren't."

The pain around my heart deepened. He was so very right. I couldn't look at him, but I didn't have to. He was the one person, the only person, who had breached my defenses and heard confessions I'd never spoken.

"I'm not sorry your father died. What he did to you was wrong." Mark's hand found mine. It was a man's hand now, broad and strong, with a dusting of golden, sun-burnished hair that grew thicker as it spread up his arm. I curled my fingers around his, uncaring for a moment, we were in a public place.

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"No matter what, he was still my father."

"So what? He was a cold, rigid, uncaring son-of-a-bitch who beat you when you didn't live up to his warped idea of what *his* son should be. He hated you for what he perceived as you letting him down, and he made it his life's work to make sure you would never be happy."

My stomach roiled, threatening rebellion, with the truth of his words. "What's this? The Mark Matthews version of tough love?"

"If you need it to be." He released my hand. "You treated me like some dirty little secret, and I didn't know why, not then, but I grew up, Brett."

I struggled to breathe as the burn in my chest increased. "I cannot do this right now."

"I know. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have started this conversation at the party. It's just...I'm afraid you'll run away again."

I dared a look at his face, eerily blue in the festive lighting, and forced the words out of my airless lungs. "I'm on a fucking island. How far can I run? And you ran farther than I did."

"Oh, God, Brett." His fingertips touched my face. I jerked away, imagining every eye watching us. He bit his lip. "Sorry. I'm sorry. Please don't run at all. After the party, stay and we'll talk."

My heart screamed to agree to his request, but my head was in control. "About what? What wasn't? What isn't going to happen?"

"No. Nothing we do can change the past. I want to talk about what could be."

"You've got to be joking. How can you sit there and suggest we have a future?"

Mark gripped my wrist. "How can you look me in the eye and say there's nothing left between us?"

I couldn't, and he knew it. Everything I ever felt for him was

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alive inside me again. It had never died, merely banked down to embers, lingering with a fierce tenacity, waiting for this moment.

"We're not going to continue this conversation in the middle of this party." I tried to pull my wrist from his grasp. My fingers tingled because his grip was so tight. He refused to release me.

"I won't shut up until you say you'll come to my room."

"Come to your room! What happened to staying after the party to talk? You still operate by upping the ante as a way to force me to do something. You can fucking stop it!"

"You're right." He eased the grip he had on my wrist. "Seeing you again...I need...I was..." He reached for my face again.

I pulled away. "Stop touching me in front of everyone, too. I'm not going to tell you that again."

Mark stared at me, his expression unreadable. "You never came out?"

"Just how the fuck do you think coming out, and having my father's business associates know he had a queer son, would have improved my situation?" My mind flashed briefly to the pending sale of my company. I had thirty-five million after-obligations dollars at stake. "And now is not the time to do it, believe me."

"It wasn't a criticism, Brett. It was a question."

I rubbed the back of my neck in a futile attempt to ease the burgeoning ache at the base of my skull. I looked across the room, straight into Austin's concerned gaze. *Damn*. He crossed the room, heading straight for us, hopping up on the dais with ease. Austin spoke to me, but his gaze never left Mark's as he took off his seaweed wreath and rubbed his scalp.

"How's it going, Brett?"

"Good, so far. Austin, this is Mark Matthews. We knew each other twenty years ago, and it seems we had to come all the way to

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St. Lucia to catch up.”

Austin shook Mark’s hand. “Pleased to meet you. It’s funny how that works, isn’t it? Brett, after the party, we’re having a nightcap in the bungalow. You’re invited.”

He was giving me an out. With the honed instincts of a good attorney, and friend, Austin divined something was off. But did I want—really want—to bail out on Mark? So many lost years between then and now. So many regrets.

The chance to make one thing right in my life was before me.

“Thanks for the offer, Austin, but Mark and I have a lot of lost time to fill in for each other.”

My lawyer studied me for a few heartbeats, then nodded and said goodnight. I turned to Mark, to the warmth of his gaze, and my sore heart thawed a little more. I managed a tight smile for him.

“You know what I think I’d like?”

Mark shook his head and swallowed, hard. His voice, usually so vibrant and strong, trembled with suppressed emotions. “Amaze me the way you used to. What’s Poseidon’s pleasure tonight?”

The image of his dark head bowed over my lap sent my pulse rate soaring. It would be better to start with simple things and get my feet back under me.

“Let’s start with finding someplace private to talk.”

CHAPTER 4

A few minutes before midnight, Poseidon's court reassembled and, upon Colby's proclamation, escorted me out. I got a few brief hugs from several of the girls, then Mark and I were left standing alone in the lobby. He plucked at my robe.

"You want to go take this off and slip into something more comfortable?"

I fanned the fabric to move the air around beneath it. "Absolutely. They warned me this outfit would be warm."

"What do you have on underneath it?"

His question was asked in all innocence, but that didn't mean I couldn't take advantage of it.

"A g-string."

Mark blinked. "Excuse me?"

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"You heard me. It barely contains me, too."

"Jesus." He stared at me, his mouth open.

I tapped his chin with my index finger. "No, not Jesus. Brett."

I walked away, heading for my suite and the safety of underwear. I turned, taking a few steps backward as I grinned at him, standing frozen in the same spot.

"Is your loincloth rising, boy?" It certainly was. The years fell away, and I laughed with glee. "Mark Matthews. Speechless!" I spun around, walking forward again before I tripped over my robe and he had the last laugh. Rapid footfalls sounded behind me as he caught up.

"You looked at my loincloth. And in a public place." He fell into step beside me. "I'm amazed."

We approached a small group loitering in the middle of the walk. I changed the subject. "I think you're in the same row of singles suites I am. I saw you last night outside."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"At the time, I thought the moonlight was playing tricks on me, Mark. It wasn't until I saw you this morning that I realized it was actually you."

We reached my door, and I realized my key card was in my shorts, at Colby and Theron's bungalow. I muttered a few profanities under my breath.

Mark touched my arm. "What is it?"

I told him, and he shrugged. "I guess we get to take a bit more of a walk in the moonlight, eh? Or we can go to my room."

Or I could call the night clerk and have them come open the door for us. I dismissed that idea for the time being. If our "talk" went badly, then I'd consider that option. I looked him up and down.

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“Where’d you hide your key in that get-up?”

He snorted, crossed the patio to the planter box and reached under one of the flowers. Mark smiled as he held up his plastic card. I gave him what I hoped was a regal Poseidon nod.

“Clever. Do you have a pair of shorts I can borrow for a night?”

“Sure.” He ran the magnetic strip through the scanner and the door opened. I hesitated as he motioned for me step inside. Mark slid his cool hand under the flowing sleeve of my costume. “I’m different now, Brett. Get to know me since I’ve matured.”

I met his anxious gaze, wondering if my eyes were as black as his. “I’m different, too, Markie Matt.”

He shook his head. “Lord, I haven’t thought of that escapade in years. You’re probably the only person in the world who knows I did that. It’s not something I’d do today.”

In my mind’s eye, I could still see him as a scrawny kid, up on that filthy stage, doing a pole dance striptease. Some asinine drunk had challenged him and, in those days, he never said no to a dare. I’d died a hundred times in those three minutes, afraid some other man would lure him away from me.

“I put a fifty under your g-string.”

“You made sure every one saw you do it, too.”

“I staked my claim. I didn’t want any misunderstandings over who got you at the end of the show.”

Something in the way he looked at me said he might still honor that claim. Under my sleeve, his fingers caressed my skin, then closed around my elbow.

“Please, Brett. Don’t make me have to beg you to come in.”

I stepped inside his suite on quivery knees. For twenty years, I’d imagined what seeing him again would be like. I’d dreamed of

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being able to hold him again. Suddenly, the way was open to that, and I was unsure of what to say to him that wouldn't somehow sound wrong. The door closed behind me.

How could he possibly believe me if I told him how much I regretted my actions twenty years ago? If I'd acted like a man, we might have shared those long, lonely years. Mark stood so close to me, all I had to do was turn around and reach for him. If only I had the courage. Thank God he did.

His strong fingers gripped my hips, giving me the will to turn and face him. He shook visibly as I put my hands on his shoulders, and struggled to find my voice. "Mark..."

I don't know which of us moved first. He was suddenly in my arms, and we had our faces buried against each other's neck. The enormity of what I'd lost, and what was within my reach, seized my heart in a painful, vise-like fist. I was a man with no use for tear ducts, but suddenly my eyes flooded, blurring my vision.

Mark held himself stiffly, as if he still feared my rejection. Never again would I push him away as I had before. No longer a kid, he'd grown into his tall, gangly frame, filled it out with lean muscle. I had a brief memory of that skinny boy pressed against me, then it faded as he hugged me tighter. His lips moved on the soft skin where my neck and shoulder met. I breathed in the tang of his sweat and kissed the dewy spot below his ear. It was all I dared, and so much less than I wanted.

"Mark, why don't you go wash off the green makeup, and I'll call and see if they can send a bottle of wine, or something."

He squeezed me. "I've got two bottles of Chardonnay in the fridge. I ordered them, you know, just in case you said you'd come."

I toyed with the wisps of dark hair that touched the back of his

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neck. "Be prepared? You never told me you were a Boy Scout."

"I wasn't. Come wash my back?"

I started as a jolt of arousal hit me in that split second of sexual speculation. He had to feel me jump, pressed so closely together as we were. The pouch of my g-string was about to become useless, and from the feel of things, the flap of his loincloth wasn't faring much better. I ran my hands down his back, over the smooth skin that flowed over supple muscle.

"Let's not rush things, baby. If we go too fast, we'll crash and burn again, and we might not get another chance."

He made a choking noise against my neck. "I should've come back that night. I should've made you listen to me."

Mark clung to me, and I realized he barely held his emotions in check. I needed to be careful and help him calm down because if he fell over the edge, I'd dissolve into a puddle right along with him.

"I couldn't have heard you at that point. I was too embarrassed after seeing my doctor, and too angry to be reasonable. But later, Mark, I looked for you. I swear to you—about a week after our fight, I searched for you. I haunted all the clubs you liked to hang out at for months, but I didn't find you."

He drew a shuddering breath. "I cleared out of town and headed for the west coast the night you threw me out of Ricky's apartment."

Had he told anyone before he left? I'd asked some of his friends if they knew where I could find him, and they'd all denied knowing his whereabouts. Their words had held the ring of truth, and I'd believed them. In my desperation, I'd even staked out his parents' house for a while.

I held him tighter. My angry words had driven him to leave

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without saying goodbye, and I'd suffered the repercussions. His hands turned restless on my back as his erection nudged mine. We were in fine shape to take things slow and careful. I ached to make love to him, to move past the hurt I'd lived with for so long. It was suddenly very clear to me that tonight was my last chance to free myself—from myself. I buried my fingers in his dark hair and tipped his head back.

How many times had I dreamed of kissing him again? Too many to count, and each misty, imaginary caress evaporated, becoming a real memory, as his feverish lips parted beneath mine.

I meant to keep the kiss short, a first tentative step toward building a renewed trust, but he tasted of lemons and spice, and hope, and it lasted a very long time. Mark moved his lips over mine, deliberate, slow, never forcing. I grew bolder, flicking my tongue to his, a light touch that he echoed. Neither of us delved deeply. We were both too emotionally raw for that. He moaned, deep in his throat, and I pulled back. His eyes were closed, his thick, black lashes tipped with sparkly gold makeup powder. I ran my thumb over his lower lip.

"Can I change my mind about washing your back?"

His eyelashes swept up. He looked at me. "You're not teasing me, are you?"

I kissed him again, then rested my forehead to his. We stood there, our hands restless, our breath mingling, bathed in the rich, musky scents of overheated, aroused male.

"I want you, Mark. I've always wanted you."

"God, I was so wild. What ever made you want me?"

I answered him with honesty. "I've no idea. It was just there."
It's still there.

His fingers found the zipper tab and he tugged it down. I was

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grateful for the cooler air that brushed my chest. I searched for a button, or tie, or snap, to undo his loincloth. Mark hooked his finger in the vee created by the half-undone zipper, and peeked down inside my robe.

"It's too dark in here for me to see. Are you really wearing nothing but a g-string under there?"

I found the snap on his costume and gave it a yank. The little garment dropped to the floor. His cock hung between us, hidden in the flowing fabric of Poseidon's robe. Without conscious thought, I cupped his tight buttocks and squeezed.

"Is your ass green, too?"

He inched my zipper down. "No. I had to draw the line somewhere."

I let go of his butt with one hand, and urged him to get the blasted zipper open. I was cooking in the costume, not to mention eager to fulfill his wish to get a look at what little covering I wore. The metal parted. Mark pushed the sides of Poseidon's regal attire open and stepped back. My gaze streaked to his groin even as his darted to mine.

His cock was exactly as I remembered. Thick, heavily veined, cut, it was seven inches of gorgeous tool rising out of a coal black bush. My gaze swept the rest of him, and it hit me again how all the kid softness had gone, leaving a broad-shouldered, trim hipped man in his prime. Back then, his erect penis had appeared too large for his teenage body, but now the proportions were perfect. I looked into his unsure gaze.

"You're fucking beautiful, Mark."

"Do you mean that? Because you're...my God, Brett. You're sexier now than you were then. And you still make my seven inches look small."

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“Flatterer.”

Mark laid his palms flat against my chest. “I’m serious.” His hands swept the robe off my shoulders, and I stood before him in nothing but that gold scrap of fabric that no longer hid a thing. He looked at me, his eyes alive with that wild mischief that had frightened a younger me so badly, yet drawn me to him, heedless of the cost to my life.

“Well, well, Mr. Houston. I think I’m digging for gold.”

CHAPTER 5

My heart stuttered at his words, settling to a rapid beat as I draped the robe over the back of the couch. The gleam in his eyes as his gaze feasted on my nearly naked frame was real. The g-string strained to contain my desire for him. He reached for my hips.

“Let me help you get that off.”

I swatted at his hands. “I can get it off. I don’t want to have to explain to Colby Denton how his costume got ripped.”

Mark laughed softly as he slid into my arms. His lips met mine in another long, long kiss that left me breathless and eager to move beyond such a light caress. Carefully, I peeled the little pouch off and tossed it on top of the robe.

“You know something? That thing did make me feel sexy.”

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Mark's face lit up. "Really? I'll get you a whole wardrobe of them, starting with animal prints."

I grabbed his hips and pulled him to me, bare chests and naked thighs rubbing as we moved against each other's body. "I wanted to take this slow. Now I want to go fast."

He cupped my ass and ground his pelvis to mine. "I do understand. We need to hit the shower. You're turning green."

"This is so weird, Mark. It feels...familiar, but all new."

It was the familiarity that worried me. In my desire to be close to him again, to recapture the chance we'd lost, was this rush to intimacy a mistake? His fingers closed around my hard shaft, and I lost the cogitative function to reason it out. Or maybe I didn't want to dissect it further for fear of talking myself out of being with him tonight.

"Nothing has ever felt like this, Brett." His lips brushing my ear, he stroked me slowly, rolling my foreskin up over my glans. "If you'll pardon the pun, this is my gold standard reference, and no one has ever measured up."

I wondered, uncomfortably jealous, how many others there had been, but I had no right ask, or to judge him. My own past was littered with faceless men, found and discarded as I searched for some echo of what I felt when I made love with Mark. I put my palms on his cheeks and gave him the first deep kiss.

His tongue met mine, eagerly engaging me on the field of a mock battle, testing to see if I still held firm to the lines I'd drawn so many years ago. I didn't—I wanted to go down beneath him and give him what I'd denied him, but neither of us had trust enough for that, not yet. He moaned, a low, desperate sound, then he slammed me back against the cool wall.

He sucked my tongue into his mouth and let me take over. My

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heart threatened to hammer its way out of my chest as our tense thighs locked together as tightly as our lips. Being much the same height, his hard-on rubbed against mine as my fingers slipped between his buttocks, sliding across sensitive flesh. I absorbed his low cry of longing, taking it into myself. I started to go to my knees, but he stopped me, his hands grasping my arms and urging me back to my feet.

“No, Brett. I really need to get this goop off my skin.”

“Okay.” I had to agree. The chalky taste of that green makeup was enough to keep me from licking him from head to toe, but his cock was free of it.

I kissed him, a quick pressing of my lips to his, and slipped past him. He groaned loudly, with much exaggeration.

“What now?”

“Your ass, Brett. Your very perfect ass.”

I twitched it for him, and before I could sass him back, his palm connected with my left buttock, hard. I rounded on him, surprised, and not in a good way.

“Don’t do that again.”

Mark stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes gone wide with the shock of memory. He was one of only a handful of people who knew how badly my father beat on me whenever I disappointed or angered him, which was just about every time the man saw me. His hand grasped mine.

“I am so sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it. I just...”

I put my fingertips to his lips, silencing him, and allowed my regret at snapping at him show on my face.

“I know, Mark. It’s okay. I’m sorry, too. I know you were only horsing around. I need to remember how you like to carry on. I didn’t mean to snap at you like that, baby. I really didn’t.”

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We looked at each other, and in that old way we'd had, we shared a moment of perfect understanding. It was one of those things that had frightened a younger me, having anyone see into me so clearly. Now I could embrace it, knowing how special a connection like that truly was.

"C'mon. Let's get wet."

Mark agreed, turning on the bedside lamp before he followed me into the bathroom. I looked around the room and found everything matched the one in my suite, right down to the shower and the fancy fixtures. He flipped on the gas fireplace, adjusting the flame down to where the clear base crystals glowed, then he flipped the light switch to off. I turned on the jets—all twelve of them—and adjusted the water flow.

In the flickering gaslight, I grabbed a washcloth and squirted a generous dollop of Mark's shower gel into the soft fabric, surprised to find it was the same stuff I used. I inhaled the familiar spicy-citrusy aroma as I worked the cloth until suds saturated it. It definitely smelled better on him.

He stepped under one of the showerheads and the green makeup ran off his skin to color the floor tiles. I urged him to turn around and get his back wet, then scrubbed him down, poignantly reminded of the night I met him. His eyes told me he remembered that shower, too, only this time, thankfully, it wasn't his shed blood swirling down the drain.

Mark concentrated on his hair and face while I did the rest of him. I fought the urge to go straight to the goods, knowing if I went to his groin first, the rest of him might end up splotchy. He washed my chest and belly with his hands, smiling because he knew I saved the best for last.

My whole body throbbed with anticipation. The easy glide of

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his soapy hands over my skin, and his beneath my slick fingers, aroused me in a new way as I learned his mature body. The slow building of a renewed connection, the weaving of all those good things we were to each other back then with what we had to offer now, brought an awareness I was about to embark on a new journey.

I lathered his back, skimming my bare hand over his skin after I made a pass with the washcloth. Only after he was squeaky clean and rosy pink almost everywhere else did I soap my fingers and delve between the muscular twin globes of his ass.

Mark wrapped his arms around me and hooked one heel behind my knee, giving me better access to tease him. I slipped my middle finger past the tight ring of muscle, and wiggled it. He kissed me, his tongue thrusting in and out of my all-too-willing mouth. His thigh quivered against my hip. I stilled the movement of my hand. He looked at me, his dark gaze ruttish in the glowing light from the fireplace. His foot slid down my calf on its way back to stand on the floor.

“Are you going to do more than tease me?”

I pulled his pelvis as tightly to mine as I could get it. “We’ll see.”

“Oh, make me crazy wondering, why don’t you?”

I wiggled my hips so our dicks rubbed again. “Okay.”

Hands shaking, he reached for the shower gel. “I like this new sense of humor you seem to have.”

Slick with suds, his hand cupped my balls, rolling the testes inside their sac. His fingers closed around my shaft. Time suspended as he stroked me with sliding caresses. I shifted, bracing myself, and Mark stopped. I leaned forward and kissed him. His tongue licked into mine with growing impatience. My pulse

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pounded in my ears.

I wanted him anxious. I wanted him impatient. We were down to it, and I didn't want him to be cautious, or to worry I was comparing him to his younger self. I poured some shower gel into the palm of my hand and gave him a quick wash. His hard rod pulsed in my hand. This time, I didn't allow him to stop me from going to my knees. I took his cock in my mouth.

He moaned as my moist lips slid over his glans. I swirled my tongue around the rim, across the sensitive spot underneath. The water ran over him, cascading over my face. The taste of his semen teased my senses as his body released a few drops.

"Brett. Bed."

I didn't want to stop, but his legs shook so badly he might just fall on his ass if his knees gave out. I gave him one last loving lick, then stood. Mark hit a recessed button and the water stopped flowing. I grabbed a towel and tossed it over his head.

He protested as I rubbed his hair dry, swatting at me to get the towel off his face. Then it was my turn to sputter as he wrapped the towel around my head and licked his way down my chest while I fought my way free of it.

Cursing, muttering, and trading friendly insults, we managed to get almost dry as we fought our way to the gauze-enshrouded bed. Mark reached up and pushed the sheer panels all the way back to the wall, out of the way. I shoved him, and he tumbled onto the bed beneath me as I urged him down onto the cool sheets.

Mark's legs gripped my hips, straining my resolve to take a slower route with him. The memory of his young, firm ass shining under the stars as he spread himself on the hood of his car for me taunted me, riding me hard with the need to go into him. There had been enough light that night for me to watch my dick disappear

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between his buttocks. That image floated in the air above me in those lonely nights when I needed release.

Not yet. It was too soon, and too late, for that. With a lithe twist of his strong body, Mark rolled us across the bed. I slid from his embrace, kissing his chest, and stomach, on my way back to his erection. We shifted closer, grunting at each other, until...

My eyes crossed as he licked my cock, base to tip. His soft, gentle lips surrounded my glans. My size made it difficult for most guys to take me too deeply, and I never forced the issue for fear of teeth. Mark took my shaft between his thumb and forefinger, moving them in rhythm with his mouth. His other hand slipped beneath me. My groin throbbed with anticipation.

He teased me, stroking my tender flesh, never breaching me. I buried my face against his groin, and let my orgasm begin. I fell into a blinding white light, vaguely aware he'd moved his mouth away. His fingers rolled the soft skin of my penis over the core, his touch light, and that carried me to the summit. The pleasure rolled through me, and in the velvety blackness, images of us making love burned my eyes. I shuddered under his touch, finished, but not truly sated.

Mark's hand on the back of my head brought me back to total awareness. His pelvis thrust against my face with silent urging to touch him again. I went down over him, taking him deep. He moaned as my mouth and hand set a pace that left him no way to slow down. His thighs tensed and his hips moved restlessly under my touch. He cried out my name, a short, strangled, explosive breath that gave me a split-second of warning to move my mouth away. His back curved; his shoulders lifted off the bed. I stroked him, and he came, his semen streaming onto his belly to form glistening white pools.

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I regretted not taking his hot life into my mouth, missed not having his taste on my lips to share with him. But we lived in an age where lingering uncertainties rendered some things unwise with strangers.

And that's what we still were to each other.

CHAPTER 6

It was enough simply to breathe. Mark's head rested on my thigh, next to his hand. Every few minutes, he rubbed his pinky finger over my balls, making them draw up a bit. I didn't say anything, suspecting the involuntary reaction amused him. I lay propped up on my elbow, watching him. His gaze finally met mine.

"That took the edge off."

I rubbed his hairy leg. My "edge" was still with me, an uncomfortable fullness down low that struggled to convince my forty-nine-year-old penis it could rise again.

"Says you. I need something to drink, but I'm too lazy to get up."

Mark lifted his arms over his head and stretched, full body,

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groaning as he relaxed. He tapped my hip as he rolled up to a sitting position. "Wine, whiskey, or water?"

All three sounded pretty good, but I wanted to stay awake with him for a while yet.

"Water, please."

"Do you want a shot to go with it?"

Oh, what the hell? "Sure, why not."

Mark padded silently to the small counter area. Restless, needing to stay physically close to him, I followed. The small bar yielded several whiskey miniatures, and he held up my old brand.

"Still drink this?"

"Not often. I...started to worry I liked it too much."

He gave me a swift glance as he poured two shots and handed me one. We clinked the glasses together and downed the amber liquid in unison. I set my empty on the counter, but he poured another for himself.

"You don't smoke now, Brett?"

"I quit seventeen years ago, fifteen years ago, and finally for good fourteen years ago. When did you give 'em up?"

Mark sipped his whiskey. "I put them down about six years ago. Just woke up one morning, didn't have any in the house, and decided I didn't want them any more." He lifted his glass in a tiny salute. "If I could market that for people who really struggle with it, I'd be rich."

I got a bottle of chilled water out of the refrigerator. "I'd have paid a lot for it to be that easy for me, let me tell you. I suffered."

He finished his drink and set both shot glasses in the sink. I'd observed people who lived alone were usually tidy like that. Mark leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. I admired the long, easy lines of his body, his genitals

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pushed forward by the way he stood. He seemed a bit taller than I remembered, but that wasn't surprising, considering how young he'd been. That last growing spurt had been good to him.

"There's so much I want to know about you, Brett."

I understood. I had so many questions about his life, but all of them paled against a more important one—what was our future going to be? Did we have a future?

Did he even want to consider resurrecting our affair? Did I?

In the worst kind of way, I did. Such a foolish hope when he lived on the west coast. And a waste of what little time we had. Mark looked at me, his eyes dark and knowing. Once upon a time, I suspected him of being able to read my mind. Maybe he still could. His fingers laced through mine.

"Are you thinking about going back to bed?"

"Yep." I pulled him in that direction. He offered up a mock resistance, laughing as I growled at him.

Close to the bed, he planted his feet and used our momentum to sling me onto the mattress. I bounced my way to the far side as he landed beside me. We fluffed up the pillows and settled in against each other, thigh-to-thigh. His warm hand squeezed and stroked up and down across my side, restless. He sighed and put his forehead against mine.

"Ah, questions. I don't know where to start."

"Likewise, baby. You lit out for the west coast. How did you live? How'd you land the first job? What brought you here to the island right now?"

"Brett, I have to know something first. Are you involved with anyone?"

"No, I'm not." I lifted up a silent prayer and asked him the same question. His knuckles grazed my nipple.

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"Nope. I was, a few years ago, but it was doomed from the start. He was a blond."

I laughed a bit, insanely relieved he wasn't here cheating on a partner with me. And not because of any guilt I knew I wouldn't suffer—not for being with him again.

If I weren't careful, the genie of my hope would escape its bottle.

"That's cold, Mark. Surely his hair color wasn't the problem."

"Ha. That's what you think. He started out a redhead, went to black, added little pink spikes, then he dyed it blond. He spent an hour in front of the mirror every morning. I got tired of competing with his blow dryer just to get to the sink to brush my teeth."

That made me laugh again. I remembered Mark as one of those people who didn't care too much about how he looked. He never seemed to have much vanity, yet he always appeared well dressed and well groomed. Between our bodies, his restless fingers stroked my flaccid penis. It lengthened briefly, then drew back.

"Why aren't you with anyone, Brett?"

Because they're never you!

I wasn't going to lie to him. He deserved truthfulness, and giving it to him was the only chance I had to keep in touch with him after we left the island.

"Work, therapy, work. More therapy."

He was quiet for a few minutes, and I knew his next question would touch on things that should be long buried, but suddenly weren't.

"How'd your father die?"

"According to the death certificate, it was a heart attack. Of course, he had it twenty minutes after we had a little fight."

"Every conversation you and he ever had was an argument."

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What made that one different?"

"Not an argument, Mark. A fight. I was thirty-four years old and desperately tired of my life. Before she died, I'd promised Mom I'd look out for Carrie, you know that."

He nodded. "Yeah, you told me that. I used to get pissed at you when you'd dump me to take her places. After I learned why you were so protective of her, I got queasy every time you went because I knew the next time I'd see you, you'd be all bruised up."

I had a flash of memory, of Mark raging at me, tears streaming down his young face, as he applied cold washrags to my swollen cheeks. It wasn't the best history to share with someone who meant so much to me.

"Better me than her, baby. I kept him from ever touching her, so I don't regret it. Anyway, Carrie had just gotten married and moved out. She was finally safe from him. I had thirty grand in the bank that the old man didn't know about, and I was packed to leave. He overheard me tell her goodbye on the phone. Things...escalated."

"Meaning he started beating you."

I lifted my gaze to his, and found it full of compassion. My eyes burned at his understanding.

"That time, I hit back."

The shock in his eyes didn't surprise me. In the depths of his gaze I saw the question he was afraid to ask—had I killed my father? I continued the story.

"Anyway, he was livid and went for me a second time. I just...stepped out of the way. He tripped and landed on the floor. I bolted for my car like the hounds of hell were after me. The old bastard chased me down the driveway. That's the last time I saw him alive. In the rear view mirror, running after my car."

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"The police?"

"Hey, all the neighbors saw him chasing my car and heard him screaming profanities at his faggot son. He laid on the ground for twenty minutes before one of them decided they'd better call nine-one-one."

"But he left his company to you."

"No. He left it all to Carrie. She sold it to me for a buck, just to make it legal. Her husband didn't want any part of it and he handed me the dollar bill himself. She gets a little check every month because I think she's due it and because I love her. Of course, she married well and doesn't really need it. One of the filthy-rich Bartlett boys."

"Well, hell. Don't tell me she married Tony."

"Yep. She snagged The Fox. And I hate to tell you this, but he's more gorgeous now than he was then. They live over near Mount Holly, and he takes off work every Tuesday afternoon to boink my baby sister on their 'yacht' out on Mountain Island Lake. Just think—it could have been one of us, except for the little annoying fact he's straight."

Mark whimpered, and we both laughed. He sobered and kissed my eyes and my cheeks, before brushing his lips to mine.

"I didn't know what to do for you. I was so young. You were older, and you told me to leave it alone. I wish I hadn't listened. I hated that you wouldn't let me help you."

"No one could've helped. I refused to walk away from my sister and leave her without a defender. If I'd taken her out of my father's house, he'd have gotten his high-power lawyers to find a way to lock me up, most likely for sexual perversion. I know that because he told me so."

"It took me a long time to accept that your frustration with my

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inability to rely on you was part of your wildness. You saw it as failing me, and you didn't. You couldn't help."

"Christ, Brett, you can't just excuse away the things I did!" He sat up and beat his pillows into submission, then stretched out beside me again. About a foot of bed separated us.

"I wanted to help and, instead, I made things worse by demanding your attention and then throwing it away when I got it."

"I've let go of the past, Mark. Well, all but the fact you gave me clap."

His chin lifted toward the ceiling and he let out a frustrated howl, beating the mattress with his feet, before he glared at me.

"I didn't know I had it! I didn't do it on purpose!" His eyes narrowed in the subdued light. "You weren't an angel, either."

I reached for him. "C'mon back over here and I'll shut up about it."

"Like you never had it any other time. The way you whored around when the moon was waxing or waning, or just spinning in orbit? Shee-it."

"For your information, that's my only experience with any sort of sexually transmitted disease." I wiggled my way across the bed to him since he didn't seem inclined to come to me. His arm draped over my waist. "And the moon has nothing to do with my sex drive."

Mischief mixed with memory, sparkling in his eyes. "The moon was full the night of my eighteenth birthday."

I tried my best not to smile, but I grinned at him. "Shut up and kiss me, Markie Matt."

He rose up on his elbow and leaned closer, his breath warm against my lips. "Of all the things for you to remember, it had to be that."

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"You seized that stage like Grant took Richmond. To this day I can't watch a pole dance without seeing you."

"Time passes."

"Yes." I kissed him, a slow, lingering touch meant to coax him to tell me something of what he felt. It didn't work. Emotionally, he'd pulled back from me, as I had from him, and if I questioned him, we'd end up arguing. I didn't sense he was the least bit sorry we'd put our hands on each other, but rather he needed a little space to process his feelings. So did I.

It wasn't easy, but I refrained from speaking. Mark rolled over and turned off the lamp.

"We should get some sleep, Poseidon. You know what tomorrow is, don't you?"

I did, but I sensed he didn't refer to the obvious holiday. "No. What?"

Mark slid down and put his head on my shoulder. His fingers splayed across my belly. "The first morning we'll ever wake up together."

I moved my arm to be able to hold him and covered his hand with mine. We'd fucked like minks wherever we could, usually in my car or a buddy's apartment, but we'd never spent the night together, never shared the strange bonding born of sleeping side-by-side.

So often when I'd thought of him, I'd been in my solitary bed, aching with loneliness. He was beside me, now, his breathing deep and steady as he slid into sleep, leaving me alone to battle the two-edged sword of my memories.

CHAPTER 7

I drifted toward consciousness and the awareness that my right arm was numb. Mark slumbered on, his dark head still resting on my shoulder. We hadn't moved at all in the night. No wonder my creaky old bones were stiff. I let my arm fall from around him, wiggling my fingers in the attempt to coax the feeling to return.

Mark stirred against me, his legs tensing in a stretch. I flexed my arm, and he rolled away from the bed, heading toward the bathroom. I yawned and fought my way to the counter to start coffee. He didn't have any, so I called room service. I needed my caffeine fix in the mornings.

He came out of the bathroom and went to the counter.

"Fuck. No coffee?"

"Good morning, and Merry Christmas to you, too, sunshine. I

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ordered a pot to be delivered.”

He yawned, groaning as he reached for the ceiling. My gaze dropped to his cock as it lifted when he flexed his spine. Mark snickered at me as he made his own observations of my body, half-hard and needing a trip to the head.

“I know what you’re looking at.”

“Sue me. I know what you’re gawking at, too.” I slipped my arms around him.

We leaned on each other, still and silent, as the world outside our room rustled its way awake. I hated to move, just being skin-to-skin with him brought peace to my soul, but I really had to piss before my wanting to get him back into bed took over. I planted a kiss on his cheek and got on with my errand. Mark had a small bottle of mouthwash on the lavatory counter, so I swished.

All the better to give him a proper good morning kiss before the coffee arrived. I walked back in the bedroom as he yanked on a pair of shorts.

“Cover up, Brett! Room service is here already.”

I dove under the bedspread as he opened the door, only it wasn’t room service. Austin stood there, wearing a ratty orange bathrobe, complete with feathers, which looked like it came from some off, off Broadway stage play, and sandals. His hazel eyes lit up with delight as he looked at Mark, then me.

Damn Austin’s prankster streak. Where the hell had he found that robe? I’d bet someone left it at the resort when they went home, and Colby had kept it to use as a decoration for one of his fancy theme parties. I scowled at him.

“Oh, hell, that’s not our coffee. That’s my lawyer.”

Mark spun around and stared at me. His voice squeaked. “Lawyer?” Mark glanced at Austin, then back to me, his eyes

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wide.

Austin held up a coffee carafe. “It *is* your coffee, and your keycard. I was out getting ours on my way to drop off the key and heard your name mentioned. I told the kitchen I knew you and I’d bring it since I had to talk to you, anyway.” He handed the container and my card to Mark, still wearing that big smile. “You guys are invited to breakfast at the bungalow. Nine o’clock. Try not to be late, Brett.”

I glared at Austin as I spoke to Mark.

“Mark, don’t say anything to him. He’ll never leave if you do. Austin, thanks for the coffee and for bringing my keycard. Now don’t you have a nice warm bed to get back to?”

“No. Steve is already up.” He grinned. “We had to exchange presents.”

Right. More likely they’d exchanged body fluids. I tried a more direct approach. “Goodbye, Austin. We’ll see you at breakfast.”

Austin faked an un-lawyerish pout. “If I didn’t know better, Brett, I’d think you’re trying to get rid of me.”

“Bingo! Mark, shut the damn door.”

My lover looked at Austin. “Sorry, man. I’m hoping for more sex.” Mark closed the door between them and held the carafe up, grinning. “Should I pour?”

“Sure, but first things first.” I tossed off the covers and hopped back out of bed, intent on kissing him properly to start the day. His smile widened as his arms slipped around my neck. I slanted my mouth across his, and his happiness flowed into me.

Mark stopped smiling long enough to kiss me. His tongue licked into mine, and I forgot about coffee, breakfast, and everything except making love to him in the morning light. Mark’s hand trailed down to tease between my buttocks. My body

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responded, and I hardened in a few wonderful, rapid pulses.

I unzipped his shorts, easing them off his hips, mindful of what a zipper could do to a man in his state. They fell to the floor and he stepped out of them as his rigid shaft filled my palm. He shuffled his feet, guiding me to the bed. The back of my knees met the edge of the mattress and I tumbled us onto our sides. Mark rolled me beneath him, something I'd never allowed when I was younger. He levered up on his elbows.

"Is Austin really your lawyer?"

"Yes, he is. He's the one who convinced me to come down to the island for the holidays."

Wariness flickered in his eyes. His thighs tensed against mine. "Is he an ex?"

I brushed my knuckles over his bristly cheek. "Nope, but he is a friend. When he puts on his attorney's hat, he's completely different. The joker disappears, and he's all shrewd legal eagle."

Mark relaxed, but his gaze slid nervously away from mine. "I guess I shouldn't jump to conclusions, huh?"

I raised my knees to grip his hips. "Twenty years is a long time, Mark. There's lots of water under the bridge for both of us."

He looked at me, his green eyes gleaming with desire. "Speaking of under, I like you under me."

I squeezed his ass with both hands. "Feels kinda nice, I must admit."

Mark swallowed, hard. His chest expanded, pressing me tighter to the bed as he took a very deep breath. "You're such a top. Are you going to tell me you've learned a new trick?"

"First, you have to promise not to pass out on top of me."

He moaned as his head dropped to my shoulder. His voice was so low at my ear, I almost didn't hear him. "Does that mean what I

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think it means?"

He'd never had me that way, and I was uncertain as to his reaction. It had been years later, when I sought to develop a lasting relationship, before I allowed it to happen. The boyfriend at the time sensed my disappointment and took it personally. He moved on, and so did I. Only I knew what the real problem was, and it wasn't with the act itself. Now I feared Mark's jealous anger that I'd allowed another man what I'd never permitted him.

"I don't bottom much, baby, but I'm sorta in the mood."

Mark rose up, unvoiced questions glittering in his eyes. "We don't have time, not if you want to make that breakfast. What's 'the bungalow,' by the way?"

I ran my fingers through his dark hair, sweeping a few sleep-incurred cowlicks back into place. "It's the resort owner's private home. How's this? We go spend a couple of hours with the guys, then we'll have all afternoon to laze. The holiday buffet is at six o'clock this evening. We'll need food by then."

"Sounds like a plan, but first..."

His lips met mine, a cautious testing of my mood. I don't know if I surprised him or not, but I gave him a moment of tenderness, then thrust my tongue into his mouth. His chest vibrated as his pelvis pressed to mine, again and again, in a mock taking. Down in dark, hidden places, I quivered with anticipation of surrendering to him. My cock throbbed, hard and eager as it had ever been, even when I was a young man. I rocked my pelvis up, rubbing our dicks together.

Mark inhaled, a quick, sharp sound that sent an echoing jolt through me. His skin dewed under my palms as we thrust and rubbed against each other, slowly warming as the pleasure took root and grew. Memories of schoolboy days awakened within me,

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of that first time I'd dared get this close to another boy. It told me just how far Mark and I needed to go to truly trust each other. I locked my knees behind his and rolled us onto our sides. His hand snaked between us, his fingertips stroking my glans.

My heart wanted so much more than this quick easing. That part of me wanted to haul Mark off to a deserted island where we'd have all the time in the world to get to know each other again. Talk about silly schoolboy longings—I still had some. But living in the moment was just as important as dreams. I nudged his thighs open with my knee and gave myself enough room to stroke his shaft.

The first pleasure a man learns is from his own hand. With a lover, that well-known practice expands, changed by touch into a simple gift with layers of complexity. I was preternaturally aware of the velvety skin that covered his erection, even as his fingers rolled mine over its hard inner core. The musk of semen wafted in the air between us as he leaked and I spread the slickness over him.

I couldn't tear my mouth from his, kissing him until my lips were raw. I wanted him to feel what I felt for him and couldn't say aloud. Mark met me in that open, unguarded kiss, with his own longings and regrets. I swallowed them in to keep them safe, my mind struggling to believe he was able to give them to me.

His strokes shortened, and my arousal jumped, my body tensed. My lungs refused to fill and I couldn't draw a deep breath. The tension at the base of my spine spiraled around itself and snapped free. I came in a blast of blinding white light, knowing nothing but Mark's fingers moving over my dick. Even that awareness faded as I fell into a warm darkness, my body giving up its deepest mystery into his hand.

Mark moaned into my mouth, the low sound of a man on the edge of release. His skin, already damp, washed wet with sweat.

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His hand covered mine, moving me to caress him with longer strokes and a firmer pressure. He jerked against me with a short, explosive breath as his hot semen splashed across my belly.

We stilled, breathing in each other's breath. I was content to let worries and questions pass for a few perfect, content moments. Mark stirred, and I opened my eyes. He smiled.

"We're gonna be late."

He was right. Austin would cackle with glee over it, too. "I'm afraid so. I need to get back to my room and get some clothes, too."

Mark kissed me, a soft, soulful, clinging caress that withered my resolve to climb out of his bed. His arms came around me, holding me, his face buried against my neck. Could he be as moved by being with me as I was being with him?

He trailed kisses down across my shoulder and chest, pausing to suck my nipple to a tingling little peak. Those gorgeous eyes looked at me, and all control I had over my foolish hope shattered as I fell into the warm, liquid green depths of his gaze that revealed his own doubts and dreams. My heart swelled, threatening to expand out of my chest as Mark cupped my cheek and smiled.

"I'll let you go, just this once more."

CHAPTER 8

"I knew you'd be late." Austin ushered us inside the bungalow, squeezing my arm as I walked past him. I grinned and handed my friend the Poseidon costume before turning to our host.

"Thanks for inviting us to breakfast, Colby." I slipped my arm around Mark's waist. "This is Mark Matthews. We knew each other a long time ago, and by some miracle, we're both here."

Colby Denton extended his hand to Mark. "Glad you could join us, Mark. This is my partner, Theron. His brother, Austin, you've met, and that's Austin's partner, Steve. C'mon in, fix a plate, and grab a seat."

Mark shook hands with everyone, and we made our way to the simple buffet spread. I was glad to see such plain fare and helped myself to scrambled eggs, toast, and a few indulgent strips of

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bacon. After all, I was on vacation. Mark sat down beside Steve, and I settled next to him, noting there were eight places at the table. The door opened just as Colby and Theron discussed whether or not they needed to call someone named Tomas.

I recognized the handsome Latino as he entered. I didn't know his exact title, but from snatches of conversations overheard, I'd concluded his word carried the same authority as Colby's or Theron's with the staff. Another round of introductions was made as Tomas and his partner, Raffie, fixed their plates and joined us at the table. I knew someone would question Mark and hoped it wasn't Austin for fear he'd come across like the prosecution. It was Colby who got the conversation going.

"Mark, what brought you to the island for the holiday?"

That was a good question. I'd asked him, but we'd had so much to say to each other that he'd never gotten around to answering me. I listened intently.

"Lots of things. I've been with the same employer for close to twenty years. Lately, I've been feeling, I don't know, a little stale. Human resources came to me and 'suggested' I use up some of my accrued vacation time before it hit the cap and I lost a chunk of it. I was browsing the Internet, looking for vacation ideas, and when I hit the Southern Cross, it was like this voice boomed in my head, telling me I had to come."

Mark looked at me. "Now it seems a little scary, like some force brought me here for a reason."

Colby nodded. "There does seem to be something magical about this place. It brought Theron to me. Austin and Steve met here. Tomas and Raffie met here. Now it opened the way for you and Brett to reconnect."

Under the table, I squeezed Mark's knee and wished we could

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go back to my suite and hop into bed. His hand covered mine.

The table shook and silverware rattled. Theron and Austin froze, twin guilty looks on their faces. Colby muttered something that sounded like “Juveniles,” and rolled his eyes. He turned back to Mark.

“How did you and Brett first meet?”

Mark’s thigh tensed under my hand. I prayed he wouldn’t say too much. If we found a firm footing for a future, then the details of our misspent youth wouldn’t sound so sordid—or so I told myself.

“He saved me from being bashed by a group of straight thugs. We...struck up a friendship. Now I think we’re able to appreciate each other more.” Mark glanced at me, and I smiled for him.

Austin tapped his coffee cup with his spoon. “Enough questions for one morning. Let’s allow Brett and Mark a little privacy to get reacquainted.” He lifted his mug. “It’s not champagne, so I propose a coffee toast—to friends old and new. May we all be happy and healthy, and may we often be together.”

Cups lifted and clinked together to a murmured chorus of agreement. We took the obligatory sip to seal the wish. Theron asked Steve if Austin was back on caffeine, which brought forth laughter from all but me and Mark.

We stared at each other, our gazes full of questions. He looked away and released my hand. We both settled down to eating the food on our plates, and private musings.

I had little knowledge of a loving family, and from what I knew of Mark’s formative years, neither did he. I listened to the flow of conversation around the table, and the diversity of the accents.

Colby spoke with a touch of Bronx, or maybe New Jersey. Theron and Austin shared a southern drawl with Mark and me,

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although I knew they had been born in the Midwest. Steve hailed from Milwaukee. Tomas' sentences were laced with Spanish, and his partner mixed both French and Spanish with his English.

This was family, the kind men like us made for ourselves, full of loving acceptance and support. Austin had been family to me for a good many years, and now he'd invited me to join his. All I had to do was acknowledge I was a part of it. I ached for it, never having known it. My father's hatred had kept me from lasting friendships. I feared that in his rage at me, he'd strike out at anyone close to me.

After his death, I'd been consumed with work for far too long, not really noting the passing of time. In ten days, I'd be free of that responsibility, and have the funds to be able to pursue whatever life I wanted, wherever I wanted to go. This new, welcoming family would embrace me regardless of where I came to rest.

Did I want it if the man beside me didn't share it? I leaned back and rubbed my belly. "I'm stuffed. That was wonderful, Colby. Thank you."

Everyone agreed. Colby beamed, and I knew then just how much personal satisfaction he got out of hosting any sort of get-together. I draped my arm along the back of Mark's chair.

"I hope you don't mind too much, but I think Mark and I are going to excuse ourselves."

Theron spoke up. "Only if you promise to share our table at the holiday buffet tonight. We'll be on the south terrace. Six o'clock."

"We'll be there." I pushed my chair back and stood. All the men around the table echoed my movements, hands extended. Mark and I shook hands with everyone again, but when I grasped Austin's hand, he didn't let go.

"Do you have a minute for a private chat?"

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Unease prickled along my spine as the old pattern of putting everything before time with Mark echoed. "Only if it's important."

He nodded. "It's legal stuff, and it is." He held up his hand, fingers spread. "Five minutes."

I turned to Mark. "Do you mind terribly?"

Mark shook his head. "Of course not. I'll be in my suite."

I watched him leave, hating the growing space between us as he walked out the door. The world was colder without his warmth next to me. Austin grabbed my elbow and led me away from the table. He took a deep breath. "Mark's hot. And young."

"Are you calling me old, Austin? I hear you, and thanks for caring. Now what's up?"

"Paulson wants to ink the deal early so he can fly to Telluride for a little skiing vacation. If we don't sign early, it has to wait until he gets back in February. And if we sign early, the paperwork will still be dated so the sale is effective January second."

I didn't want to wait more than a month. My father's company had been a millstone around my neck for far too long. I needed to be free of it, which meant I'd have to cut short my holiday and my time with Mark. Maybe he'd be willing to accompany me.

That was a selfish thought because it meant Austin's time with his brother would be cut short, too.

"If we must, we must. It's not just my profit on the line."

Austin rolled his eyes. "Well, yes, I'd hate to tell Steve the new kitchen curtains have to wait, but your situation seems to have changed. How's Mark going to react to you leaving early?"

"Curtains? You're getting five percent of the sale price for handling the deal, and all Steve gets is curtains? He needs to move in with me. I'm going to ask Mark to fly home with me to Charlotte. He grew up there. Maybe he'd like to see it again."

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“Can you leave tomorrow?”

My heart sank. If Mark said no, then tonight was all the time we'd have. It wasn't enough time for us to work out where we were with each other, or what we wanted. My face must have given me away.

“Okay, Brett. The day after? That's as far back as I can push it.”

Two more nights with Mark. It still wasn't enough, but I didn't have an option. Over one hundred fifty people worked at the manufacturing company. They deserved a swift and tidy transition, as promised. The sale happening at the end of the year, while the plant was shut down for the holidays, caused more stress than they needed as it was.

“The day after tomorrow. Let me talk to Mark, then hopefully the concierge can handle the airline tickets today. It is a holiday, you know.”

Austin nodded. “Let me know before Mark distracts you, okay?”

I snorted. “I'll do my best, but no promises.”

He laughed and gave me a quick hug. I hustled out the door, walking swiftly along the path toward my suite. My five minutes had turned into ten, and I was anxious to tell Mark what had happened and to work out a solution so we could still have as much time together as possible. I took the steps up to the level of the long, low row of singles suites in a single bound, rounded the corner, and stopped dead in my tracks.

Mark sat at one of the patio tables, chatting and laughing—flirting—with the young man from the plane, Eric. In my memory, I saw him sitting in front of a local hang out, his hand under some guy's shirt, pinching the man's nipple. Eric laid his hand on

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Mark's arm. A red haze crossed my vision.

He hadn't changed. The moment my back was turned, he looked for tricks. I'd never be able to trust him. The fragile hope I'd fought bloomed full and shattered in a single heartbeat. I fought the need to run from him, then it was too late. Mark turned, his gaze lighting with joy as he saw me. Wariness claimed his features as he stood and walked toward me.

"What's wrong?"

My frozen heart couldn't even rage at his actions. What else should I have expected from him?

"There's a problem with my company. I need to go home as soon as possible."

Mark stared at me, unmoving, for several moments. "Just like that. You have to go?"

"Just like that."

I brushed past him, entering my suite without looking back.

CHAPTER 9

I didn't know if I wanted Mark to come after me or not. I sat in the chair, staring out the window at the mountains, sick to my soul that I'd wanted to believe in him so badly, and he'd thrown it back in my face. I shouldn't be upset. We'd never given each other any promises.

Maybe now I could finally put him behind me and move on with my life. I'd carried him around for twenty years, allowing what could have been, and wasn't, to drag me down and prevent me from forming any sort of relationship with another man.

I'd spent a lot of money over the years on therapy to deal with the effects of my abusive father, but my feelings for Mark—and my regrets—had taken their share of hours along the way. Had I confused compassion and empathy for another battered young man

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with love? I was not a particularly handsome man—a definite handicap for a gay man. Did the fact Mark had been so eager to have sex influence me into believing he felt something more for me than lust?

God, I was tired. I'd fought my whole life to find some sort of peace, some refuge from the wreckage left in my father's wake. I found it, fleetingly, when I held Mark, but that was lost to me now. I closed my eyes, hoping to ease the pounding at the base of my skull.

I jumped at the knock on the door, startled awake. I opened the door to find a disheveled Austin standing in front of me, glowering.

"Just what the fuck did you do? Steve and Theron had to pull that man off me before he killed me!"

I washed cold with shock. Mark attacked him? Why? Mark had suffered his share of violence as a boy, too. He hated it as much as I did. Austin grabbed my arms and gave me a good shake.

"Answer me, damn it!"

"I...I don't know what to say. Mark...why?"

He breezed past me into the suite, bodily shoving me out of the way and slamming the door. "You're an idiot, Brett Houston. A fucking, blind idiot. That man loves you."

I shook my head, disbelieving. "No. You're wrong. I saw him chatting up one of the singles' group right outside this door."

Austin drew back, straightening to his full six-one frame, eyes narrowed. "And for that you give him the brush-off? What the *fuck* is wrong with you?"

I stepped back, away from his anger. I'd never seen him riled-up before, or heard him swear like a sailor. I hardly recognized him.

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"You think I should let him go screw whoever he wants? That would show me the love, wouldn't it?"

"He fucking thinks I told you to fucking dump him. He tried to beat the shit out of me! I'm not a fighter. Look at this." Austin thrust out his arm to display an ugly, spreading bruise on the underneath where he must have raised it in self-defense. "He'd have really hurt me if Steve hadn't been there. You're lucky, bucko. Steve's not your average pacifist queer boy. He would've hurt Mark if my brother hadn't stepped in!"

"Austin, calm down. You're—"

"Calm down? He hit me! He hit my lover! I will not fucking calm down! He blames *me* for whatever the fuck *you* did."

My stomach roiled at the thought of the people I cared so much about fighting because of me. "Why would he do that?"

"Maybe you should fucking ask him, Brett! Go over there and fix what you fucked up. *Now!*"

With that final edict, my friend—I hoped he was still my friend—stormed past me and out the door. I flinched as it slammed closed, staring at it, my mind spinning.

Why would Mark think Austin had anything to do with... Because, from his point of view, everything was fine until I spoke privately with my lawyer. But to strike him? I had to make sure Mark apologized for that. I took a deep breath and forced my feet to carry me to Mark's suite. My hand was weighted oddly as I lifted it to knock on the door.

Mark opened the door, his face pale and his eyes red-rimmed. I forgot I couldn't trust him, forgot he'd gone after Austin. Nothing mattered except I loved him, and had since the first time he fell asleep with his head in my lap. I had to make this right.

We weren't the same people, snatching sex in my car because

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we had no place else. I absorbed the defeated slump of his shoulders, the lost aura about him. It was now or never to figure out a way to be with him. If I couldn't, I had to let him go. Mark greeted me as coolly as I expected he would.

"Go away, Brett. I don't want to see you."

"Why? Is Eric in here with you?"

"Who's Eric?" The confusion on his face was real. A cold shock blasted through me. My chest ached with the chill.

"He sat beside me on my flight. I saw you flirting with him."

Mark's eyebrows shot up. "Excuse me? That kid I was talking to just outside? He was waiting for his date. I said 'hello.' Just what do you think you saw?"

In my mind, I saw him turn. The pain in my chest expanded. He'd been glad to see me. I suddenly remembered the way his eyes lit up, the smile on his face. I was a fool.

I had allowed my fears to wreck the fragile threads we had woven around each other. I stared at him, shocked and speechless at my own stupidity. Mark grabbed my elbow, pulled me inside, and shoved me onto a chair.

"Sit down." He went to his knees in front of me, concern in every line of his face. "Do not have a heart attack on me, Brett."

"I'm sorry. How could I have been so blind?" I leaned forward, reaching for him, but he rocked back on his heels, away from me.

"Talk to me, Brett. Tell me the truth. Did you think I was trying to pick up that boy?"

"I'm sorry," I repeated, too ashamed to meet his gaze.

His icy voice cut deep. "You should be. I wanted a second chance with you, and you tossed it away. Christ, I went after your lawyer buddy and... Shit. He'll probably sue me."

"No, he won't. He may never speak to me again. He blames

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me, and he's right." I straightened, gathering my courage to look at him. "I want that second chance with you. I overreacted. I wish I could take it back, but I can't. All I can do is beg you to forgive me, and if you can't do that right now, at least let it go until you can."

Mark rose to his feet and walked away from me. "I'm not a kid anymore, thank God. I grew up. I don't trick every man I see."

I resisted the urge to go and wrap my arms around him for fear he'd reject me. "I believe you."

He spun around, angry. "Do you really? Well, I don't believe *you*. I was an oversexed idiot when I was eighteen, and I did what boys that age do. I ran wild. You were such a puritanical old queen, even back then. Did you ever stop to think that maybe I didn't actually fuck all those guys?"

"Didn't you?"

"No. I didn't. I knew it got to you when I flirted. I knew it pissed you off." He looked away. "I needed your attention, Brett. I was so afraid you'd decide I was too young and that any given time you made love to me would be the last."

I kept all hint of accusation out of my voice. "You didn't just flirt with other men, Mark. You got into cars with them. You went into backrooms and restrooms with them."

He took a deep breath. "You weren't the only one trying to escape his father's home. I gave a lot of blowjobs, and I made a lot of money. But I only fucked a handful of them, and only if they paid me cash...and lots of it. And yes, I picked up the clap and passed it to you, but guess what? You lived through it."

"I know your folks were hard on you, too, but I didn't know you had sex for money. I swear." He'd always seemed to have enough cash in his pocket. Why didn't I ever question where it

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came from? Had I been that naïve, or had part of me known and refused to acknowledge it? I suspected the latter.

“You should’ve told me you needed money, Mark. That’s the one thing I’ve always had and could’ve given you.”

“Yeah, you were a poor little rich boy, weren’t you? It was so sad you had to drive a new car every year.”

“The only reason I had those cars was because my father wanted to look big on the social page of the local rag. He paid me a good salary at the plant for the same reason. The truth is, personally, he didn’t care if I lived or died. I take that back. He’d have preferred I died. Then he could sit in church on Sunday mornings and play the grieving widower and father.”

I rose and went to him, standing close enough to drink in his body heat. His enigmatic gaze never left mine.

“Oh, baby, all this hurt we’ve both carried around for so long. I can only see one way to get rid of it, once and for all.” I laid my sweaty palms on his shoulders and said the only words I knew to say, and the only words that really mattered. “I loved you then, and I love you now.”

Mark’s lovely eyes flooded. “Now you tell me that? When you’re leaving?”

I took a deep breath and forged ahead. “Two days isn’t long enough to fill in the blanks for each other, or to say everything we need to say. If I could change the last twenty years and be able to spend them with you, I would. But, baby, would we have lasted until now? I’m not certain of that.”

Mark laid his hands on my chest. My knees trembled with relief that he’d touched me again. “I never forgot you, Brett, not for one day. You had money. Why didn’t you come after me? I prayed you would.” He sighed tiredly. I stepped closer to him,

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relieved he didn't move away. His hands fisted in my shirt.

"Then life in California got better. I had a great job and friends. I thought about going back to Charlotte, you know, summers and holidays, but I was too afraid you'd have someone."

His eyes went black and bleak. "You were older, Brett. You were supposed to have answers for me, but you didn't. I understand now what your life was really like. You gave up more than me to keep your father off Carrie, and you had to do it. There wasn't a choice for you. You have one now."

His laid his right hand along the side of my face, his fingers trembling against my cheek.

"Where do we go from here? I gotta know."

CHAPTER 10

He'd put it back on me, made it my decision. I gathered my courage and covered his hand with mine. I ached to wrap my arms around him and never let go.

"The reason I have to leave is to complete the sale of Houston Supply. The buyer is anxious to final out the paperwork so he can go on vacation. I want...hope...you can come with me until you have to fly back to California. I'll pay for the airfare."

He shook his head, his eyes searching mine. "A few more days? Is that all you want? Is that all you hope for?"

It was my turn to shake my head. Unable to make the words come, I pulled him to me. His arms came around me, and we stood there, pressed together. I cleared my throat.

"I don't want to spend another day or night without you. My

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life is changing. The plant is off my shoulders. I bought a place out on Ocracoke Island for the summers, but I can live wherever you want ten months a year.”

Mark drew a shuddering breath. “I can’t just quit my job, Brett, and it’s in California.”

“Then I’ll move to California. Just say the word.” I pulled back and looked at him. “You should know this. I’m clearing a respectable amount from the sale of the company—thirty-five million.”

“*Dollars!*” He paled, his mouth slack with surprise.

I kissed his limp lips, then brushed my thumb across this chin. “Well, baby, it’s not marbles.”

He backed away from me, shock carved into his handsome face.

I shrugged. “You don’t have work if you don’t want to, Mark. I could be your full-time job.”

His eyebrows shot up again. “I’m not about to be a kept man. No fucking way. I can’t do it.” He swallowed, then gave me the strangest look. “At least not yet. I can’t ask you to move to California and then be working all the time.”

I bit my lip to keep from smiling. *Maybe*. Maybe it was going to be okay.

“We’ll figure it out. We owe this chance to ourselves, Mark, and to each other.”

He stepped into my arms again, leaning on me. “And if we can’t work it out?”

“I don’t want to go there, baby.” We had to make it work. I’d never feel alive again if we didn’t. I hugged him tighter. “I sure could do with some coffee.”

“You’re a java junkie. You know that, don’t you?”

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I used be late meeting him because I had to hit the drive-thru for a cup.

“Yeah. I know.” I rubbed my cheek against his. I needed to get us out of this room for a while. We needed to step back, take a deep breath, but we needed to do it together. “So can we go get some?”

“No. Just call for them to bring a fresh pot. What’s the point of being at a posh resort if you don’t let them wait on you?” His forehead rested on my shoulder. “God, I feel like such a fool.”

Mark stepped away from me and walked into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. I perched on the edge of the bed and called room service. I replaced the receiver in the cradle and listened intently. The shower was running. I fought the urge to join him and wash off the smell of raw nerves. He’d not invited me, a clear signal he needed a few minutes to himself.

So did I. Nothing was truly settled between us.

It didn’t take long for a large carafe of coffee to arrive. I took a seat at the table, poured a steaming cup for myself, and waited for it to cool and Mark to reappear. When he did, wearing nothing but a towel around his waist, I poured for him. He eased down on the chair next to me, murmuring his thanks. I met his gaze over the rim of his mug and didn’t comment on the dark smudges beneath his eyes.

“Nice towel, Mark. Did the shower help?”

“I like it, and yeah, it did a little.” He took another sip. “I have to go apologize to your friends. I can’t believe I reacted like that.”

That made two of us, but I didn’t comment on that, either.

“If you want, we can go over a little before dinner.”

Mark groaned as he folded his arms on the table and laid his head on them. I stroked his damp hair and presented option number

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two. "Or we can ditch the holiday buffet and stay in bed."

He looked up at me, uncertainty in his gaze. I tried to smile for him. "You don't want to go back to bed, baby? Pull the covers over your head?"

"That depends, Mr. Houston. Are you coming with me?"

I rubbed his arm. "All the way to California, if you'll have me."

Mark grabbed my hand, his gaze drilling into mine. "Do you really mean that? Don't say it to me if you don't because I won't allow you to jerk me around, Brett."

"I do mean it. You said it, and okay, I get it. You have a job there you're unwilling to leave. I get that, too, and it does not piss me off. You need a 'fall back' in case we flame out again. So I'll go west with you, and we'll take some time and see how it goes. No pressure, no promises of undying love and devotion. Just one day at a time."

He licked his lips. "And if I tell you I do love you, would that mean anything?"

My eyes burned as he blurred in my vision. I blinked him back into focus, and told him the truth. "It would mean everything."

He squeezed my hand and tilted his head toward the bed. "You wanna?"

"Yeah, I really do." The thought of making love to him, knowing it marked a beginning, made it difficult to think of anything else, but I had pressing business to get out of the way. Then we could stay in bed the rest of the day.

"First, though, we need to go over to my suite. If we're flying to Charlotte tomorrow, I've got to make a few calls."

Unease flickered in his eyes. "Can't they wait?"

I'd have to prove to him he wasn't second to anything else in

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my life, not ever again, and that might take a while. I lifted his hand to my lips. "Thirty-five million dollars, Mark. I can't pull up stakes and go with you without it."

He shoved his chair away from the table and hopped to his feet. "We need to go to your suite."

I slid my hand under his towel and up the back of his leg. "Why don't you pack and move in with me for tonight while I wrangle airline tickets?"

Mark flashed me, flipping the towel open for a split second and swiftly re-wrapping it. I got a quick glimpse of his cock, hanging heavy down his thigh. He leered at me as he pulled me to my feet and against his chest.

"Get moving, old man."

My arms closed around him as our lips met. A poignant awareness arced between us, one that tasted of everything we'd been to each other, and everything we still were. My whole being stretched toward him and met his hopes and fears, and took them in mingle with my own. Mark broke off the kiss.

"Okay. Go now, or you won't be able to. I'll be at your door in fifteen minutes."

"Don't be late. I'll be naked."

A smile swept across his face as he shooed me to the door. I gave him another quick kiss and hastened to my suite to make calls.

I called Austin and warned him Mark and I might not make dinner, and why, while the concierge desk rearranged our flight schedules. Austin understood and told me we could change our minds and come, no explanation needed. And he told me to tell Mark he didn't harbor any bad feelings over his outburst. I was more relieved than I let him know. I cared a lot for Austin and

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needed him to get along with my lover.

My lover. My heart swelled in my chest at the thought. I could finally call him that. Now I could admit to myself that he'd always been that to me. *My lover.* That phantom man I'd longed for and now could touch again.

I was alive in a new way, seeing my life coming full-circle, back to where it should have started and hadn't. It wouldn't be easy, coming together as two mature men, but the maturity gave us a deeper resolve. I stripped and scurried into the shower, washing off the reek of nervous sweat. When I re-entered the main room, naked, Mark was on the telephone, still wearing nothing but the towel. He handed the receiver to me, mouthing, "Concierge desk," at me.

Then he played with my ass as I listened to the clerk update me on what she'd been able to arrange. I hoped I could remember everything she told me. Mark's fingertips on my swelling dick sent my concentration fleeing.

I shook my head and tried to move away from his teasing, but he grinned and followed me. I completed the call, dropped the receiver, and snatched his towel away from him. His cock rose, jutting forward. I flicked the towel at him.

"In a hurry, lover?" I waved it in front of him again.

This time, he grabbed it away from me and tossed it on the bed. My pulse stuttered at the ruttish glint in his seductive gaze. He opened his shaving kit and pulled out a bottle of lube and a three-pack of condoms.

"You have no idea, darling."

I flipped back the covers and knelt on the bed.

CHAPTER 11

Mark motioned for me to lie down. “Stretch out, Brett. Get comfy.”

I sprawled back against the pillows, wiggling around until I lay stretched out before him, then rearranged my balls just to tease him. It backfired on me. A secretive smile bowed his sexy lips as he pulled another bottle out of his case and squirted a generous portion of liquid into his cupped palm.

He straddled my hips, his powerful, pelted thighs spread wide, knees gripping me. His cock lay heavily beside mine on my belly, and he stopped me when I reached for it.

Haloed by the light of the windows behind him, he glowed. He tilted his hand and the oil dripped in slow, lazy drops onto my stomach, pooling in my navel. Mark dipped his finger in the

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reservoir and ran the tip of his middle finger from the base of my cock to the very tip, leaving a slick trail.

“Stroke yourself, but don’t get close. Just stay really hard.”

I wrapped my fingers around my shaft and rolled the soft skin over my glans. My knuckles grazed his erection as I stroked. “Like that?”

Mark bent over me, his dark hair giving off lustrous sparks in bright light of midday. He licked the tip of my cock with one wet swipe of his tongue. I moaned, the sound ripped from me as I tried to remain silent. My back arched off the bed, almost cramping as I fought back an orgasm. I forced my muscles to relax as he watched me with the witchy gaze that said he knew how close to the edge I trod.

“You taste perfect, like berries.” His hand covered mine as he moved it away from his erection, slowing it, showing me the pace he wanted me to keep. “There. That’s it. Keep it slow and don’t touch my dick. I do not need the extra stimulation.”

I wanted to give him lots of stimulation, and I would at the first sign he was ready for it. I tapped my pinkie finger against his erect length and found breath enough to speak. “And if I don’t?”

His eyes narrowed. “You will because I’m asking you to.”

“You’re very sure of yourself.”

He nodded and used both hands to spread the oil across my chest.

“I’m sure I’ve never wanted to be with anyone the way I want to be with you.”

I used my free hand to squeeze his oily one. He took a quick, short breath and pinched my nipples. I gritted my teeth to keep from moaning again. Mark’s hands slid across what passed for my pecs. The naked emotion on his face brought me up short.

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“You always hated your chest. Said it was wimpy.” His warm palms caressed down my sides, rubbing in the last of the oil from his hands. “Remember that night on Ricky’s futon? I rode you, like this, and fell asleep on your chest.”

I would never forget it or the look on his sleeping face as I held him.

“I remember I had to get home so Carrie wouldn’t be alone with our father after her girlfriends left. I hated to dump you off me and just leave you there, Mark. I swear to you, if they’d been another way, I’d—”

His fingertips touched my lips. He shook his head, and I finally let it go. We couldn’t change the past, any of it.

He squirted a little more oil on me. His strong fingers kneaded my shoulders, digging in at the base of my neck. It was heavenly.

“I know, but my point is, I love your chest. I felt so safe, listening to your heart beat. You’re unhappy with it because you’re not real hairy, but hair doesn’t make the man.” His hands swept over my torso, coming to rest over my heart. “You’ve got a good heart, Brett Houston.”

“It belongs to you, you know?” That was the truth, plain and simple.

My words moved him. He blinked away the quick shine that filled his eyes, but said nothing.

Mark applied a little more oil to his hands and moved down, nudging my knees open so he could kneel between them. His warm, oily hands caressed my abdomen, then down my inner thighs. On the way back up my leg, his thumbs rubbed along either side of my balls, then one hand dipped beneath me, teasing dark, hidden places I’d kept from him before. I relaxed as fully as I could. His gaze locked with mine, he very carefully pushed his

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middle finger into me.

Heat mixed with longing engulfed me. Sweat broke out under my arms. I wanted him inside me, as close as he could be with me. I'd refused him not because I didn't love him, but because I feared love would weaken my resolve in other areas of my life. I'd denied myself this intimate pleasure with other men because they weren't him. I tightened my sphincter around his finger. He swallowed, the questions easy for me to read on his face.

"Are you sure, Brett?"

I nodded. "But you'd better damn well come down here and kiss me first."

That brought the smile back to his face. He lifted my knee and urged me to my side. "Oh, I'll get around to that. Roll over. I want to do your back."

I planted my foot in the middle of his chest. His gaze flicked down to my exposed crotch and back up. I stroked my cock faster, moaning at how good it felt, and knowing it would soon get even better. "How long are you gonna torture me, lover?"

"Not much longer, I promise. Now, get on your belly. Hands out where I can see 'em."

I growled, but I flipped over, then jumped as cold gel landed on my ass. His lube-slicked fingers teased between my buttocks. I turned my head to look at him.

"You're not planning to do me like this, are you? I'd prefer you not."

Mark pressed his finger back into me. "No. I want to see your face." He came up and kissed the corner of my mouth as his hard cock slid over my butt. "This is just to get you to the edge. I want you to need it."

"It's working."

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He slipped a second finger into me, and my hips rose off the bed before I could stop the movement. My body didn't care what position it was in when he fucked me as long as he hurried the hell up and did it. His fingers withdrew, leaving the tiny muscles inside twitching as if searching for him, wanting the pressure to return.

He rocked back on his haunches and smacked my ass, hard, quickly pinning my shoulders to the bed before I could protest.

"Yes, darling, I know. You don't like to be struck. Just remember this isn't your daddy's brand of spanking. I won't do it again for a while."

Great. Now I'd go nuts wondering what he had in mind, but that had to be his point. I flexed my hips against the mattress, rubbing my cock on the sheets. My skin prickled as the friction sent ripples of arousal through me.

Mark's lips kissed the back of my neck. His wet tongue lapped down my spine. I tensed as he reached the small of my back, and he changed direction, returning to my neck. His breath tickled my ear.

"You don't like to be rimmed, darling?"

I barely managed to draw breath to speak. "I like it, but I'll come if you do it."

"No, you won't. You have to wait until I take you before you shoot. I'll be displeased if you don't wait."

I didn't want to know when he'd developed these dom-like tendencies. It didn't matter as long as I reaped the benefits for the rest of my life.

"I can't hold it in if it happens, you know."

His weight came down on me, pinning me to the bed as he maneuvered to kiss me. "Don't let it happen, Brett."

Mark's lips met mine, hot and demanding. Eager. I wanted to

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wrap my arms around him, but he blocked me as I tried to roll over. I bucked against him, but he was a strong man, one whose strength easily equaled my own and held me down. Fresh sweat broke out over my skin as his cock nudged between my buttocks.

“Condom, Mark!”

The bed shifted as he rose up, then his tongue flicked the base of my spine. I hazed out on a rush of anticipation. My thighs parted, my hips lifting as his soft tongue swept across tender flesh, once and again. And again. I hit the threshold.

Stars danced in my vision. I cried out to him I was coming. It was too late to do anything but let the heated wave fling me into sweet, breathless darkness. Mark anchored me, my back cradled against his broad chest, his arm around me, his fingers stroking me. I hovered in oblivion, then in one powerful pulse I shot in his waiting hand. I fell back into myself, panting. Mark moaned in my ear.

“I need you, Brett. I need you. Don’t say ‘no’ now.”

I twisted in his embrace, onto my back. His erection nudged my hip as I turned my head to kiss his feverish mouth. His tongue licked into mine, seeking. I met him halfway, as much as I could with my head swirling in starlight, and hoped it was enough. I shivered as he rolled away from me. A condom landed on my belly as Mark stretched out beside me, lube bottle in hand. I ripped open the packet.

“You look like you’re going to have a stroke, baby.” I rolled toward him, sheathing him.

“It has to wait until after I actually get inside you. God, Brett. I’ve had wet dreams about doing you.” He uncapped the lube.

“That’s a lot to live up to.” I took the bottle from him and squirted a stream of gel at his groin. Surprise swept his face, but he

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recovered quickly, going to his knees.

“Brett Houston with a sense of humor. It’s going to take some getting used to.” He scraped some of the gel off his torso. I opened my thighs and raised my knees as his slick hand spread the lube over me.

His green gaze held mine as he slipped a finger inside me again. I started to shake. I’d spent years regretting I’d never given him this. Mark shifted, kneeling between my legs. The tip of his cock pressed against me, demanding entrance. My body yielded that first bit, and I welcomed the tingling stretch as he pushed with a steady pressure.

Inch by careful inch he laid claim to me. I absorbed every twitch, every millimeter my flesh opened for his, until he was seated deeply inside me. My knees gripped his sides as his hips flexed to mine. My cock lengthened, swelling. I tried to lie still beneath him, but couldn’t. My need for him drove me to restlessness. Mark pulled back, and the pleasure almost undid me. He moaned, eyes closed, as he sank back into me and found a steady rhythm. I grasped my cock with my thumb and forefinger, and stroked.

I watched his face as he fucked me, struck again by his beauty. It was hard to remember the cute, gawky boy when I looked at him now, caught up in his passion. His eyes opened, and I saw how this act of love moved him. He shifted his weight and heat flashed up my spine. I gasped with surprise. He did it again and my erection completed. A feral grin spread across his face.

“Like that?”

I loved it, but didn’t want to confess. I sucked in a breath. “No.”

“Liar...oh, God...”

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“Feel good?”

He groaned and pushed into me. “No. Not...good...at...all.”

I lifted my trembling thighs higher along his sides. My fingers moved faster as I raced toward bliss. Deep inside, dozens of dancing muscles clenched his invading cock in gleeful abandon. Above me, Mark's face was taut with arousal. I could barely form thoughts, much less words.

“Li— Mark...”

“Come to me.”

I couldn't disobey as I came again, my passion fueled by Mark's powerful hips. The orgasm shook me to my core, surprising me with its strength. The unfamiliar sensations around his penetration of me took on a new, glorious life even as the old familiar release swept out from beneath my fingers. I didn't want any of it to end, but in some hazy corner of my mind, I knew it would.

My lover faltered in the relentless rhythm he set, my name a low, breathless sigh on his lips. He tensed, then slammed into me, holding himself tightly to my body as his climax began. His hips jerked to me and his body pulsed within mine. He came down into my arms, spent. I let my knees drop to the bed with a grateful sigh. Mark trembled in my arms, his lips against my ear.

“Promise not to sneak out if I fall asleep on you?”

I hugged him. “I'm not going anywhere, I swear.”

Mark groaned. “I have to move, darling.” His hand slipped between our sweaty bodies.

I was the one who groaned as the pressure inside me eased as Mark carefully pulled out. I steeled myself for the loss of his heat, but he didn't leave the bed, just stripped off the condom and laid it aside before falling to the bed beside me. He draped his arm across

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my sticky chest, and his thigh pinned my mine. I didn't care.

Beside me.

He lay quietly beside me, his eyes bright and alive as he watched me, a smile on his lips. This was where we both belonged, with each other, side-by-side. The murkiness of my future cleared, his light burning away the clouds I'd lived with for so long.

Our love for each other had endured long years apart. Whether or not it would survive the pitfalls of daily life together remained obscure.

But like any mystery, if one stayed sharp and found the clues, the solution became obvious. I was prepared to be diligent. We were worth it.

We'd have time now to share the secrets of those missing years—at least some of them. I had a few I'd spare him, and knowing that, I'd not be upset with him when he chose to spare me. The past—good, bad, and ugly—was unchangeable. The future shifted moment by moment, like the white sands of the Southern Cross beach. What really mattered was today, here and now.

I rolled toward Mark and wrapped my arms around him, finally happy.

EPILOGUE

Six months later...

Mark lifted his suitcase from the trunk of my car. "You paid how much for this shack?"

"It's a cottage, not a shack. And don't you worry your pretty little head about what I paid for it." I grabbed my suitcase and closed the trunk lid.

"That much, huh? Did you overpay?"

I grabbed him around the waist and pulled him against me as I leaned on the car. "Be quiet and listen."

I did the same, soaking in the sounds and smells of Ocracoke Island. I'd waited a long time to share my favorite place on earth with my lover.

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His arms came around me and he cocked his head, motionless, then looked at me. "Listen to what, exactly? I don't hear anything but birds and the breeze rustling the leaves."

"That's my point, lover. I had to plunk down just a tad over one million for it. It would've been less, but I ended up buying their yacht, too."

Mark's eyebrow shot up. "You were going to tell me that, when?"

"I just told you." I kissed him, a quick pressing of my lips to his. "Now my sister and brother-in-law won't be the only ones getting themselves boinked in a stateroom on Tuesday afternoons."

He looked at house, then grinned at me. "I bet we can sit on the back porch naked."

I squeezed his buttocks. "Sunbathe, naked."

"Grill, naked." His hands slid up under my shirt.

I unbuckled his belt, unsnapped his jeans, and slid them off his hips. "Wax the car, naked."

Mark laughed brightly and pulled his pants back up. "You'll have to park in the shade if you want to relive your past. That metal is too damn hot. You wouldn't want my tender parts to get scorched, would you?" He refastened his belt and slipped back into my arms.

"Oh, hell, no. We can't allow that to happen."

We stood there, relaxed and loose, breathing in each other's presence and the sunshine. It was the same sunshine we enjoyed in California, but it felt different. I had to face the fact I was a Carolina boy, through and through. His head dropped, resting on my shoulder.

"Tell me again when the guys are coming. The phone rang and I got distracted."

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He was right about the metal fender being hot. My ass had started to burn, but even that wasn't enough to force me to move and end this peaceful moment.

"Austin and Steve are driving out Friday night, then they're going back to Charlotte on Monday morning. Theron and Colby are flying in late that afternoon. Then all four of them will drive back out on Tuesday until the following Sunday."

"Then it's just you and me until Labor Day?"

"It's just you and me now, you know."

Mark sighed, a deep contented sound, then he yawned. "I need a nap, darling."

"You're a man of leisure now. You have all day to nap."

"Huh. I still have to find us a house in Charlotte. Shut up, Brett."

I hated to see him spend the money from the sale of his place in California on a house for us here, but he'd insisted. I'd given my word to remain silent on the matter, but it had already proven hard to keep. Luckily, he was an understanding man.

I hoped he would be equally understanding when Austin showed up with some papers for him to sign. I wanted him to have a financially secure future, with or without me. I expected him to have a few things to say to me, but it was done.

This way, perhaps he'd not feel such an urgent need to look for a job, and the way would be open for us to spend more time enjoying life.

It was justice, in an odd sort of way, that the sale of the company my father put above his family—certainly above his queer son—had provided me with all the material things in life. I pondered what sort of man it made me to find amusement in that fact, but not for long. I enjoyed my life too much to dwell on what

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couldn't be changed. My lover kissed me.

“Penny for your thoughts, Brett.”

I smiled at him. “I doubt they're worth that much. I packed a big box of condoms, you know.”

Mark batted his dark eyelashes at me. “That's amazing. So did I, and I even remembered to stop and get some of the lube that heats up.”

I hugged him. “You perv.”

“C'mon, Poseidon. Let's go see if we can ruin the job the housekeeping service did making the bed.”

I let him go, grinning as we picked up our suitcases and strolled up the walkway together. I couldn't wait to see his face when he found out all I had on under my jeans was a gold g-string.

KC KENDRICKS

Best-selling author KC Kendrick makes her home in Maryland. A 2008 Amber Heat Wave Winner, and a 2008 CAPA nominee, KC writes contemporary gay romances that while are adult in nature, celebrate love and hope for mature readers.

Writing more traditional romance under a pseudonym, the author is a two-time EPPIE Finalist, and a 2005 CAPA nominee. With one contemporary title a #1 bestseller, several other top-ten list titles, and a few more recommended reads, the author has established herself as a storyteller that delivers rich, satisfying romantic stories that feature strong themes of love, hope, and redemption with positive, upbeat endings.

* * *

**Don't miss *Give Me One Night*
by KC Kendrick,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

When passion changes the rules, one more night can alter the future...

On St. Patrick's Day, Brody O'Connor joins the revelry of the yearly pub crawl, hunting a like-minded man for a night of fun and

frolic with no strings attached. When a mystery man in an emerald green shirt engages Brody's interest, it doesn't take long for the hunter to become the prey.

Well-matched with his mystery man, Brody regrets his "no strings" approach to a night of shared passion that leaves him hungry for more. The morning after, Evan is gone, as agreed. Brody knows it was a mistake to let him go, and vows to find him.

Evan also never expected to meet someone like Brody. Now Brody wants to change the rules, and Evan decides he'll give Brody one more night to convince him to stay...

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