



Netting Neptune

KC KENDRICKS

NETTING NEPTUNE

...Theron could borrow some of my clothes for tonight. Maybe, just maybe, I'd manage to steal a kiss, or more, before the party started. I checked the patio and he was gone, so I headed for my suite with all due haste. The sound of the shower spray zinging against the tiles greeted me.

My knees quivered with the knowledge he was behind the door, naked. I had to let him know I was here. I couldn't let him stroll out of the bathroom in his birthday suit, all clean, smelling fresh like soap, and dripping wet. Could I?

No, damn it.

I knocked on the bathroom door and told him I was in the living area. He called back to me, his voice muffled by running water and the wooden door between us.

"What?"

I raised my voice a few decibel levels. "I said I'm out here."

"You could be in here, you know."

Say...why the hell not?

Cock swelling, pulse skipping, I set a new "stripping world record" and opened the door. Through the clear glass enclosure, Theron's gaze slammed into mine, wanting yet wary. I paused, shivering in the steam teasing my sweaty skin. His gaze flicked down to my erection, hanging heavy, and mine went to his.

Completely aroused, his penis jutted out, full and rosy red. Cut, he was a solid eight inches, maybe a bit more, with prominent veins. I was of an equal length, but he looked to have me on girth. From the sudden gleam in his green eyes, I didn't think it a problem...

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NETTING NEPTUNE

BY

KC KENDRICKS

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NETTING NEPTUNE
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CHAPTER 1

As a very young man, I entertained the fanciful notion I'd live my life like a rolling stone, one that gathered no moss. My dreams didn't take into account finding my own personal paradise and being lucky enough to actually make a home there. I'd been on St. Lucia for ten years, and it was time to celebrate. The idea of hosting a series of summer beach bashes had taken root, and I didn't even try to talk myself out of it, regardless of the work and expense involved.

The festivities tonight kicked-off the season with my birthday bash. I wanted to make my thirty-ninth birthday one to remember. It didn't bother me—too much—this heralded the approaching end of my third decade. I'd come a long way from the over-bearing brat I used to be, and I deserved a reward.

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Besides, unlike a lot of gay guys, I didn't fear the dreaded fortieth next year. To me, forty represented the arrival at true manhood. So many of my boyish notions had already passed, and upon my next birthday, I considered my boyhood officially at an end. But first, this year.

Tonight's theme was Surf City. I'd downloaded digital copies of all the great 1960s surf songs for dance music. My staff jumped right into party mode and painted a few dozen Styrofoam surfboards, hung twinkling white lights, and even found an old Woody station wagon and an owner willing to loan it for an invite to the party. I'd been banned from the kitchen, but not before I'd overheard the whispers about the birthday cake in the oven. The bar was stocked, the pig was in the pit, and the guest list turned over to the hired bouncers. All I had to do was get in my daily swim and take a nap.

I stepped off the boardwalk into the hot sand, peeling out of my T-shirt as I went. My beach—or rather, my corporation's beach—was sparsely populated this afternoon. Southern Cross guests, mostly friends come to celebrate with me, were probably doing what I should be doing in preparation for tonight—resting. I flipped my T-shirt and sandals under a palm tree, beside another swimmer's belongings, and made for the water. Three steps later, I forgot about how toasty warm the soles of my feet were.

Neptune rose from the blue Caribbean waters.

I gawked at the glistening god of the sea manifested from myth to reality for my eyes only.

More appropriately, I ogled him, my mouth hanging open. He walked straight toward for me. I got hard and had no way to hide it.

He was my height, a solid six feet, with broad, bronzed

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shoulders. Longish dark hair lay plastered to his skull, dripping seawater to join the rivulets coursing down his pelted chest. Trim, supple hips moved in a lazy swagger despite the hindering sandy footing. His snug red swim trunks showed off a nice-sized bump at the apex of muscular, hairy thighs. I was smitten.

I finally looked at his face, straight into a pair of gorgeous but wary sea-green eyes framed with long black lashes, clumped wetly from his swim. His cautious gaze swept me, head to toe and back again, before taking one more quick glance at my hard-on.

He took a few more steps into shade of the palm tree and the cooler sand underfoot.

"Sorry if I'm on a private beach. I don't have good directional sense about unfamiliar places."

I followed his lead and stepped into the shade with him.

"This is the Southern Cross beach." I held out my hand. "Colby Denton. I own the resort, so you don't need to worry."

He seemed to relax as his wet fingers closed around mine in a firm handshake. "Theron Bowman, lost traveler."

"Maybe I can help. Where do you need to get back to?"

Theron released my hand and blew out a breath as his gaze flickered away from mine, leaving me oddly bereft of the connection to him. "North Carolina."

"Oh. That's a bit far on foot. How well do you swim?"

"Not well enough, I'm afraid. I guess I'd better be on my way. Nice to meet you, Mr. Denton." He took a step away, and struck by the odd note in his voice, I grabbed his elbow before he took another. His skin was cool from the water.

"Hold on. Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"Mildly," he answered, with obvious reluctance. "Not with the island police." He stole another swift glance at my waning

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erection, which encouraged my cock to lengthen again. A little smile teased his lips. “They were polite, but not too interested in helping someone of my persuasion recover his personal property.”

Sweet Mary. There was hope. I did know what he alluded to, though. Most of the island’s official personnel were polite, but smart gays and lesbians chose discretion when here. You never knew when you’d meet the one official who would make your life miserable just because he could.

I thought the trade-off for living hassle free in such a beautiful place worth keeping my sex life low profile, but not everyone agreed. I needed to confirm what he meant so I didn’t make another embarrassing blunder. He’d already seen my reaction to him, so he knew about me.

“You mean of the gay persuasion?”

He nodded. “That would be the one.”

“Well, why don’t you come up to the patio and I’ll buy you a drink before I get you back to your hotel.”

Theron shook his head. “Thanks, but I’m not staying in a hotel. I need to go see if my family has wired me funds to get home.”

“You’re here without money?” *Damn.* Vagrancy would land him in the local jail and he’d never get out. I had to help him.

“I arrived, and my luggage went missing, so I’m without a lot of things. I quite stupidly put my reservation confirmation and travelers checks in my suitcase, not my duffel.” He pointed at the small canvas shoulder bag at our feet.

So instead of driving himself crazy, he went for a swim? It made an odd sort of sense.

“That’s it, Mr. Bowman. You’re coming up to the resort with me, where you’ll be safe. You can make whatever calls you need to make. I can’t let you run about the island without money.”

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He held his hand up. "I can't let you do that, man. I'm sure my brother has wired what I need by now."

"Don't be stubborn. I'm a property owner on the island. I can help, so let me. Besides, it's my birthday and I need something to do before the party tonight. Wanna come as my guest?"

My Neptune shook his head. "I don't take charity, Mr. Denton."

"Okay. You need money. I need waiters for tonight. How's that? And call me Colby, please."

He thought about it for the longest sixty seconds of my life, then he held out his hand again. "Deal. And I'm Theron."

"Good." I shook his hand. "Let's go."

"Don't you want your swim?"

I grinned at him. "I live here so I get to swim every day." *And besides, getting to know you will be a lot more fun.*

"I really hate to inconvenience you further, Colby."

I squeezed his elbow again. "You're not, so come on."

Theron bent over, picked up my T-shirt and held it out to me. He almost managed a straight face, but one corner of his mouth twitched. "You, um, might need this."

No might about it. I pulled it over my head and yanked the tail down as far as it would go in front, then retrieved my sandals. He gathered up his meager things, and I gestured for him to follow me up to the patio. We stepped though the line of shrubs into one of the Southern Cross' six courtyards, the one decorated for tonight.

"Wow. You're planning one hell of a party, aren't you?"

"I told you, it's my birthday."

"Are you pulling my leg?"

I grinned at him. "Nope. It really is my birthday. I'm celebrating all summer."

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Theron flashed me a knowing smile. "Happy birthday! So you're thirty-nine?"

Delighted with the amusement in his voice, I laughed. If he could guess that, he must be a bit older than me. I asked him, and he admitted he was forty. I led him up the steps to the covered patio and motioned for him to pick a table. He draped his clothes over the back of a chair at one of the tables in the shade. A waitress promptly appeared, greeting me by name.

"Josie, this is Mr. Bowman. His order is on the house."

She nodded, but Theron held his hands up, palms out. "Now, wait. I told you I don't take charity."

"And I agreed to give you a job. Eat hearty, because you're on staff tonight. You can bus the tables."

Josie shook her head. "Sorry to butt in, but we need a bartender. Adam's father had another mini-stroke. He won't be here."

Damn. Not good news, for Adam's father, especially. "Thanks for the update, Josie. I'll call him." I turned back to Theron. "Please tell me you're a bartender in another life."

He nodded. "As a matter of fact, I can tend bar."

"Good. So enjoy your meal and you can work it off. Deal?"

"Yeah, deal."

I pulled out a chair. "Mind if I join you?"

Theron's eyebrow drifted up. "I'm not paying for your meal, too."

"Smartass." I already loved this guy's sense of humor. I sat, and to my dismay, he took the seat across the table. Now I couldn't nudge his knee with my knee.

"Bring us a small fruit bowl and a pitcher of iced tea, Josie." I handed him a lunch menu. "I meant what I said, Theron. Get

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whatever you like, even breakfast.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate this. The last meal I had was on the plane yesterday, and it wasn’t much.”

Yesterday? Where had he slept last night? On my beach? I bit my tongue and didn’t ask. He wouldn’t sleep out in the open tonight. I’d make sure of it. Josie returned with the tea and two tall glasses filled with ice. I murmured my thanks, then ordered two appetizers, and a couple of turkey and cranberry whole wheat wraps.

“I want to sample the cold crab dip and the shrimp spread we’re serving tonight.” I smiled at Theron. “Do you mind being a guinea pig with me?”

“Heck, no.” He poured the tea and handed a glass to me.

I tapped my glass to his. “To new friends.”

Theron hesitated for the space of a heartbeat, then nodded. “To new friends.”

We sipped together, and I sat mesmerized by the muscles moving in his throat as he swallowed. My lips tingled as I imagined the feel of this skin along his jaw line under the bristly texture of day-old whiskers.

“You’re going to need some fresh clothes for tonight, and a shower and shave. We’re the about the same size. After we eat, my suite is your suite.”

Theron’s green gaze filled with amusement. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were trying to get me out of what little clothing I own.”

I took another sip of tea. “Considering you’re only wearing swim trunks, how hard can it be?”

He froze for an instant, a sheepish expression taking form on his handsome face. *Well, well, well.* I grinned at him. “I’ll behave,

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I swear.”

“Right. I’ve got your number, Colby Denton.”

I had his, too. The appetizers arrived, and we concentrated on eating. Theron ate neatly, but it was obvious he was hungry. I wanted to help his situation, but I needed a bit more information.

“Tell me the names of the authorities you spoke with. While you grab a shower and a little rest, I’ll go see what I can do about tracking down your belongings.”

“You don’t have to go to any trouble for me. Once my brother wires funds, I’m going home. I’m not in a vacationing state of mind after yesterday. My mid-life crisis doesn’t need all this additional stress.”

I scooped up a cracker full of crab dip. “As it so happens, I have a suite coming empty tomorrow. It’s yours if you want it. You can have at least one relaxing night on the island, my treat.”

Theron looked toward the bay. His shoulders slumped. Maybe I needed to back off. My last serious lover had accused me—quite accurately—of having a deep-seated need to fix worlds not belonging to me. I pushed my chair back and stood.

“Just think about it. I’m going to get more ice.” I didn’t wait for his reply as I went off on my errand. Before I went back to the table, I made a quick call to the reservation desk and instructed them to hold the suite I’d offered him open for the night in case he took me up on the offer.

Josie was chatting with Theron when I rejoined him. He thanked her, then looked at me with those beautiful eyes. I knew what he was going to say. My heart beat wildly, joyfully.

“I accept your offer of hospitality.”

CHAPTER 2

My stomach fluttered, performing some sort of little happy dance. Lower down, my cock sent frantic signals to my brain. I couldn't let my Neptune get away without knowing him, in the Biblical sense. He leaned forward.

"Listen, Colby, I'll pay you once I get home. You're trying to run a business here."

"And I can afford to do a nice thing for a stranded traveler. Now give me the name of whatever official you spoke with, and I'll make a few calls. Maybe your luggage will turn up."

He pulled an envelope from his canvas duffle bag and handed it to me. The business card was stuck in the fold and I recognized the name listed. The man liked to make sure everyone knew he was in charge, but I groveled like a pro, when necessary, to get what I

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wanted.

“Thanks, man. I really owe you.”

I shook my head. “You really don’t, so let’s just forget it, okay? If we don’t, we’ll sit here all day and not get anything done.” I slid the cold crab dip at him. “Tell me what you think about this.”

Theron scooped up a healthy helping on a wheat cracker and shoved the whole thing in his mouth. I watched his pink tongue flick bits of dip off his lower lip. His gaze locked with mine. Very slowly, he licked his upper lip. I squirmed in my seat. He didn’t even try to stop from laughing at me as he went for another cracker. I held his gaze.

“If you tease me like that again, babe, I’m gonna lick off the extra for you.”

He broke the cracker in half and handed a portion to me. “I wouldn’t want you to go to any more trouble for me.”

I took the cracker. “You’re a slick one, Mr. Bowman, but I’m known for my persistence.”

He popped a melon ball into his mouth, chewed it, then swallowed. “I sorta figured that out about you.”

Before I could reply, Josie tapped me on the shoulder. “Sorry to interrupt, but you’re needed at the front desk, Colby.”

“I’ll be right there.” I turned back to my guest. “Please...finish your meal, then come inside and find either Josie or me. Josie, if you can’t find me, please take Mr. Bowman to my suite so he can get a shower and relax for a while.”

I didn’t linger. The sooner I took care of whatever problem had occurred, the quicker I could get Theron alone. After that... I was already too worked up over this guy and it wouldn’t be smart to speculate.

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Right. I planned to cast a net over my Neptune and give him a Southern Cross night to remember.

The problem at the front desk was minor. The computer had pulled one of its usual tricks. I input my password, the software reset, and all was well. I slipped into my office and called the local airfield. Better to start with folks who were friendly. If they had off-loaded Theron's suitcase, then I'd grovel.

They were certain Theron's luggage had not been removed from the plane and had no idea how it had been missed. It was likely back in Charlotte, North Carolina by now. I made another call, this one to the States to a travel agent friend of mine. He agreed to make a few stateside calls. The suitcase had to be somewhere, and I wanted to know where. Once I had the information, a decision based on my guest's plans was possible.

Meanwhile, Theron could borrow some of my clothes for tonight. Maybe, just maybe, I'd manage to steal a kiss, or more, before the party started. I checked the patio and he was gone, so I headed for my suite with all due haste. The sound of the shower spray zinging against the tiles greeted me.

My knees quivered with the knowledge he was behind the door, naked. I had to let him know I was here. I couldn't let him stroll out of the bathroom in his birthday suit, all clean, smelling fresh like soap, and dripping wet. Could I?

No, damn it.

I knocked on the bathroom door and told him I was in the living area. He called back to me, his voice muffled by running water and the wooden door between us.

"What?"

I raised my voice a few decibel levels. "I said I'm out here."

"You could be in here, you know."

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Say...why the hell not?

Cock swelling, pulse skipping, I set a new “stripping world record” and opened the door. Through the clear glass enclosure, Theron’s gaze slammed into mine, wanting yet wary. I paused, shivering in the steam teasing my sweaty skin. His gaze flicked down to my erection, hanging heavy, and mine went to his.

Completely aroused, his penis jutted out, full and rosy red. Cut, he was a solid eight inches, maybe a bit more, with prominent veins. I was of an equal length, but he looked to have me on girth. From the sudden gleam in his green eyes, I didn’t think it a problem.

“Are you coming...in?” He stroked his cock with a soapy hand.

I swallowed and nodded, not trusting my voice. He opened the glass door, and I stepped in behind him, pulling the knob to activate the rear water jets. He turned to face me.

“Nice set-up, Colby. I guess this is a spa shower?”

“Every suite has this.” I laid my palm in the middle of his chest, not quite sure who was leading. “You want your back washed?”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “I’d love my back washed.”

He turned around and leaned forward, thighs spread as he braced his hands on the tiled wall. I stared at his round, muscular, perfect ass and knew he wanted me to fuck him. I didn’t think I could take a deep enough breath to accomplish the deed. I forced my trembling hands to soap up a washcloth.

Theron grunted as the wet cotton contacted his shoulder. I made my way over his back, rubbing in circular motions. Thinking him washed enough, I flipped the washcloth over the bar and lathered my hands. Lust rippled through me as my soapy fingertips caressed his smooth skin. The water sluiced the suds down across

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his flanks.

I moved closer, my cock nudging the cleft between the twin white globes of his buttocks. I wanted him so badly my knees knocked together, but I was a little off kilter. My voice echoed hoarsely inside the shower enclosure.

“Theron.”

He straightened, his back coming against my chest. I gripped his hips to steady us, then slid my arms around his waist. His hand covered mine and guided it to his engorged cock. I wrapped my fingers around his shaft and stroked. He leaned his head in to rest against mine.

“Like that?” I rolled my soapy fingers over the rim of his glans. Theron moaned. I took it to be a yes and kept going. It didn’t take long.

A fine tremor swept through him. His breathing changed, growing quick and shallow. Theron reached behind me and grasped my ass, squeezing like his life depended on it. A low groan rumbled up from his chest, bursting past his lips in one explosive cry as his dick pulsed in my hand.

I pumped his cock, mingling the sudden slickness of his semen with the water running over him. My balls drew up tightly as my body ached to join him in release. I stayed with him until he moaned again, this time the sound of man spent and wanting to reclaim himself from the velvety blackness. I stilled my hand and let my head drop onto his shoulder. He murmured my name and turned in my arms. Pushing me flat to the tiled wall, Theron dropped to his knees. I braced my feet and took hold of a grab bar before I fell.

His tongue flicked to the tip of my cock, teasing me. I thrust my hips forward, needing to feel the heat of his mouth take me

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deep. Feather-light, his breath blew over my wet skin. I shivered under the hot spray.

He grasped my dick with forefinger and thumb, rolling the outer skin gently over the hard inner core. I tried to keep still, but couldn't as my pelvis arced forward. Theron refused to hurry, his touch whisper-light and slow, driving me nuts. The breath hitched in my throat, again and again, as my need fought his pace. Orgasm hovered, just out of my reach, as his tongue lazily licked my balls. His lips slid down over my throbbing cock and the climax bubbling at the base of my spine ripped through me. I was vaguely aware he'd pulled his mouth away, but it hardly mattered. I was coming, carried there by his knowing fingers.

I couldn't breathe. A roaring filled my ears. My abdominal muscles clenched, and I fell into a heated darkness, brightly lit by the stars dancing behind my eyes. I doubled over, my hands on Theron's shoulders, and forced a single, strangled word past my drooling lips.

"Stop."

His hands caressed up my sides, then stroked down my thighs. I finally forced air into my lungs and opened my eyes. I blinked his green eyes into focus. The wary look was back.

"I'd better let you finish your shower."

I grasped his arms and pulled him to his feet. "I'm clean enough."

Cupping the back of his neck, I tried to kiss him, but he moved away, shaking his head. Startled by his refusal, I released him and mutely watched him step out of the shower. Theron wrapped a towel around his waist and left the bathroom.

Had I disappointed him somehow? Or was it he didn't want to risk any sort of emotional connection with me? I longed to know,

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but it wasn't something I could ask. I'd struck a deal with him. It didn't involve sex, and I didn't want him to think it did. We'd satisfied our natural curiosity about each other, nothing more.

Theron was a tourist who'd had a bit of bad luck. I'd help in any way I could. In a handful of days, he'd pick up the pieces of his life, back in the States. My life was here and would go on much as before, unchanged by our little encounter.

If only I really believed that.

CHAPTER 3

My route to the island had been circuitous. I'd always possessed a sense of being different, even as a small boy. I'd existed outside, looking in at the people around me. My family confused me, and I suspected it was mutual. My mother tried to ease my suffering by keeping me close. Her love and kindness sustained me, but too often I was a teenage asshole to her. She understood.

Those schoolmates who ferreted out my secret taught me the one inescapable, vicious lesson of being a gay teenager—conform or be cast out. My father brutally rammed home that bit of learning. The day I graduated high school, he set my scant few belongings on the front porch and told me never to come home again. My mother cried and made me promise never to look back.

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I got a job and buckled down. With a steady boyfriend, I took a vacation to St. Lucia. I fell in love with the place, and living on the island became my holy grail. I worked two jobs, dug my way through some college classes, and squirreled away every penny I could. My lover preferred I spend my money on him and eventually walked out. I didn't mind. I got a cheaper apartment and worked more hours.

Then my mother died, and a check for fifty thousand dollars arrived, payable to me. I didn't even question why she'd never told anyone she had a life insurance policy on herself with me as the beneficiary. I knew and I kept my word. I didn't look back.

I flew to St. Lucia and found a little beach motel in need of some tender, loving care. Twenty-two months—and a steep learning curve later—my resort opened for business. I decided to call it the Southern Cross, not for the stars or the song, but for the tiny diamond cross that had hung from a gold chain around my mother's neck. I'd never seen her without it.

I enjoyed my life. Sure, I worked hard to keep my little resort running smoothly, but it was a labor of love. I met all sorts of fascinating people and made lasting friends. Four or five times a year, someone very interesting booked a suite and I was his vacation fling. Occasionally, I was his fling two or three vacations in a row, which suited me fine. I didn't have a place in my life for someone permanent, but reconnecting with old friends was enjoyable.

So why did this little wank job in the shower with Theron bother me?

Okay, so he'd refused to kiss me. Maybe he didn't kiss his tricks. A first kiss fanned lustful flames—or not. We'd bypassed it and still enjoyed getting clean together. Was it that he didn't want

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to risk our first kiss not having any spark?

I didn't think so. My gut said Theron and I had to the potential to mutually combust, which is why he refused to kiss me. He didn't want to know it for sure for fear it would change his life.

Or maybe I'd allowed him to walk away because of my fear of that spark.

I turned off the water and found a towel of my own. He stood at the terrace door, staring out over the ocean when I walked into the main room. I got a laundry bag out of the drawer and handed it to him.

"Put your clothes in this and my staff will get them laundered. I'll loan you things for tonight."

Theron nodded. "Thanks."

"Listen, Theron, after the party, you can come back here to sleep if you want. Take the sofa or join me in the bedroom, it's up to you."

He sighed, a long, tired sound that made me think about a lot of things in my own life I couldn't change.

"Thanks, Colby. I'll probably take the couch."

I moved to stand behind him and squeezed his shoulder. "Would you like to talk about it? I'm a pretty good listener."

"No. It'll scare you off of turning forty."

I snorted. "Do I have a choice about the big four-oh?"

His shoulders slumped. "Everyone has choices, man. Life doesn't become a problem unless you only have bad ones to choose from."

A sobering statement, to be sure. Had some bad choice driven him here? Or had he hoped it was a good choice, and it became one more in a series of events that beat him down to the very edge of his tolerance?

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“Mercury does enjoy a good retrograde.”

Theron glanced over his shoulder at me. “So that’s what happened to the last ten years of my life. I wondered.”

I grinned at the dry humor in his voice, but my curiosity about him grew by leaps and bounds. “My offer stands if you decide you want to share.”

“I don’t want to depress you.” He turned and my eyes feasted on his sea-green gaze. “But I’ll take you up on the offer of clean underwear.”

I motioned him to re-enter the bedroom, then followed him in. I tossed briefs and socks on the bed for both of us.

“Would you like jeans or something cooler for tonight? I’ve got a few pairs of white Docker-style slacks, or I even have shorts. Your choice.”

“The slacks will do fine.”

I draped two pair over the back of the chair. For Theron, I chose a light teal polo to show off his eyes, and a turquoise one for myself—for the same reason. Shoes, he had, so no worries there.

“There’s someone at your door, Colby.”

I stepped out of the closet. “Ah. Room service with my afternoon refreshments. Wait here.”

I went to the door and accepted the pitcher of fresh-brewed iced tea and new fruit basket. The maid removed the items from yesterday. Owning the place did have a few perks. I poured two glasses of tea and carried them into the bedroom. Theron had donned a pair of slacks. I pointed at the shady balcony outside the room.

“Let’s sit for a while.”

He opened the door for me, then took the tumblers from my hands. “Why don’t you find your pants before you come outside?”

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Darn.

I took his suggestion and joined him at the small table—still shirtless. I had a good chest so why not show it off in the hope he'd pay attention?

My balcony was only about four feet off the sand, but careful plantings made it private. When seated, I couldn't see the shoreline, but had an expansive view of the water and the horizon.

"Theron, I feel like I need to say something about what happened in the shower, but I don't know what."

"Yeah, me, too. I was outta line to invite you to join me."

I tapped my glass to his. "You weren't as far as I'm concerned, but maybe I was. I don't want you to think I'm helping you out just to get sex."

He didn't reply, and I suspected my fear was accurate. He'd been used in that way in his life.

"So what time does the party start tonight? When am I on duty?"

I grabbed the opportunity to change the subject. The party started at nine, and I wanted the bar to open around eight-thirty. He grinned when I told him to set out a jar for tips. It wasn't just *invited* guests who'd cruise through for a beverage. The bouncers were window dressing. They'd let anyone mostly sober into the bar.

I peeled an orange as we chatted, and he accepted a few slices. While we talked, I found out a little bit about him.

He hailed from Arkansas originally, but he'd graduated from the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia with degrees in marketing and business. A telecommunications firm in Washington, D.C. had recruited him, and his life had spiraled downhill from there. He'd moved to Charlotte to start over...a

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decision that had bombed as well.

“The pressure to perform was incredible, man. Things just got out of control in a hurry.” He looked incredibly ill-at-ease, even sad, and his eyes had a bruised, tired look about them. “It didn’t help when one of the higher-ups found out I’m gay. As they say, that was that. I was thirty and jobless.”

I suspected a lot had transpired within that little word “and.” If he was forty now, what had happened in the last ten years? It wasn’t something I should pry into. Sometimes pride was all a man had. I wouldn’t wound Theron’s further.

“I don’t think many people get through life without a few bad times. I had a few getting to the island, and the first five years were lean.”

Theron sighed. “I think I’d like to lie down for a bit before tonight. Sleeping on the beach last night wasn’t very cozy.”

I gave him high marks for ending the conversation politely, but with determination. My rampant curiosity about him would have to wait until he was ready to talk more. I suggested he take the bed instead of the sofa, as I needed to finish dressing and go check on my business. He nodded, waiting until I’d finished in the bedroom to come inside and sprawl out on the bed. I left him to his rest and went to my office. I’d have rather joined my Neptune for a nap, but I didn’t want to push him. I hoped he’d share my bed after the party, but accepted he had to come on his terms, not mine.

Handling details for the evening kept me busy until about six o’clock. It was about then I spotted Theron, looking smoking-hot-sexy in my white slacks and teal shirt, checking out the bar setup. I moseyed over to make sure he got something to eat. He laughed, and I mused privately his nap had done him a lot of good. The dark smudges under his gorgeous eyes were gone.

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“You’re a regular mother hen, aren’t you?”

“I can be. Now come over here and have dinner with the birthday boy.” I pulled a chair out for him at my table.

He rolled his eyes as he sat. “I guess I have time.” Theron looked skyward again as I took the chair next to his. “No playing with my knee, Colby. No footsie, either.”

“Would I do that?”

“You would.” He flipped open the menu.

I shook my head. “Forget the menu. I had a couple of filet mignons flown down from the States. Yeah, they were frozen, but for a very short time.” My instructions had been to keep them very, very cold and, just my luck, an over-achiever had packed the order. They would be fine, though, all things considered.

“I planned to have one tonight and one tomorrow night, but having a dining companion calls for both of them now.”

Theron flashed me a grin. “Okay, but I’ll take mine as done as your chef can bring himself to make it.”

I flagged a waitress and gave her our order. I looked at Theron. “Bordeaux? Chateau d’Yquem?”

He nodded, and the waitress went on her way. Theron bumped his knee against mine.

“I’m sorry I was a shit this afternoon. I needed to fall on my face. I hope I didn’t leave you thinking I didn’t enjoy our shower.”

Relief flooded me, but I didn’t allow it to show. “It was pretty obvious you needed a nap. You looked tired.” I rubbed my eyes. “You had these big, dark circles around your eyes, like a raccoon.”

“Funny. Ha-ha. Well, the...” He bumped his knee to mine a second time. “The shower was nice, Colby.”

His hand rested on the table between us. Did I dare? I did.

I covered his hand with mine. He didn’t pull away. “I enjoyed

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it, too. Maybe you can wash my back again, later tonight.”

The wine arrived, saving him from having to answer. Tomas poured for us, flashing me a curious look. I nodded slightly. Word would spread through the staff I might not be alone tonight. Unless some major emergency occurred, Tomas was on duty and he’d save all questions until tomorrow. Theron gave no indication he’d noticed the exchange, but he probably had.

Before I had the chance to tell him I hoped he’d consider sharing my bed tonight, a couple of friends breezed in to wish me a happy birthday. They’d barely gone before the dam broke and the patio flooded with people. Theron ate, listening while I chatted, snatching bites of filet between greeting people. Much too soon he left the table and settled into his bartender duties as I lived it up as the hosting guest of honor.

I managed to find my way to him in time to see the sunset reflected in his eyes. He smiled and handed me a seltzer with a lime twist. I whined.

“I ordered a vodka and tonic with a lime twist.”

He shook his head. “No more alcohol for you tonight, birthday boy.”

My heart performed a funny little dance in my chest. I lowered my voice. “Does that mean what I hope it means?”

“Save the last dance for me.”

CHAPTER 4

Around midnight, the party wound down. Most of the guests departed, and the staff unobtrusively cleared empty tables and removed chairs. I shared my table with Billy and Herbie, two buddies who owned a sightseeing tour service on the island. I watched Theron pack up the bar while we chatted.

Theron was a good bartender. As guests left, he put away any specialty liquors they'd ordered, leaving out only what the people remaining had asked for. He'd already sent the extra glasses inside, and emptied the ice machine and wiped out the hopper.

Herbie caught my gaze and smirked at me. "He's cute, girlfriend. Are you tapping him?"

"What a question. It's my birthday. Don't you think I should?"

Billy leaned closer. "Hon, I recognize him. Do you remember

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that McCafferty fellow from one of the Carolinas who was convicted for insider trading after about a five-year legal battle? That's his partner, or was his partner, at the time the scandal broke. They arrested this fellow, too. His picture was splashed all over the television and newspapers when they incarcerated him. The court declared him a flight risk and they held him, without bail, for nine months until his lawyer proved he was innocent. They released him without so much as an apology for their treatment of him."

I almost fell off my chair as memories flashed through my mind. He was right. I remembered reading about it, now that Billy had mentioned it. It surprised me I'd not recognized his name. "Theron" was hardly common in the States.

All the nasty particulars of the case escaped memory, but Theron had been arrested and charged as a conspirator. The investigation revealed his lover illegally accessed his computer and used it for some of his dirty work. Theron had been thoroughly exonerated, but I didn't doubt those months in prison had left a mark on him. He'd lost his job, and likely all prospects of another that didn't involve flipping burgers. I'd have to tell Theron I knew, but I didn't want Herbie and Billy shooting off their mouths on their way out tonight.

"Listen up, you two. You don't mention it. The man was cleared. We will not embarrass him. Got it?" They nodded, and in the nick of time. Theron dropped the few remaining lemon slices in a tall glass, added crushed ice and water, turned the light off above the bar, and walked over to the table. I stood and pulled out a chair for him as I made introductions. A few minutes later, Billy and Herbie said their goodnights, and I was alone with Theron. I thought he looked tired again, and wondered at the amount of stress he lived with. He lifted his water and smiled at me.

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“Happy birthday.”

I smiled back. “Thanks. We didn’t get our dance.”

He waved at one of the wait staff. “It’s under control, Mr. Denton.”

Sure enough, a slow, mellow piano filled the air. Theron stood and held his hand out to me. “May I have this dance?”

Gooseflesh rose on my skin. I’d not danced with anyone in years, since before I moved to the island. I pushed back my chair and placed my hand in his. We jockeyed a bit, both of us trying to lead, then he grinned and put his arms around my shoulders. I wrapped mine around his waist and drew him against me. Slowly we found a rhythm, our hips moving together. Theron laid his head against mine and sighed. I asked the question, dreading his answer.

“You tired?”

He laughed softly, his breath teasing my ear. “Don’t worry. I’m getting my second wind.” He ground his pelvis to mine. “I’m looking forward to tonight.”

“Thank God.” I nibbled his earlobe, aware a few of my staff surreptitiously watched our dance. I never hid the fact I was gay from them, but they’d never seen me openly courting anyone before. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the simple pleasure of swaying to the music with him.

As the music ended, soft applause rippled through the shadows. I pulled back and looked at him. “Ready to turn in for the night?”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “Yes. I’m ready, but there’s something... Look, Colby, let’s not get all caught up in tonight, okay? I’m going home as soon as I can.”

I understood him all too well, but from the moment he’d risen from the sea, I’d been under his spell. It would be hard to let him go in the morning, but it was clear he’d already made that choice. I

wondered, for a brief moment, about the man who'd betrayed him. Was there still involvement there? The heart was a strange ruler, forgiving what on the surface seemed unforgivable. It wasn't something I could ask and expect to share his passion tonight. His past was his own, and I wouldn't be the one to reopen old wounds.

"I hope you won't be upset when you get to my suite. I ordered a few things in case you said yes."

"It's okay. I suspected you would. Any man who lives on a tropical island has to be a bit of a romantic."

I kept my arm around his waist and propelled him off the dance floor. "It's not a bad thing, you know. Surf, sand, starlight."

"I didn't say it was." Theron pulled me off the path and into a dark shadow.

His fingers teased the wisps of hair on my collar as his arms snaked around my neck. I forgot how to breathe as his dark eyes watched me. The blood pooled in my groin; my cock lengthened. I ran my hands up his sides, feeling every ridge of his ribcage. He held his back stiffly, like he hadn't felt a connection to anyone in a while. My knees shook when he wet his lips.

I'd tried not to obsess over why he'd not kissed me earlier, but it had bothered me off and on all day. We'd come to the moment where he would, and I reached down for every ounce of self-control I had to remain still and let him kiss me, his way. Did he have any clue what he did to me?

I had to know if his dick was as hard as mine. Theron's eyes lit with anticipation as I cupped his ass cheeks and ground my pelvis to his. He was hard, the ridge of his cock pushing the length of his zipper.

I managed to croak a few words. "I had to know."

He ran his thumb over my lower lip. If he didn't kiss me soon,

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I'd faint from lack of oxygen.

"And now that you do, what happens?"

"You tell me, Theron. I don't want to push you."

"You're not." He cupped the back of my head and brushed his lips to mine, a whisper-soft touch that snapped through me, shattering my good intentions along with my control.

I backed him to the side of the restaurant where the shadows were deepest and kissed him, hard. His tongue licked into mine, eager and willing. Wanting. I tasted the faint trace of lemon from his drink as I nibbled the corner of his mouth. Theron scraped his teeth over my lower lip and heat coiled in my belly, like some spring awaiting release.

His strong arms held me as I massaged his ass. My balls drew up as he groaned and thrust his tongue into my mouth. Deep inside, a phantom memory ached for a new touch, his touch, and from that phantom came images of him pressing me down beneath him on clean, crisp sheets. He groaned and broke the kiss, his head dropping to my shoulder. We stood holding each other, panting, our breath mingling in the cool night air. I found my voice.

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

He nodded, and his hand found mine, lacing our fingers together. I pushed off from the wall and led him to my suite.

"Your apartment isn't attached to the main structure like the others that sit this close."

It took my sex-fogged brain a moment to process what he was talking about. "Um, no. I think my little hut was originally a separate kitchen. It was gutted when I got here, but it was just the right size for me." I leered at him, wiggling my eyebrows in the glow cast by the bulb above my door. "I bet you're just the right size for me, too."

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Theron blinked at me several times, then gripped my ass with one strong hand. "I didn't take you for a bottom, babe."

At that moment, I managed to get the door open and we stumbled through it, grabbing each other and laughing. I smacked his butt.

"We'll flip a coin to see who gets to fuck whom first."

He snickered and grabbed the tail of my shirt, yanking the fabric over my head and tossing it aside. Theron laid his palms over my pebbled nipples, rubbing in small, tight circles. Little jolts of pleasure sparked from under his hands. I tugged his shirt from beneath his belt and pulled it over his head. He backed away, unsnapping his slacks and kicking off his shoes. I followed his lead and in seconds stood naked before him, stroking my erection. Thumbs hooked over the waistband of his briefs, he looked me up and down.

"Jeez, you are a sexy thing."

I laughed and pointed my finger at him. "Get 'em off."

Theron exposed the tip of his rosy cock.

I nodded. "Show me more."

He turned, hooked his index finger under the leg band and pulling the white cotton up to reveal a muscular buttock. I stroked my cock, rolling the skin. A jolt of arousal caught me. Theron's green gaze turned smoky as it devoured me.

"Careful with that, Colby."

"Always." I backed toward the bedroom, motioning for him to follow. He did, stepping out of the briefs. His gaze never left mine as he tossed the underwear past my head.

The bedroom had been prepared as requested, with several candles burning, nestled safely inside hurricane globes. A snack table sat in the corner opposite the bathroom, and two bottles of

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wine chilled in their respective buckets. The windows were open and the ocean breeze teased the sheer curtains. Theron stopped and took in the scene before him.

“Wow. You have your people do this often?”

I wasn’t surprised by the edge in his voice, not now that I had an inkling about his life. I shook my head. “Truthfully, no. It’s not what I pay them for, and it’s not any of their business if I entertain. But I was a little busy tonight, so I asked for a favor.”

Theron turned to me, his hands gripping my hips. Candlelight flickered in his eyes. “Thank you. It’s a lot of trouble to go to for someone you barely know. It means a lot.”

I reached for him, my hands mirroring his. “You’re someone I want to know better, so it’s worth having my staff whisper behind my back, wondering what’s going on.”

He took a step and closed the distance between us, pressing his chest to mine. Our cocks rubbed. “You haven’t broached the subject, so I will. My last blood test was clear, and I’ve not been with anyone since.”

I ran my fingertips over the smooth skin of his back. “Same here, but I think we’re going to need protection tonight.”

Theron brushed his knuckles over my bristly cheek. “Yeah, I think we will.”

I knew we would. I wanted him in every way I knew to have a man.

He released me and knelt in the middle of the bed. The candlelight cast his skin in gleaming golden light. His lustrous, dark hair shone, sparkling with golden highlights. Springing boldly from its nest of curls, his cock hung heavy and full between his spread thighs.

The sound of the sea drifted through the open windows,

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swirling around my Neptune as he dared this one night as an earthbound man. I went into his arms and he drew me down onto the cool, white linen.

CHAPTER 5

I enjoyed a lover's strength, and he didn't disappoint me. Theron's arms closed around me, strong bands of steel I didn't want to break, or even bend. His lips found mine, and I gave myself over to him, letting his passion lead me where he willed. The sheets were soft beneath me as we fell together, thighs entwining to hold us belly-to-belly.

The broad, hard planes of his chest pressed to mine, and I slipped my hand between us to pinch his pebbled nipple. Theron groaned and thrust his tongue into my mouth. His hand stroked my back, down across my ass, his long fingers searching the dark crevice for that hidden orifice, and finding it.

My body tightened as he stroked the tender spot, my cock throbbing with every rapid beat of my heart. I needed to taste him,

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savor his unique flavor. I moaned into his mouth, struggling to break free of his addictive kiss. He released me, his teeth nipping a path along my jaw line. I licked his salty neck, the soft skin where his neck flowed into his shoulder, working lower. He realized my intent and with a lithe flex of rippling muscles, stretched out on his back.

I suckled the tiny peaks rising from his flat brown nipples, laving them with my tongue. On down I went, licking my way to the tip of his cock, breathing in the musky scent of aroused male. Theron shifted, his fingers teasing my ass again. I slipped one hand beneath him and echoed his movements. My other hand grasped his cock as I slid my lips down to deep throat him. His free hand smacked my ass with some force, then rubbed the spot. I showed no mercy, teasing him with no intent to let him come, not yet.

“Where’s the lube, Colby?”

I swiped my tongue around the rim of his glans before I let him go long enough to tell him it was in the nightstand drawer. I trailed saliva down the length of his erection and licked his balls, gasping as a slick finger penetrated my anus. My toes curled as Theron massaged the tight ring of muscle. I forgot to do anything, even breathe.

Theron rolled to his knees and physically hauled me up to the pillows. I grunted as he straddled me.

“Damn, you’re strong.”

“Yeah? You’re just too willing, babe.” His thumb and forefinger stroked my cock, a gentle pleasuring that made me squirm beneath him.

“Suck me, spank me, make me come. That’s how willing I am.” I squirted some lube onto my palm and slipped my hand between his spread thighs. Tender flesh puckered as the cool gel

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contacted it. I watched his face, saw his eyelids flutter as I pushed my middle finger into him.

“Like that?”

His hoarse voice was little more than a moan. “Maybe.”

I stopped playing with his butt and reached for a condom, holding it up. “You or me?”

We stared at each other. I don’t think either of us drew a breath. Theron grinned, and it was my turn to moan. The tip of my stiff cock rose off my belly in anticipation. “Suck me first.”

I groaned again as he licked his lips, wiggling his tongue at me.

“Theron. Just...”

He smacked my hip before lifting my right leg to his shoulder. “Just what?”

I planted my foot in the middle of his chest and pushed. He toppled backward, then pounced on me, growling. I stroked myself, and he rolled his eyes at me.

“Okay, okay. I’ll give you a blowjob since it means so much to you.”

I let go of my dick and lifted my hands over my head to hold onto the headboard. Theron came down to me, nose-to-nose.

“Got a rope, big boy?”

“Theron!” Desperation had set in. If he didn’t put his mouth on me, I might expire. I teetered on the verge of it as he greased his palms with the lube and ran them all over my chest. I shivered as he stroked me, his touch sexual, yet not. Aroused and hurting, I didn’t want him to stop petting me and end the gentle touch. The moment I quit wiggling, he lowered his mouth to my cock. My hips surged up to meet him.

Theron’s warm, wet tongue pressed flat to smooth mushroom of my glans. His soft lips teased me, starting to go down over me,

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then going back up. He cupped my balls, carefully rolling the testes inside the sac, and the pressure grew at the base of my spine.

His strong fingers grasped the base of my shaft as he sucked me in. The heat in my groin spread as he flicked the head with feather-light licks of his tongue. His hand slipped beneath me again and those long fingers began a serious massage, relaxing me, preparing me. I buried my fingers in his hair and let the sensations roll through me as he pleased me.

Theron released my dick, kissing his way up to my lips. I wanted to swallow him in that kiss, feast on him. My body was strung tight, like a bow, eager to feel him inside me. Would I finally know that elusive, fierce, white-hot pleasure with him? Many of my past lovers had spoken of it, even thanked me for it, but I had yet to experience it.

“Colby? What is it?”

“What’s what?”

His hands caressed the inside of my thighs. “You’re suddenly tense. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I swear. I need you.”

He pressed his lips to mine in a long, lingering kiss. I slipped the condom packet into his hand. Theron kissed my eyes, my cheeks, then knelt between my spread thighs. My knees rose to grip his hips as he suited up. I squirted a bit more lube on my belly, and he dipped his fingers into it and spread it over the latex.

Anticipation and trepidation swirled around the flames in my belly. I held my breath as his fingers stroked me again, intimately gliding over me. I watched Theron’s face, the handsome features drawn taut with his own arousal. The tip of his cock pressed for entrance. I blew out a breath I’d not been aware of holding, and he slipped that first bit into me. I jerked, surprised at the burning mix

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of pain and pleasure in the stretch. My aching cock lifted. His gaze snapped to mine.

“Easy, babe.” Theron pulled back, his hands stroking my thighs.

I relaxed again, and he pressed forward.

My body suddenly yielded to his. I cried out, but not in pain, as my flesh came alive around his. Dozens of tiny muscles twitched in a riotous dance that threatened to toss me over the edge and down into bliss. Every pounding beat of my heart ended at the tip of my cock.

“Theron!” I grabbed his arms and pulled him down to me.

He started to move, pumping into me in a slow, steady rhythm. Deep inside me, a heat built, growing steadily on the push and pull of his cock. I wanted to recoil from that burning, tingling spot, even as I wanted to know it better. Theron’s mouth came down on mine, hard, and I lost all choice in the matter.

Heat flashed up my spine. My body tensed, bowing off the bed. A blinding light flashed behind my closed eyelids as I hit the threshold, trapped in the throes of the most powerful orgasm I’d ever experienced. I reached for him, needing an anchor, and he was there, his strong arms holding me as I thrashed wildly beneath him.

Theron moaned hoarsely in my ear, saying my name like a mantra. I gasped for enough air to urge him on. The pounding rhythm of his hips faltered, and he slammed into me and held himself tightly to me. A fine tremor seized him, then he collapsed onto my chest. I let my legs fall limply to the bed. His hand slipped between us. The internal pressure eased as he gave up my body. I couldn’t move, and apparently, neither could he.

Never in my life had I been so completely, and agreeably, limp. So *that* explained the fuss some guys made about being a bottom.

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No longer would I wonder why the Big Deal. I caressed Theron's damp back.

He grunted as he lifted his head. "Are you okay? Do you need me to move?"

"I'm great, and moving is overrated." I ran my hands over him again. "I sorta like you right where you are."

Theron snorted, levering himself up on an elbow. "You're not exactly a soft pillow, babe." He kissed me, a mere brushing of his lips to mine; clinging sweetly with a poignant awareness that we were both moved by the experience we'd just shared.

I'd promised not to get too caught up in him.

"Okay. Maybe you should move. My bladder is making requests."

Theron kissed the tip of my nose and rolled off me, letting his momentum carry him off the bed to his feet. Stripping off the condom, he disappeared into the bathroom. I heard the water run briefly in the sink, then he stepped back into the bedroom and made for the snack table.

"It's all yours, babe. What wine should I open?"

I sat on the edge of the bed and stretched, arms over my head. "Both are blushes, very comparable to each other. I happened to be overstocked on both, which is why I chose them for tonight."

"Ever the resort manager," he said quietly, lifting a bottle from its bed of ice. He found the corkscrew and got busy. I tottered off to the bathroom on my own errand. Theron had poured two glasses of the wine and was preparing a plate when I came out. He grinned at me.

"Let's take this out on your little balcony, okay?"

"Sure." I picked up the glasses and led the way, laughing at Theron's squeaky voice behind me.

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“Eek. No pants? You can sit out there nekkid?”

“I do it all the time. The plantings are so thick, no one can see me when I sit. It’s safe.”

I guess he believed me since he came on out and plopped down in a chair. “Are you really okay, Colby? I’ve never heard a guy make a sound like you did.”

“I never got off like that before, so there.”

His gaze locked with mine for a few seconds, then he grinned at my confession and reached for a tidbit on the plate. “What’s this?”

“I don’t want to talk about it either, trust me. This is ...” I picked up one and popped it in my mouth, chewing. I swallowed. “A flour tortilla spread with a cream cheese and shrimp spread, with some spring onion added. It’s rolled and cut into slices.”

He took a bite, nodding his approval. “I didn’t see them at the party.”

“Nope. This is how you use up the leftover spreads.”

Theron handed me a glass. “To the innkeeper. Long may he prosper.” He tapped his glass to mine, and we both sipped. “You enjoy this life, don’t you?”

“I love it. I can’t believe I actually managed to build my life here. I look back and it seems like it wasn’t as much hard work as I know it was.” I took another drink. It was now or never. “What happened, back in the States?”

He blew out a long, tired-sounding breath, and didn’t pretend not to know what I meant.

“Bad choices, Colby. I trusted my partner and he betrayed me. Being here with you is a big step for me.”

I held my hand out to him. “I remember bits and pieces about the story. You don’t have to tell me anything.”

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To my surprise, Theron took my hand. “What matters is, I’m not ready to begin a new relationship, even with someone special like you.”

“I’m content to be your vacation fling, if that’s what you need.” Even as I said it, I knew it wasn’t true. I wanted a lot more with him.

He sighed again. “Colby Denton, that’s the only lie I’ll ever let you get away with.”

CHAPTER 6

I squeezed his hand. "I'm trying to keep it light and easy, like you wanted."

"I know. I appreciate it, too." Theron let his head fall against the back of the chair. "God, Colby, my life just...got off track somehow. I didn't even see it coming."

"I suspect most people wouldn't see the police heading for them if they haven't broken any laws."

"Really. I trusted Alonzo, and he used me from day one. He convinced me to take the job at his company, and it was a few steps up for me. Then when I traveled, he used my computer. Everyone thought he was sending me love notes."

"It's none of my business, but..."

"No. It's not, so let it go."

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The brittle cold in his voice stunned me into silence and told me a lot about the cloud he lived under. I wanted to help him, if he'd allow it, not pry into his pain, but I hadn't earned the right. I kept my voice level and gentle.

"Theron, lots of people helped me when my father threw me out and severed all ties between me and my family. When I came here, folks opened their lives and helped me, no strings attached. I'd like to pay their generosity back by passing it on and helping you. That's one of the reasons I've offered you the room, and if you want to stay a few days longer, my hut is your hut."

He drained his glass. "I'm sorry I snapped at you. I appreciate your offer, but you can't help, Colby, so let it go."

If I wanted to have the rest of the night with him—and I did—I had to do as he asked. I hurt for him, but I couldn't force him to accept my help. I squeezed his hand.

"Would you like another glass of wine?"

Theron nodded, gratitude at the change of subject in his troubled gaze. "Yeah, I would. And maybe a few more shrimp rolls. I can't believe how hungry I am."

"It's the ocean air. It makes people eat." I took the plate inside and loaded it with more treats, then took it and the wine out to the balcony. Theron poured, emptying the bottle, and I set it aside. I dared another question.

"What made you come to St. Lucia?"

"I needed to step away, get some rest and relaxation. Except for you, it hasn't turned out so well."

"At least I've done something for you, then." I plucked a few grapes off the bunch and dropped them in my wine.

Theron made a strangling noise, his hand at his throat. "Isn't that some sort of sacrilege?"

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I grinned at him. “Probably, but they soak up a bit of the wine, and it’s fun to suck them up with my tongue.”

Theron laughed, a low, wicked sound. “I’ll give you something to suck, babe.”

“All I have to do is ask, right?”

“I’ll even dip it in the wine first.”

It was my turn to laugh, glad for his intact sense of humor. “Would you like to walk down to the water?”

“No, I don’t think so. I got a bird’s eye view of the dawn this morning—yesterday morning, I mean.”

Could I really have known this man for less than twenty-four hours? It seemed impossible. We were old souls together. Didn’t he feel it, too? He started to hum, and I glanced over at him as he dropped two grapes in his wine.

“This had better be good, babe.”

“With your tongue, you’ll have no problem getting them out.”

He lapped one up, chewed, and swallowed. “Flatterer.”

I laid my hand on his forearm and committed his strong profile to memory. His eyes closed, a sure sign he didn’t have the physical reserves a man his age should have.

“Are you tired?”

“Exhausted.” The corner of his mouth twitched. “But I have the rest of my life to sleep.”

I downed what was left of my wine, swallowing my grapes whole. “Why don’t we hit the bed again? If you’re ready, that is.”

Theron sucked up his other grape, then set his wine aside. He batted his eyelashes at me. “Let me be a real pain in the ass and ask if this deal comes with breakfast?”

“Well, you were sort of a ‘pain’ in the ass, but I liked it. So, yeah, I’ll feed you breakfast.”

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That sexy laughed rolled out of him again. “If you make those noises from a little bit of ‘pain,’ I’ll really hurt you so you can howl.”

“Once a night is my limit, studly. It’s your turn.” I stood and held my hand out to him. Instead of pulling him out of the chair, to my surprise, he pulled me down on his lap. It took me a few seconds to relax.

“Well, I must say this is something new and different for me. I’ve never sat on a guy’s lap before.”

“I can see why. Your ass is awfully boney.” His fingers slid up the inside of my thigh. I tilted his chin up and kissed him.

Theron kissed me back, but I sensed a sadness in him, a reluctance to move back to the bed. I knew, beyond all doubt, he wanted to make love again. The proof of it poked my hip as it rose between us. His hand caressed my erection as we kissed. He knew I wanted him, too, and yet he delayed.

Had he moved to the moment we were finished, and only our parting remained? He’d spent long months in prison, then was hounded by the media wherever he went once released. I understood how a man could forget how to live in the moment when dread for tomorrow ruled your life. I wiggled my boney butt, and he released me. I stood again and this time he allowed me to pull him to his feet.

Groaning, he stood and stretched, his hard-on jutting out as he flexed his spine. I handed him the snack tray and warned him about the boldness of some local feral cats—we couldn’t leave the food on the balcony. He stepped back so I could go inside first, then pulled the screen behind us.

I wanted him again—and again. It was obvious he planned to walk out of my life and not look back, and yet I couldn’t think of

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any way to ask him to stay for a while that wouldn't add to his burden.

The candles had guttered, all but one, and I blew it out. Theron stood by the bed, his face shadowed. I went to him and laid my palms on his chest. His hand gripped my hips and he gave me a little shake.

"I told you not to get all caught up in tonight. You're not listening to me."

I shook my head. "I'm trying, but truth?"

He nodded.

"I'll remember you for a very long time, Theron Bowman."

He cupped my cheek. "I think you must be a very good man. You deserve someone who has something to offer you. There's not much left of me."

I grasped his shoulders. "It's for me to judge what I need. I'll say this once, and then let it go, because I want to make love to you until neither of us can move. Life will get better, Theron. Just don't let go of hope."

"Like you, I'm trying. It's hard when...well, I'm not laying all my shit at your feet." He tugged me toward the bed and I went, my pulse quickening. Theron fluffed the pillows, then fell face first onto them.

I straddled him, smacking his ass. Stretching out full length on top of him, my cock nestled between his buttocks. He grunted.

"What? No foreplay?"

"Plenty of foreplay." I wiggled my hips, slipping deeper, while my lips teased the back of his neck. I rose up and licked my way down his spine, kissing every knobby vertebra. If he were mine, I'd coax him to gain a few pounds and ease the sharpness of the bones beneath his skin.

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On I went, to the twin dimples at the base of his backbone. He trembled as I licked into the top of his crease, his skin twitching in anticipation. I dipped lower and he almost jumped off the bed. I didn't allow him to get away, going deep again. Theron cried out, a long, low, breathless moan ending in a gasp as I tongued him again. I licked my way back up his spine, savoring the sweetness of his skin.

"You howl so much better than I do, lover." I tongued his ear, then braced up on my hands and knees. "Roll over."

The bed shook as he obeyed, flipping over, his long body flexing within the cage my arms and legs made. His erection lay darkly against his belly, and I eased down to lick the length of it, tip to balls. Theron's hips rose and fell, grinding, coaxing. I deep-throated him until he lay panting under my ministrations.

Keeping my touch as light as possible, I stroked his cock, barely moving the outer skin with my thumb and forefinger. He kept gasping, "No fair," as his body jerked with each upward step of arousal. A pearlescent drop appeared, and I licked it off, savoring the taste of him, before I released him to grab the lube and a condom.

I leaned back on my heels, ripped open the packet, and sheathed my cock. Theron pulled his knees in, then placed his feet against my chest. His green eyes seemed to glow in the moonlight.

"Don't you want me to suck you?"

I shook my head as I squirted a generous blob of gel on his belly and dipped my fingers into it. "I want this to last more than three strokes."

"Oh, God. Would you hurry up—now!"

I had no intention of rushing what could be the last time I held him. I eased one greased finger into him. His eyelids fluttered

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closed. Slowly, I massaged the tight ring of muscle until his flesh quivered under my touch.

“Theron, look at me.”

His eyes opened, and I moved over him. His knees slid along my sides to grip my ribs and guide me. He took a deep, shuddering breath as I eased into him. Without warning, his body gave way. Our cries of surprise and pleasure mingled in the air around us as my body claimed his. I flexed my hips, fully seated within him.

I moved then, slowly at first, gathering force and speed at his urging. His arms reached for me, but I held him off, needing simply to fuck him. Sweat stung as it ran into my eyes, and I seized on the sensation, a welcome distraction from the burning orgasm bubbling at the base of my spine, racing to overtake me.

I didn’t want it, not yet. Impaled beneath me, Theron’s head thrashed back and forth on the pillows, his hands gripping my forearms. He groaned every time I withdrew from him, gasping as I thrust back into him, the sounds growing more desperate as he sought his own release.

His hand snaked between us, his shoulders bowed off the bed. Deep within him there was a strong pulse, and the tang of spent semen filled the air. A starlit blackness filled my vision; the breath clogged in my throat. My cock swelled even fuller as my tingling balls drew up close to my body. Theron’s voice reached me in the darkness, urging me on. The climax I’d held at bay seized me and I emptied myself into him.

Afraid to move, I held myself to him. His legs released my torso and dropped to the bed. A strange shaking swept through me, a trembling like none I’d ever known. With a shared groan, I carefully pulled out of him. He drew me down into the wetness on his belly, taking my mouth in a deep kiss that laid bare my soul

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and showed me all the reasons why he'd not kissed me before.

His kiss held the knowledge of how good we'd be together, his sorrow that he couldn't let it happen, his determination to walk away from me. All the wonder he felt at finding someone who didn't want to hurt him, and all the pain of a man who'd lost faith in his own heart.

I cradled him beneath me, not wanting to move. He coaxed me onto my side, our bellies rubbing slickly against each other. We clung to together as our sweat dried and the scent of our lovemaking faded. Outside, nearby, a bird chirped, heralding the approaching dawn. Theron's arms tightened around me in a hug, then he sighed softly and relaxed into sleep, leaving me to face the coming of day on my own.

CHAPTER 7

I must have slept because the next thing I knew, Theron kissed my eyelids open to the bright sunshine of mid-morning. His heat of his dewy skin indicated he'd been on the balcony. He lifted my hand to his lips. "Good morning, sunshine."

I'm such a smooth lover, I yawned in his face. "You've been up for a while."

Theron smiled. "No, just awake. But I could get up if you get up."

I knew in my heart he wouldn't make love to me again, but I played along. "Hold that thought. What time is it?"

"Oh, no. You're going to turn innkeeper on me, aren't you?"

"I might not have a choice." I rolled over and checked the clock—almost ten. I had to, at least, check in with the front desk.

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Tomas had put in a late night, too, working and might not be on duty yet.

Theron straddled my hips and handed me the phone. "Call. Then we need to talk."

I knew his desire to talk meant he planned to say goodbye, but I placed the call anyway. The front desk reported all was running smoothly. I asked them to send two orders of crêpes and a big carafe of coffee to my suite. I cut the connection and dropped the receiver on the bed.

"Okay. What do you want to talk about?"

He cupped my cheek. "I think you know. My brother sent me an airline ticket to get home. The courier brought it about an hour ago."

My heart sank. "I guess you've got to catch the two o'clock outta here?"

He nodded, his face sad, his voice carefully modulated. "I'm sorry, Colby. I really am. I'd hoped maybe we'd have today, but..."

"We can trade the ticket. I'll pay the fee."

"No. That won't make it easier to leave." He smiled down at me. "My clothes came back from the laundry, too. Another debt of gratitude I owe you."

I shook my head. "You don't owe me a thing." I managed a smile. "You gave me a very memorable birthday, you know. I hope you have time for the breakfast I ordered."

Theron came down to me, into my arms. "Yeah, I've got time for breakfast."

I held him tightly as he buried his face against my neck. Seized by some unvoiced emotion, he shook silently. Did he regret his choice to leave? He didn't speak, and I could only speculate. He

sighed.

“I have to put my life back together, and I can only do that by facing everyone.”

“Changing the direction you take in life isn’t running, Theron. It’s growing, re-evaluating. It’s putting away what doesn’t work and accepting what does.”

He kissed my neck. “I know, but I need some closure if I’m ever going to move on with my life. Please understand that.”

I wiggled down until I reached his mouth. His lips opened, warm and hungry, and I knew it was too late to do more than let him go. A knock on the door startled both of us. He slid away from me and ducked into the bathroom. I called for room service to bring the cart in, although breakfast had lost its appeal. The waiter pushed the cart into the living area and discreetly left.

Theron poked his head out and offered to get the cart. I let him so I could take a turn in the bathroom. We fluffed up the pillows and leaned back with our plates. The crêpes were delicious, but something inside me said I’d never enjoy them again. He finished half of his, then set his plate back on the cart, his gaze uncertain as he looked at me.

“I need to get a shower. Come wash my back?”

“Of course.”

A last chance to touch his golden skin, to feel his chest pressed to mine. I wondered what he’d do if I fell to my knees and begged him to stay?

I would not put that sort of pressure on him.

Theron turned on the water and opened all the jets. I stepped in behind him and lathered a washcloth. I washed his back, then he did mine. No playing this time; no fondling or caressing. The rights ceded to each other last night had been reclaimed. We were

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strangers again, separated by more than skin.

He stepped out of the shower enclosure and quickly toweled off, leaving me to finish my shower in mournful solitude. I lingered, giving him time to dress. In my mind, I imagined the long lines of his body flexing as he pulled on his shirt. I turned off the water and found my own towel. Still clammy, I wrapped the towel around my waist and stepped into the bedroom. He wasn't there.

Nor was he on the balcony, or in the living area. Theron was simply gone, without a word. No goodbyes, no more time to risk what we'd shared in the night taking control of our decisions. If I were a different sort, I might have sat down and cried.

I had no time for such a selfish indulgence. I had a resort to manage and a lot of people to thank for my party last night. They say it's better to give than receive, and I wanted to give my staff a little gift for letting me have a night off and carrying the load. My personal sorrow would stay just that—personal.

The night with my Neptune was a golden memory, one to see me through the dry stretches. I hoped I'd given him as much in return.

* * *

Plans for the July party went into full swing. It would take more than a few surfboards and volleyball nets to turn the east patio and the beach beyond into a pirate's den. We needed a few carpenters. Slowly, my version of Port Royal took shape and form.

My staff was diligent, following the checklists we'd created. We incorporated new ideas wherever possible, as we thought of them. Guests came and went, many expressing regret they wouldn't be here for the party.

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The Southern Cross was booked solid, so I suggested a few of my competitors, telling folks regardless of where they slept, they could come spend an evening in Port Royal with my pirates. When asked, I confirmed I was the captain, naturally. Who else? It always got me a smile.

I smiled back, always the genial host.

It didn't fool Tomas, my majordomo, and friend. To my surprise, he kept his counsel instead of asking me questions I didn't want to answer. Most of my staff thought it was "romantic" I'd danced with Theron in front of them. Tomas knew better what it meant.

I clicked off the days. A week went by, then two. A Night in Port Royal was a huge success. I had over three hundred people pass through the party. My harried booking clerks threatened to make me walk the plank, so the pirate captain plopped his butt down behind the desk for an hour and helped them make reservations as far as a year in advance.

It was one way to be absent for the last dance.

I locked the front door, then went out back to tell everyone to call it a night. We'd close this area off and finish the clean up in the morning. Guests had three other areas in which to enjoy their breakfast. My pirates needed to relax and get some sleep. No one argued, and the crew vanished in the blink of an eye, all but Tomas.

He handed me a beer and pointed at a table. We clanked our bottles together in celebration of the evening and drank. He set his bottle down and leaned back, grinning. With his dark Latino looks, Tomas was gorgeous when he smiled, but we'd never considered being lovers. We valued our friendship more.

"What a *loco* night. I heard Josie say the Southern Cross is

booked solid for the next seven months, and half full beyond that.”

“Yep. This was great for business...amazing, in fact. I’m glad the next bash isn’t until the end of August.”

“So why are you sitting here, *hombre*? Why haven’t you jumped a plane and tracked down that Theron?”

Why indeed? I downed a few more swallows of warm beer. Tomas stared at me, his eyes dark and knowing. “*Rajado*.”

“Now you’re being nasty.” But he was right. Instead of quitting, I should have gone after Theron. He said he wanted closure, but going back would only bring more pain. I had more to offer—a fresh start with a new lover.

Tomas leaned forward and touched my hand. “Colby, go. Josie and I can mind the store.”

I appreciated him offering to take over for a few days. I trusted Tomas and Josie—they were completely capable of managing the resort in the short term. Why did I hesitate?

“I can’t just take off on a whim to chase a piece of ass in the middle of summer.”

“So not only are you a quitter, you’re a *cobarde*. A coward. I never thought I’d see it, *amigo*.”

“Are you finished making me feel good about myself?”

He sighed and leaned back. “You need to go after him. He won’t come back on his own.”

I knew he was right—about all of it. Theron had been hurt, betrayed, and it had shaken him to his core. He needed some sign from me he was worth the effort. So why did I delay? I nodded.

“You’re right, Tomas. I’m a coward. I’m afraid if I go after him and find him, it’ll be too late.”

“The longer you sit here, the later it gets.”

I chugged the rest of my beer. “Okay. I’m going to make a few

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calls in the morning, and I'll be on a plane before the weekend. If you want a day off, you'd better take it tomorrow. Tell Josie and Adam to grab some time off, too, although I don't think I'll be gone more than three days."

Tomas met my gaze, nodding. "Probably not more than that. He will or he won't, and it shouldn't take long to find out which." He squeezed my hand and stood. "Good luck, my friend. Now, I must go before Raffie locks me out of the bedroom."

I rolled my eyes. "Right. You're in such imminent danger of *that* happening."

Tomas laughed softly and disappeared down the dark path toward his home. I stood and headed for my own suite.

Restless now I'd made the decision, I powered up my computer and sent a few emails before checking flight times. I ran a few white pages searches and found no listing for a Theron Bowman anywhere in the United States. It didn't surprise me. He probably had his lawyers file to have all such information removed, public or not. I would have if I'd been in his shoes.

The details of the insider trading scandal and Theron's subsequent arrest, I didn't read again. I'd tortured myself learning what I could about it in the days after he'd left. Once was enough.

There was nothing more I could do tonight. Hopefully, come morning, I'd have a few responses to my emails and be able to book a flight. I stripped and fell into bed with a silent prayer that next week, he'd be here with me.

CHAPTER 8

I'd not flown back to the States in several years and found it every bit as annoying as I remembered. My first flight to St. Lucia and back had been pre-September 11, 2001. The world changed, flying became more trouble than it was worth, and I stayed on the island.

This trip, I didn't care what hoops I had to jump through so as long as some big bird eventually set me down in Charlotte, North Carolina.

For some silly reason, I believed the Carolinas would be on a par with the islands. Maybe because of the romance of the name, Carolina. What I stepped into was ninety-eight percent humidity, heat that shimmered in waves when you dared look past the end of your nose, and haze so thick it felt like I inhaled gravy with every

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breath. The island life and its gentle, clean breezes had spoiled me. Theron probably jogged five miles a day in this heat and didn't notice a thing.

I snatched a seat in a shuttle going to my hotel and did my best to sound pleasant to the young chatterboxes sharing my ride. Recently renovated, the hotel was exactly what my travel agent buddy said it would be—a pleasant surprise. All I really cared about was the king-size bed...and whether or not I could convince Theron to share it with me. I dropped my duffel on the floor and took a quick shower.

Theron's lawyer exhibited an abundance of caution when I spoke with him. I told him the situation, up to a point, and he agreed to contact his client, and suggested I come to his office at four o'clock this afternoon. My stomach knotted with nerves as I wondered if Theron would be there.

What if he came and told me to forget him and go home? I steeled myself to hear those words, and prayed I wouldn't. And if he wasn't there and his attorney declined to tell me where he was, that was an answer, too, one that made my chest ache if I dwelled too long on it.

As I dressed in white slacks and turquoise shirt, it occurred to me I'd worn them the night of my birthday party. Had I unconsciously thought to send Theron subliminal reminders of our night together?

This whole trip was a mistake. Like some schoolboy, I was ready to make one lucky night a foundation for a future. *What an idiot.*

But I wasn't a kid, and neither was Theron. I heard the secrets he told me in his kiss, even if he didn't know he revealed them. I felt the wonder in his touch as his hands caressed me and readied

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me. He hadn't expected to find me anymore than I'd expected to find him.

One of us had to make this first move, and it had to be me. I needed to get a better grip on myself and be about it. I knew the worst that could happen, and I'd live if it did.

Theron's lawyer had an office in a nondescript brown brick building near Freedom Park. I trusted the taxi to get me there and thanked the heavens the cab had air conditioning. I almost asked the driver to wait, but decided against it. I needed some positive thinking so I said another prayer Theron had a car.

Religious ambivalence aside, I seemed to pray a lot lately.

A doorman buzzed me through and directed me to the fourth floor. I stopped outside the second door on the right, took a breath, and, heart in my throat, stepped inside. The receptionist smiled at me.

"Mr. Denton?"

I nodded.

"Come with me, please."

I followed her down the hall to a sturdy-looking oak door boasting a Conference Room plaque.

"Go on in." With a tiny wave of her hand, she abandoned me to my fate. I opened the door.

Theron stood by the window, looking sexy-hot in dark blue denim jeans and a white sport shirt. He also looked too thin, the lines of his shoulders and back, tense. He turned and gave me a weak smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. Still the most beautiful eyes I'd ever seen, his clear green gaze was clouded with doubt.

"Hey."

I gripped the back of a chair and hoped to God that my knees would stop knocking together.

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“Hey, yourself. Thanks for meeting me.” *Oh, shit.* How inane. I’d not flown a thousand miles just to mumble something so stupid.

“Why’d you come here, Colby?”

“To see you. To see... You left before we said some things.” I took a step toward him, and he held up his hand, palm out. I stopped, although I didn’t want to.

“What was there to say? Goodbye? Anything else would have been a lie.”

“I’m here. Does my presence say I’m a lie?”

He perched on the window ledge, his face drawn and sad. “No, you’re not a lie. You’re the one bright spot in the last ten years.”

“What else happened, Theron? I looked up articles about the insider trading trial. The five years before that? Were you with him all that time?”

Theron nodded. “Off and on.” He stood and walked to the end of the conference table, closer to me. “We fought all the time. I’d leave, and he’d come after me, beg me for another chance.”

Fuck. Did he see that pattern in me? “And you gave him one? You can’t blame yourself for that. It’s hard to end a relationship when you have a big emotional investment in it.”

He took a quick, short breath. His voice was firm, unwavering, but his eyes begged me to fight for him. “We don’t have anything but a great memory, Colby.”

“Then let’s build on that memory, the connection we made.” I stepped toward him and this time he didn’t tell me to stay put. I stopped two short steps from him, far enough he could reach for me if he wanted.

“We’re not kids, Theron. I trust what I feel or I wouldn’t be here. I know what sparked between us doesn’t come along very often. And I understand you don’t have that same confidence in

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what you feel, that you're afraid to take a first step."

"You're right, you know," he said, hoarsely. His eyes had a red-rimmed look. "I've never wanted to be alone, Colby. I've struggled with it these last few years. What if that's all you are? Not wanting to be alone?"

It cost him to say those words, to be so honest. More than anything I wanted to pull him to me and hold him, but it wasn't the right thing to do. I'd come as far as I could. We'd reached the point where he needed to be the one to come to me. I saw that now, and knew if I could just be patient, he would. He had to. I didn't want to live my life without him.

"I think you and me together is a lot more than settling for just any warm body to keep us company. I tell you what. Why don't you have dinner with me? I know my showing up out of the blue must have you sorta off balance."

He made a choking sound and looked at the ceiling. "Well, yeah." His green gaze fixed on mine and I saw Neptune again. "Just dinner?"

"Just dinner unless you say the word. Tell me you have a car and know a nice, quiet place to dine."

Theron nodded, then he held out his hand. Relief swept me, leaving me weak in its wake. I took his hand and his fingers closed around mine. We stared at each other, afraid to move.

"Would you like a real steak?"

I squeezed his hand. "Would I ever. I love the island cuisine, but every once in a while I crave nice, thick, perfectly aged sirloin."

The corner of his mouth twitched in the beginning of a smile. "I remember."

Holding him suddenly became more important than breathing.

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Gently, with a slow, steady tug, I pulled him against my chest. Theron didn't protest, but shook in my arms, his chest rising and falling erratically. With a strangled breath, his arms came around me.

I held him, drinking in his nearness, his scent, his warmth. The moment his breathing leveled off, I backed away.

"C'mon. I can't eat before flying, so I'm starving."

"Okay, give me a minute." He searched my face, his eyes anxious. His fingers touched my lips. "I can't believe you're really here."

"Believe it." I leaned in and kissed him, a light, quick touch of my mouth to his, nothing too forceful to startle him into backing away. Behind me, a man cleared his throat. Theron slid from my grasp and looked past me, smiling. I turned as he made introductions.

"Austin, this is Colby Denton. Colby, my brother, Austin Michaels."

I noted the different last names, but didn't comment. Brother, half-brother, or stepbrother hardly mattered if Austin was a brother of the heart. I shook his hand, making the proper, polite greetings, preternaturally aware of Theron's hand resting lightly on the small of my back. Some signal must have passed between them. I sensed a thaw in the brother's attitude as Theron spoke.

"We're going to get an early dinner. Colby and I have a lot to talk about, so don't worry if I'm late coming home."

Austin smiled. "I won't worry. Remember what I told you."

Theron nodded as he applied a subtle pressure on my back to get me moving toward the door. "I remember, and I think you're right. Thanks, bro."

The brothers exchanged a guy-type hug, then Theron ushered

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me out and into the elevator. I was curious about what Austin might have said, but didn't ask. He'd tell me—or not—and I'd live with whatever he decided.

“What hotel are you at, Colby?”

I told him, and added I had only booked for two nights. He nodded.

“I'm bunking with Austin. God, Colby, I'm forty years old and I can't even manage to get my own apartment. What do you want with me?”

“Maybe you need a change of scene. People in this town know your name, and it doesn't matter if you're innocent. You're still guilty by association.”

He took a deep breath. “You're right. It is, and I am. Austin gave me a job. All the money I spent for a degree, all that hard work, and no one in this town will hire me. I've been up and down the Eastern seaboard, and not even a nibble on a job in my field.”

“Then come back to the island with me.”

He practically skewered me as his gaze shot the proverbial daggers at me. The edge in his low voice was even sharper. His cheeks darkened under his tan. “What? So you can keep me and make me a whore?”

The elevator doors slid open and I had to move pretty fast to keep up with him as he headed for the rear exit. A step behind him, I grabbed his arm as he flung the door open. We collided with each other, my shoulder hitting the doorframe with enough force to bruise, but I didn't lose my grip on him.

“Just stop! No charity. I'll give you a job, if you want. Hell, I won't even say a word if you go work for the competition, if you'd rather.”

I held tight as Theron tried to jerk free. “Yes, charity! First

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Austin, now you.”

“No! A job. The place next to the Southern Cross is for sale. It’s an opportunity, Theron. A new start—with me.”

I saw the break start in him, that moment where his heart managed to overtake his head. The pain he lived with rolled off him in waves, and I ached to wash him free of it.

“Listen to me, okay? Please?”

He nodded slowly.

“I’m nowhere near a saint, Theron. Having the resort has meant having men. Lots of men. It was fun. I can’t lie and say otherwise. You’re not the first guy I had a good time with. My point is I’m old enough, and experienced enough, to know when a guy is special.”

Theron swallowed, the muscles in his throat moving erratically.

“Are you finally going to lie to me, Colby?”

CHAPTER 9

I wanted to turn him over my knee and spank his sexy ass until it was rosy pink. Only my gut feeling he was being honest with me kept me from the attempt. He expected to be hurt again, and he couldn't see his way clear to trust me yet, or his heart, and recognizing that about him gave me an advantage.

"No, Theron. No lies. Not between us. You're afraid to give us a chance, and baby, I do get that." I lifted his hand and placed it over my heart. "I'm begging you to try, just try, to be with me tonight. I came hoping we could talk about whether or not we had a future. Do you want to give up and walk away without even trying?"

He shook his head. His chest rose and fell as he struggled to breathe calmly. I pulled him back into the dark, cool hallway and

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wrapped my arms around him.

"It's okay, Theron. I wish I knew everything about what happened to you, but I can't ask you to dredge it all up just to satisfy my curiosity."

His arms finally came around me and he leaned on my strength. "I don't have any family, only Austin. Being close to him was the reason I agreed to move here with Alonzo. Getting me away from my friends was part of the scheme, you see. There'd be no one whispering warnings in my ear. Thank God, I never told him about Austin being my brother. Some power in the universe was looking out for me on that one."

Theron pulled back and looked at me. "My stomach is in knots. I can't eat right now, but you're right. We need to talk. Can you get room service at your hotel?"

"Of course. Can I kiss you?"

He shook his head, but he laid his palm along my cheek in a soft caress. "Not here, but not because I don't want it. We need to get out here before one of Austin's bosses blunders along and sees us."

"I understand. Not everyone is enlightened."

His gratitude showed in his gaze. "Listen, Colby, I'm sorry for acting like a shit, but I'm... Oh, hell. I've been sorta in meltdown since Austin said you called."

I tried not to grin—and failed miserably. "I, um, didn't notice."

Theron rested his forehead to mine. "I guess that's two lies I'll let you get away with."

The first had been when I told him I was okay with having him for nothing more than a vacation fling. I pressed my lips to his temple, then remembered he wanted to be careful inside the building.

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“That’s the only kind of lie I’ll ever tell you, Theron. Well, and maybe what your birthday present might be.”

He laughed, a small choking sound. His voice was thick with relief. “I can deal with that. Let’s go.” Theron stepped away from me and held the door open. The muggy Carolina air enveloped me as we went down the steps to the parking lot. He pointed at a late model Camaro, which I assumed, and he subsequently confirmed, belonged to his brother.

I settled in the passenger’s seat and fastened my seat belt. Theron drove like he belonged in NASCAR. I gripped the armrest and kept my mouth shut. What mattered was we arrived at the hotel room intact. I closed the door behind us, shivering in spite of the heat. Theron was a step ahead of me in his thinking. He flipped on the air conditioning and turned it down several degrees. He opened the small refrigerator, tossed me a bottle of water, and got one for himself. I pulled the heavy drapes closed, leaving a small gap between the panels for light. By an unspoken agreement, we sat in the wing chairs. He handed me the room service sheet. I didn’t want to stop drinking him in long enough to read a stupid menu.

“Are you ready to try and eat? How’s your stomach?”

Theron rubbed his midsection. “Better. I’m getting a grip on my nerves, I guess.” He gulped down a few swallows of water. “Are you getting a steak?”

“New York Strip, medium well.”

He held up two fingers, and I picked up the phone and placed our order. The kitchen said it would be about forty-five minutes. I put the receiver back in the cradle and took Theron’s outstretched hand when he reached for mine.

“Colby, I still can’t believe you’re here.”

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I had three-quarters of an hour to find out how he felt. If I didn't, we'd have dinner, maybe goodbye sex, and then he'd walk out of my life.

"Are you glad—really glad—that I came?"

He looked at me, his green gaze enigmatic until he smiled. "Yes. I'm very glad you came. I wish I'd been brave enough to fly back to St. Lucia."

"Would you really have done that?"

"I thought about it. Well, fantasized is more accurate, but I didn't know how you'd feel about it."

I clamped down on the flash of wounded temper that snapped through me. "If you'd stuck around for a proper goodbye you might have known."

He squeezed my hand. "You're right, but I couldn't risk hearing you tell me you'd come to your senses, changed your mind and you didn't want to see me again."

"And now?"

"I guess you wanted to see me again."

I groaned. The man did need a good spanking. "Theron."

He batted his eyelashes at me. "Colby."

We grinned at each other. His smile faded, and even before he spoke, I sensed he wanted to get serious.

"Tell me about this property next to the resort."

I took a deep breath. "It's the land to the south of the Southern Cross. Six acres, total, so it's manageable. The potential, though, is big. I can easily add thirty to thirty-five private suites with semi-private gardens and patio spaces. I'm looking at the potential of three million a year gross the first year, give or take a bit."

Theron stared at me. "Where do I fit in?"

"With the expansion? Anywhere you like. I'm more concerned

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where you want to fit in with me. Do you think I came here because of a business venture?"

"Didn't you?"

"Christ! You're a hardhead! No, I didn't. I came here because I want you, you stubborn ass." I went to my knees in front of him. "What do I have to do?"

He licked his lips, which just about drove me crazy. "Keep talking?"

Fuck talking. I'd had enough of talking, of trying to figure out the right thing to say to him. It was time to show him something he couldn't deny.

I grasped his hips and yanked him off the chair. We tumbled to the floor, and I rolled us, getting the upper hand. Theron stared up at me with eyes gone wide and black. I lowered my head and took his mouth.

He tensed for a moment, then his arms swept up around my neck. I put everything I had into the kiss, showing him what I felt for him, letting him taste my hope we could be together. That I needed him. That I'd fallen in love with him. And he answered me with his own hopes and longings. Needing to breathe, I broke off the kiss.

"Please, Theron, come with me. We have to give each other a chance."

He nodded. "I thought it would be so hard to say this, but it's not." He threaded his fingers through my hair. "Yes, Colby. God help me, but I want you. I swore I'd never follow another man home, but here I am. I'll go with you."

My heart soared at his words. My eyes burned and I had to blink to focus on his face. "I'm not him. I want you for yourself, Theron. I'm offering you a job because I know you'll insist on

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pulling your own weight.”

Theron drew a ragged breath. “Okay. Then do it. Buy the place next door. We’ll make it great.”

I buried my face in his neck and groaned. “Oh, God, I want you.”

His hands caressed down my back to cup my buttocks, pulling my pelvis down while flexing his up. He was rock hard. “Want me that bad?”

“You can’t feel it?” I flexed my hips against him.

“Oh, yeah. I sure do, but...” His eyes widened. “Please tell me you packed rubbers and lube.”

I wiggled my ass. “Only a six-pack, but that should get us through tonight.”

He tugged at my shirt until he worked it over my head. “You had this on the night of your birthday party.”

I slipped my hand down the front of his jeans and rubbed his cock through the soft cotton of his underwear. “I recall we managed to get naked then. Can we manage it now?”

Theron pulled my lips down to his, thrusting his tongue into my mouth. I groaned, jerking my hips to him as fresh arousal streaked through me. His heels hooked behind my knees and with a lithe twist of his slender body, he flipped us. Once on top, he rolled off me and quickly stripped. My clothes joined his in a heap. He barely had the bedspread pushed down before I knelt on the bed and opened my arms to him.

He came to me, his golden skin dewed by the summer heat and nerves. Chests pressed tightly, we held each other and it didn’t matter to me if we made love or not. I just wanted to hold him for a little while. Theron sighed, his breath warm on my shoulder as his hand caressed down my side.

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“Just to hold you. Do you know how good that feels?”

I kissed his neck, tasting the salt of his sweat. I licked beneath his ear. “I have a good idea. You taste good.”

His fingers fondled my erection. “You taste better, babe. I remember. Lay down.”

I groaned and fell sideways with Theron in my arms. We bounced as we hit the mattress, hands reaching for each other. We went a little wild, our mouths and hands on each other in a frenzied feast of touch and taste. I buried my face in his bush and inhaled his male scent. He held my cock with his thumb and middle finger, lightly stroking, rolling the skin. I licked his hard penis, base to tip, and slid my mouth down over him as far as I could. He moaned.

He said he remembered my taste, and I believed him. I remembered his, too. The present mixed with the past, merging as I pleased him. I drew on the memories of his moans to do those things he liked best. Slipping my hand beneath him, my fingers gently fondled his balls, then caressed even more intimate flesh. His thighs tensed, then relaxed, only to tense again as I drove him higher.

His hands and lips were on me, demanding I surrender to him. I willed it, but he was ahead of me in the climb, his body releasing pearl after pearl that I lapped up. With soft, liquid lips, I held his glans, swirling my tongue around the sensitive rim. His mouth released my dick and his teeth nipped my thighs. I pressed my thumb firmly to his anus and his whole body jerked. His fingers dug into my ass cheeks. His cock pulsed beneath my fingers. He moaned, a low, hoarse sound ripped from his gut as hot semen hit the back of my throat.

My own body quickened, eagerly racing to join his in release. I ignored the urge to fly, staying with him until he gasped my name

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and begged me to stop. My head dropped onto his thigh. Theron drew a shuddering breath and licked the tip of my cock. I moaned, an incoherent encouragement he heard.

His lips found me and took me, deep throat. I felt every beat of my heart in my groin, heard the roar of my pulse in my ears, as his mouth and hand worked in unison. I gave myself over to him, to sensation, and the knowledge I belonged to this man in a way I never had to anyone else. He slipped a finger into me, and I came, the orgasm bubbling through my system, melting my muscles and leaving me to float down into dark waters, gasping for breath.

I lay panting in Theron's arms, his lips kissing a path up across my belly and chest. He nestled in against me, heedless of how hot and sweaty we were. We lay still, a narrow shaft of late afternoon sunshine falling across us.

I didn't think. I couldn't form a coherent thought if my life depended on it. I floated in a moment of perfect contentment. Theron sighed, and I hoped he shared the feeling because the man deserved some peace, and peace of mind, after what he'd been through. He yawned, wiggling his toes against mine. I pulled him closer as the familiar lassitude of sleep crept over me.

A brisk knock sounded on the door.

Theron's head lifted from my chest, his gaze locking with mine.

"Room service," we said in unison.

EPILOGUE

Six weeks later...

Soft, stealthy sounds woke me. The rich aroma of my favorite dark roast coffee teased my senses. A single, sneaky finger ran the length of my morning hard-on. I covered my face with my pillow and moaned.

“What the fuck have I done?”

The pillow lifted from my face. A wet tongue licked the rim of my ear. Theron slipped under the sheet and wrapped his arms and legs around me in a full-body hug.

“Ah, c’mon, babe. It’s not that bad. What’s a measly six million dollars to an entrepreneur like you?”

“Do you know how far in debt that puts me?”

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“If we end up living in a seaside cave, I won’t mind.”

He probably wouldn’t. Any place without bars on the doors and windows kept him happy. He’d confided a bit about those months he’d spent in jail and the effect it still had on him. I planned to surprise him with a little “tree house bedroom” so we could sleep under the stars from time to time. I rolled over and laid my head on his shoulder.

“I’m not going to kid you, lover. I’m scared to death.”

“Colby.” He sighed as he caressed my cheek with his knuckles. “Everything will be fine. Have a little faith.”

He wasn’t the one with a huge mortgage payment and an expanding payroll to meet.

Theron hugged me again. “We ran the numbers a dozen times. We had Austin run the numbers independently, and he ended up at the same figures we did. Now sit up and drink your coffee. We’ve got a meeting with the demolition crew in two hours.”

“I love you, you slave driver.”

“Oh, no. No sucking up to me this morning. We don’t have time to get friendly. As soon as the demo crew gets to work, you have a staff meeting, and I have to send in the food and liquor orders.”

“How did we get so much on the schedule for this morning?”

“So we’d end up with a free afternoon, during which I’ll show you my sexual prowess.”

Uh-huh. He’d rearranged a few things, but that was okay. Last week, he’d surprised me with an afternoon on the water. I’d not even known he knew how to sail, and now that I did, I added a boat to my long-range financial plan, although we’d be renting for at least five years.

I couldn’t deny I hoped my Wednesday afternoons were

settling into a wonderful pattern of fun and frolic. I needed it as much as he did.

I'd worried the first week he was here. His nerves had held him in a vise grip of sleeplessness and inability to eat. He'd wrestled with his fear of trusting me, of being in a relationship, and there was little I could do or say aside from holding him. Apparently, it had been enough.

The dark smudges beneath his eyes had slowly faded and his appetite improved. He saw his marketing and business skills were needed, and not only by me. Word traveled through the community, and he had requests to help develop advertising strategies in parts of the tourist industry he'd never heard of before. I saw a different, tougher side of him as he negotiated the jobs.

That he brought joy to my life, I didn't have to tell anyone. I'd never been happier, and my friends felt compelled to tell me they'd noticed. Had I remembered to tell him? I rose up and tossed my leg over him, pinning him to the bed.

"No time for friendly, huh?"

His green eyes gleamed up at me as his hand slipped between our torsos to fondle me. "Well, not much time to be friendly. I can give you about ten minutes."

"You can, can you?" I stroked a few errant dark hairs from his face. "You know, the first time I saw you, you looked like Neptune rising out of the sea, just for me. I think I fell in love with you right then and there."

Theron smiled. "The first time I saw you, you sported a huge woody inside your swim trunks, and I thought whoever was getting *that* was a lucky man."

"I've never been this happy, Theron. I'm glad you took the chance and came with me."

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“I didn’t know if it was the right thing to do then, but now I know, being with you is right for me.” He took a quick, short breath. “I love you, Colby.”

My eyes burned as I heard those words for the first time. I kissed him with the certainty of what we shared, and he answered me with his own.

It was too soon to put voice to what I knew, that we’d be together for a long time, maybe even beyond time—if I wanted to be all romantic and actually believe, just for a moment, in such a thing. His fingers got very busy, teasing me. I broke off the kiss, licking my lips to get all the taste of him.

“You want to show me your sexual prowess now?”

Neptune grinned and drew me down into his mysterious depths.

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.

* * *

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