



Cassandra Gold

FANTASIES:
Christmas

Red RoseTM Publishing

Fantasies: Christmas

By

Cassandra Gold



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Fantasies: Christmas by Cassandra Gold

Red Rose™ Publishing

Publishing with a touch of Class!™

The symbol of the Red Rose and Red Rose is a trademark of Red Rose™ Publishing

Red Rose™ Publishing

Copyright© 2009 Cassandra Gold

ISBN: 978-1-60435-493-5

Cover Artist: Ash Arceneaux

Editor: Carrie RO

Line Editor: Mike Kay

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews. Due to copyright laws you cannot trade, sell or give any ebooks away.

This is a work of fiction. All references to real places, people, or events are coincidental, and if not coincidental, are used fictitiously. All trademarks, service marks, registered trademarks, and registered service marks are the property of their respective owners and are used herein for identification purposes only.

Red Rose™ Publishing

www.redrosepublishing.com

Forestport, NY 13338

Thank you for purchasing a book from Red Rose™ Publishing where publishing comes with a touch of Class!

Fantasies: Christmas

By

Cassandra Gold

Chapter One

Dumped and downsized, all in the same week.

James Hastings sighed as he trudged to his car, carrying his briefcase and a box full of the personal items that had decorated his desk and cubicle. Dirty, slushy snow squished under his feet while more snow dusted his shoulders and fell into his collar.

By the time he reached his car, his feet were like blocks of ice and his hair was damp from melting snowflakes. Opening the passenger-side door took a bit of a struggle. His cold hands fumbled with the keys as he juggled the box. He managed to get the door open and stow his things safely in the passenger seat, then he hurried around the other side of the car. His trusty vehicle hadn't let him down yet, and today was no exception. He pulled out of the parking lot, trying not to look back at the building he'd worked in for the past seven years.

He drove toward his apartment on autopilot, his mind on the mess his life had become. On Sunday, everything had been fine—or so he thought. His job was a little boring, but at least he had one. He had a decent apartment, a few good friends, a cat, and a boyfriend. Not a bad life.

Less than a week later, “not bad” sounded pretty damned good. If he’d known what was going to happen, he would have appreciated his life more. All hell broke loose on Monday, and things only got worse from there. It started with his boss, who told him his position was being “downsized” and Friday would be his last day. The only reason he’d been told in advance was because his boss really liked him. Unfortunately, the man’s genuine regret hadn’t made losing his job any more palatable. Even the generous severance package they offered wasn’t enough to soften the blow. Depressed but determined to move on, he started updating his resume.

Tuesday night, he’d spent the whole evening at the emergency veterinary clinic. His cat, Chester, had been his companion and best friend for sixteen years. Although the vet had tried, there wasn’t anything they could do. Chester was just too old and sick.

The final straw had appeared in his email inbox this afternoon, in the form of a “Dear John” email from his boyfriend. The short message went on to say that Rich felt they had grown apart and weren’t going in the same direction anymore, and all kinds of other meaningless crap. James knew what it all boiled down to, though. He had no job, and Rich liked expensive things.

If ever a week called for a drink, it was this one. About a mile from his apartment, he pulled off into the parking lot of a small shopping center. The liquor store there always had his favorite beer, and it was close to home.

In the store, he strode to the refrigerator case to grab a six-pack. As he reached into the case, another hand appeared in his line of vision. He and the other person both grasped the same six-pack.

They both pulled back. He offered an apologetic smile to the other person, a tall, skinny young man in a battered black pea coat.

The guy brushed a stray piece of long, black and red dyed hair from his forehead, revealing a pierced right eyebrow and bright blue eyes. With those eyes and a pair of surprisingly lush lips, he was kind of hot, in a punk sort of way. “Hey, sorry, man. You go ahead. I’ll take a different one. They’re all the same, right?”

“Thanks.” James hefted the six-pack while the other guy took a different one. He had the urge to say something more, to talk to the young man, but he didn’t know what to say. Instead, he nodded and headed for the counter.

The clerk at the register scanned his beer. “Good choice. That’ll be nine forty-nine.”

He went for his wallet, only to find his back pocket empty. Then he remembered shoving his wallet into his briefcase earlier. A quick search of his front pocket revealed only a crumpled five-dollar bill he’d found in the back of his

desk drawer and stuffed into his pocket right before he left work. His face heated. “I left my wallet in the car. Can you hold on to this for a second, and I’ll go get it?”

“Here, take this.”

A ten-dollar bill appeared on the counter. He turned to see the same guy from the beer case. “Thanks. I’ll pay you back in a minute.”

The young man shrugged, not seeming too worried about it. “It’s almost Christmas. This can be one of my good deeds to get off Santa’s naughty list.”

The guy really was cute, and nice enough to help a total stranger. James felt a little frisson of attraction. He tried to think of something clever to say.

Before he could think of anything, a man approached, holding a microphone. “You’ve just won a weeklong holiday getaway to Hawaii, courtesy of 103.1 *The Edge*, Fantasies Resorts, and Lancaster’s Liquor and Spirits.”

His mouth dropped open. “What?”

“You bought the winning beer, dude.” The man with the microphone gestured toward James’ beer. Following the man’s motion, he noticed a large 103.1 The Edge sticker on the side of the six-pack.

James looked from the sticker to the man and back again. “I won a trip to Hawaii?” He frowned. “Is this a joke?”

The man laughed. “Nope, and you’re on the air right now. I’m DC, a deejay at The Edge. What’s your name?”

“James.” Peering around the large front area of the store, he noticed a big table with sound equipment, emblazoned with the radio station’s logo. Apparently this wasn’t a joke.

“Well, James, come on over to my table and I’ll get you set up for your trip. But first, what radio station gives the best prizes?” DC held the microphone under his mouth.

“Um, 103.1 *The Edge*?” The guy who’d given him money snickered behind him. James threw a glance over his shoulder as DC drew him toward the radio station’s table and met the guy’s too-blue gaze. He suddenly didn’t want to let the young man get away without talking to him again. “Hey, wait a minute, okay?”

James didn’t really expect the guy to wait, but he did want to pay him back at least. The odds of anything else happening were pretty slim, especially with the week he was having.

By the time he finished talking to DC and his sound girl at the table, signed some forms, and took the paperwork they gave him, he figured the young man in the pea coat would be long gone. A quick glance around the store showed that the man was no longer there, so he headed for the door.

Just outside the doorway, the guy fell into step with him. “Hey.”

He found himself grinning though he wasn’t sure why. “You waited.”

A shrug and a smile greeted his statement. “You asked me to.”

James looked down at the beer and paperwork he clutched in his right hand. “I want to pay you back. You should have won the trip, not me. We were both going for the same six-pack, and you paid for half of it.” He frowned. “Besides, the trip is for two. I just got dumped today. I don’t even have anyone to take.”

The young man stopped on the sidewalk and turned to James. “It’s cool. I wouldn’t have anyone to take either. I’ve been single for a couple of months now.” He grinned again, wider this time. “A trip to Hawaii would have been awesome, though. Maybe you should take me with you.”

From his grin and tone of voice, James could tell the man wasn’t serious. The idea was crazy. He opened his mouth to make a joke, but what came out was, “Okay.” He froze, astonished. Had he just invited a total stranger to go to Hawaii with him for a week?

Pierced eyebrow raised, the other man stared at him. “You’re kidding. Right?”

Was he kidding? He considered, and then shook his head. “No, I’m serious. This trip is just as much yours as it is mine. If I’d been a few seconds later, you would have won.”

The guy stuck out a long, slender hand. “Travis Barton.”

He shook Travis’ hand. “Nice to meet you, Travis. I’m James Hastings.”

One corner of Travis' mouth turned up, revealing a dimple in his cheek.

"Okay, James. When do we leave?"



An hour later, drinking beer and eating pizza in front of the television like he'd planned, James wondered what had gotten into him. In a few days he'd be leaving for Hawaii with a guy he had just met. He'd already given Travis all the information, which meant he couldn't back out now.

This was the craziest thing he'd ever done, but *never* taking risks hadn't done him any good either. He was single, jobless, and unhappy during what was supposed to be the happiest time of the year. Maybe something crazy was just what he needed.

Chapter Two

The sound of his cell phone ringing greeted Travis the moment he stepped into his apartment. As usual, he'd forgotten it on the counter when he left for work. Dodging his cat's attempts to attack his shoes, he put his beer in the fridge and picked up the phone.

A quick check of the display showed the caller was his mother. "Hi, Mom."

"Did you get the Christmas card I sent?"

He smiled at her abrupt greeting. "Yeah. It was nice, thanks."

"Oh, good. I was afraid I forgot to put a stamp on it."

He rolled his eyes. His mom did things like that all the time, always had. "Can you do me a favor? I need someone to watch my cat for a week."

"Sure. Why?" She didn't sound upset, just curious. Not much upset his mother.

"I'm going to Hawaii."

"Really? Isn't that awfully expensive?"

"Not in this case. I'm going with someone, and he won the trip, so it's free."

There was a pause, and he could almost hear the wheels turning in her head. “Are you seeing someone? I thought you and what’s-his-name broke up.”

He took a deep breath. “We did. I met this guy today. At the liquor store. I loaned him ten bucks, and he won the trip because of it, so he invited me to go too.”

Anyone else’s mom probably would have freaked out at the idea of her youngest child going off on a trip with a man he’d just met at a liquor store. His mom only said, “It was nice of you to help him out, sweetie. I hope you have fun.”

He laughed.



Later, as he got ready for bed, Travis wondered if he’d been insane to agree to go on the trip. He’d been drawn to James Hastings from the moment he saw him in the liquor store. With his short, dark hair, suit, and tie, the man had that buttoned-up look Travis didn’t usually go for. Somehow, though, James’ uptight façade had looked like it was fraying around the edges. His hair had been a little bit mussed, as if he’d run his fingers through it. His loosened tie and frazzled attitude had made him more approachable. And when he’d smiled, well, he was downright cute.

The guy was probably straight as an arrow, but he'd seemed to be in need of some fun, and maybe a friend. Passing up a free vacation would have been dumb, and Travis was always up for making a new friend.

Besides, he had a ton of vacation time built up. He might as well use the time wisely. Tomorrow he'd go shopping for some Hawaii-appropriate clothes, and in a few days he'd be headed off for some free fun in the sun.

Chapter Three

Second thoughts had turned into third and fourth thoughts by the time James arrived at the airport. Tired from a sleepless night, he dragged himself through the check-in and security. At five a.m. the airport wasn't very crowded. He reached the waiting area at only five fifteen, a bit too early for the seven-thirty flight. He dropped into one of the hard plastic chairs to wait.

The next hour and a half ticked by with excruciating slowness. He was too tired to read and too uncomfortable to try to sleep. Instead, he watched the people who walked by. With less than three weeks to go until Christmas, many of the passers-by were families. Several people appeared to be college students heading home. The seats around him slowly began to fill.

It was close to seven when someone vaulted into the seat next to him. Startled, he turned to see a smiling Travis.

Travis held out a cup. "Hey, man. Coffee?"

James accepted the cup and took a cautious sip. The coffee was hot and not too sweet, just the way he liked it. "Thanks." He paused. "I was starting to wonder if you'd changed your mind."

“Nah.” Travis slipped out of his jacket, hanging it over the back of his chair.

“I was running late. I had to take my cat to my mom’s.”

He wouldn’t have pegged Travis as a cat person. “You have a cat?”

“A kitten, really. His name’s Snickers.”

“Snickers?”

Travis shrugged. “My nephews named him. It was either that or Optimus Prime.”

James laughed. “Good call. How long have you had him?”

“A few weeks. I got him from the Humane Society. He’s really playful.”

Travis pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and turned it on. He tapped a few buttons and turned the screen toward James. “Here’s a picture of him.”

Looking at the tiny gray tabby, James couldn’t help but remember his cat Chester as a kitten. Chester had been playful too. He sighed. “I had a cat. He died recently.”

Travis’ smile dimmed. “Oh, man. What happened?”

“He was old. I had him for sixteen years, since he was a kitten.” He couldn’t believe he was telling all this to a complete stranger. Worse, he was tearing up. What was his problem lately?

Travis didn't tease him or get uncomfortable at his emotion. In fact, Travis' eyes were compassionate. "I'm sorry about your cat. Animals can be like family sometimes. It's hard to lose them."

The words were pretty deep, and kind, for a guy in ripped jeans, with an eyebrow piercing and dyed hair hanging in his eyes—which taught James not to stereotype people based on their looks. Not all guys with piercings and punk looks were obnoxious, or self-absorbed, just like not all guys who worked in the corporate world were stuffed shirts. To Travis, James probably looked like a boring, uptight guy. Not that he wasn't boring, or uptight, because he had to admit he was.

Realizing he'd been staring at Travis for way too long, he cleared his throat. "Yeah. Thanks."

Travis smiled.

The PA system crackled to life. "Good morning, passengers of American Airlines flight 532 to Los Angeles. We'll begin boarding in a few minutes."

James gathered his things, grateful for the interruption.



Within half an hour they were seated on the plane. They listened to the flight attendants' safety spiel, and the plane took off only a few minutes behind schedule.

"I'm going to crash for a while." Travis pulled a thin fleece blanket and a small pillow out of his oversized backpack. Five minutes later, he was asleep, his breathing deep and even despite the uncomfortable-looking angle of his neck and head.

James watched him sleep for a few minutes, surprised by how young he appeared, and how appealing. James had never liked piercings or dyed hair, but the small silver ring through Travis' right eyebrow and even his red-streaked black hair suited him so well they actually looked nice. There were several studs in his ear, and a metal barbell connecting the two sides of the cartilage in his upper ear. Somehow James found them fascinating rather than repulsive. Travis' full, soft lips, straight nose, and killer blue eyes only added to his appeal.

James forced his gaze away to stare out the window. He hadn't invited Travis on this trip to drool over the poor guy and probably freak him out. He wasn't quite sure why he had invited Travis, but he was going to behave if it killed him. Glancing over at his companion again, James thought it just might.

Chapter Four

A loud ding jerked Travis out of a pleasant dream. He sat up, blinking, aching from the position he'd been sleeping in.

"We're going to land in a few minutes."

He squinted at James, wincing at the stiffness in his neck. "Oh. Okay."

James looked like he was hiding a smile. "You might want to do something about your hair. It's kind of smashed on one side."

He patted the side of his head. Sure enough, his hair stuck out in all directions. "Well, crap."

James laughed, a rich, full sound that made Travis smile. "Here. Let me." James opened a bottle of water and sprinkled a few drops on his hand, which he used to smooth Travis' hair down.

Travis had the urge to lean into the touch, and maybe even purr, but he restrained himself. After a couple of minutes, James stopped and sat back, eyeing his handiwork.

Travis fidgeted in his seat. "Will I do?"

The other man nodded. “At least now you don’t look like you styled your hair with one of the engines.”

Cute, and a sense of humor? Maybe James wasn’t so buttoned-up after all. “Gee, thanks.”



Forty minutes later, he and James walked into the terminal. They had an hour and a half to kill before their connecting flight to Hawaii left.

James looked around, frowning. “Okay, we’ve got to find the gate for our flight. What else?”

Travis’ stomach rumbled loudly.

Eyebrow raised, James smirked at him. “Food?”

“Please. I didn’t eat breakfast, and I missed the snack earlier.” He rubbed his empty stomach, starving now that they were on land again.

“You didn’t miss much. I got a can of soda, a tiny package of pretzels, and some kind of hard thing that might have been a cookie. Or possibly a hockey puck. I’m still not sure.” James shrugged, grinning.

Travis grimaced. “Ugh. Glad I missed it then.”

James led the way down the concourse, his strides purposeful. Travis ambled along behind him, content to follow. James stopped in front of a crowded restaurant. "Is this okay?"

Travis nodded. "It looks busy, but I'm sure all the restaurants are probably busy. Let's check it out."

Fortunately, the hostess led them right to a tiny table off in the corner. She handed them each a menu. "Tara will be your server this morning. She'll be here to take your order in a few minutes. Enjoy your meal."

True to the hostess's word, the waitress arrived shortly. James ordered a veggie omelet. Travis ordered bacon, eggs, toast, and hash browns.

James' eyes widened when the waitress brought their breakfasts to the table. "Do you eat like that all the time?"

He grinned. "Not all the time. I went through a trying-to-bulk-up phase when I drank protein shakes and worked out all the time." He indicated his body, which he had always thought was way too skinny. "It didn't work."

Rolling his eyes, James patted his stomach. "If I ate all that, I'd gain a hundred pounds, and you're complaining about not being able to bulk up. Not fair."

James looked pretty good to him, fit and healthy, at least from what he could see. He'd be seeing a lot more of the man at the resort, he hoped. To get his mind

off James in swim trunks, he said the first thing that came to mind. “What do you know about the resort we’re going to?”

After rummaging around in his carry-on for a moment, James came up with a handful of papers. “I’ve heard of the Fantasies resorts before, but I never thought I’d be going to one. They’re one of the highest-rated resort chains in the world. According to the paperwork that radio guy gave me, we’ve got reservations for a suite for a week, plus all meals and a thousand-dollar resort credit to use on whatever we want. It’s still kind of hard to believe. I’m not a lucky person, usually.”

All Travis knew was they were going to Hawaii for a week, which had been enough enticement for him. “A suite, free meals, and a thousand dollars spending money? That’s awesome.”

James nodded. They ate in silence for a while. The waitress returned with their check, and they each laid bills on the table to pay their share.

That task completed, they headed out to the concourse. They had a flight to catch.



By the time they settled in for the more than five-hour flight to Hawaii, Travis was awake and excited. He’d never been outside of the continental United

States before. He pulled the guidebook he'd purchased in one of the airport bookstores from his carry-on and started reading.

Next to him, James shifted, apparently trying to get comfortable. He'd wadded up his jacket and was trying to use it as a pillow, jamming it against the window.

"Do you want to use my pillow and blanket? I'm going to read, so I won't need them, and it's going to get really cold up here soon enough."

James gave him a relieved smile. "That would be great. I didn't get much sleep last night."

He dug out the pillow, sewn by his mom, and the fleece blanket. "Here you go."

"Thank you." James covered himself with the blanket and placed the pillow against the window.

Travis went back to his book, amazed by the stunning photos of the Hawaiian landscape. This was going to be the best trip ever. He couldn't believe his luck at being in just the right place at the right time to share in James' good fortune.

A tiny sound from beside him drew his attention to the other man. James slept soundly, his lips parted. The tension in his face was gone. He must have been really tired to fall asleep so quickly and soundly on a plane. Travis would have

guessed he'd be too tightly controlled to do that. Shaking his head, Travis turned back to his book, determined to focus on reading instead of staring at James.



Hours later, James murmured in his sleep and shifted around. Without waking, he rested his head against Travis' shoulder, snuggled in, and sighed.

Surprised, Travis stared down at the other man. James' hair smelled good, fresh and kind of minty. Travis welcomed the body heat. He had been getting a little cold anyway, and he didn't want to disturb James' sleep.

Travis smiled and stayed as still as he could. This might be the most action he'd get the whole trip, after all.

Chapter Five

James awoke slowly, warm and comfortable. For a long moment he thought he was at home in bed. Then he heard the droning, rushing sound of the plane's engine.

He opened his eyes, and immediately wished he hadn't. Sometime during his nap he'd shifted until he was almost lying on Travis. The younger man was sitting there reading as if he didn't even notice that James' head was on his shoulder, but he had to notice. James didn't know whether he should pretend to still be asleep and roll away, or sit up and apologize. In the end, he waited too long and the decision was taken from him.

Travis glanced down, saw he was awake, and smiled. "Hey, sleepyhead. We're going to be landing soon."

Heat crept across his face. He sat up, trying to act normal. "Sorry about that. You should have woken me up."

Travis shrugged. "You seemed comfortable, and I didn't mind."

He didn't know what to say to that. He offered Travis a weak smile and started folding the blanket and pretending to tidy up the things in the seatback pouch in front of him in preparation for landing.

The seatbelt light came on, and the captain announced they would be landing in a few minutes. Travis' face lit up. "Do you think we can see the islands?"

"Maybe." James peered out and caught a glimpse of green and brown. He sat back and let Travis lean over him. "Take a look."

"Cool, thanks. Wow, this is awesome!" Travis turned toward James, smiling, his blue eyes bright with excitement.

Travis was close. Too close. To James' absolute horror, his body began to react to Travis' proximity. He scooted back as far as he could, desperate to get away before the other man noticed.

The next few minutes were torture. Travis seemed oblivious to his discomfort, too intent on watching the islands below to pay attention to James. The relief that filled him when Travis finally sat back for the landing was immense.

After they landed, the usual bustle of disembarking helped him get himself back under control. He headed for the baggage claim, Travis following. They waited at the baggage carousel for thirty minutes before anything came out. Travis' battered red and black duffle appeared first.

Snagging his bag from the conveyer belt, Travis hefted it and turned to James. “Excellent. I’m going to go grab a soda. You want anything?”

“No, thanks.” He was a little thirsty, but how long could his suitcase be? Of course, his sedate navy suitcase was the last item to appear, a full twenty minutes later. He rolled his eyes and grabbed it. A quick glance around showed his tall companion slouching against a column, drinking from a bottle of Mountain Dew.

A bright smile curved the younger man’s lips as he approached. “Ready?”

He nodded, and together they went in search of the shuttle loading area.



After the bitter cold of the early morning at home and the chilly plane ride, the air-conditioned shuttle ride didn’t help matters—James was actually a little chilled.

He blinked as he stepped out of the shuttle into the bright sunshine, not prepared for the sudden warmth of Hawaii. Now, standing in the open air, his sweater and jeans stifled him. He hurried toward the resort, Travis trailing in his wake.

The Fantasies resort turned out to be even more luxurious than he’d imagined. The main building, a huge, modern, gleaming-white structure, stretched along a large section of the street. Two uniformed employees held the doors for

them as they stepped into an enormous lobby, with high ceilings. The gleaming hardwood floors, sparkling chandeliers, and the opulent furniture arranged in clusters around the room caught James' eye. In the far corner of the cavernous space, a tall live Christmas tree stood, festooned with elegant silver and white garland and ornaments, and white fairy lights. Seeing a Christmas tree in such a tropical locale was odd somehow, but this one fit the resort perfectly.

“Wow.”

Travis' awed whisper echoed his thoughts. He'd never stayed in a place half as nice, or expensive, as this one, and he probably never would again. He almost felt like he shouldn't even be here.

The porter was already carrying their luggage, pitiful as it was, to the desk. There would be no chickening out now. He took a deep breath and walked to the front desk.

The woman behind the desk smiled at him. “Aloha, and welcome to Fantasies: Hawaii. May I help you?”

“I need to check in? James Hastings?” He cringed at the way his words sounded like questions rather than statements.

Her smile widened. “Ah, our contest winner. Just a moment.” She pushed a button, and a minute later a handsome blond man in an impeccable suit arrived. She nodded toward James. “Sir, this is our contest winner.”

The man smiled and held out his hand. “Welcome, Mr. Hastings. I’m Eric Wright, the manager. We’re pleased to have you here.”

He hadn’t expected such a fuss to be made over him. He gave the man a weak smile. “I’m happy to be here.”



The efficient resort staff had them checked in mere moments after they arrived, and the manager led them to their suite. Unlocking the door, he held it open to allow them to enter first.

James gaped at the sight of the suite, which was bigger than his apartment. From where they stood, he could see a living room boasting a large flat-screen television, a small formal dining room, a large balcony with a table and two chairs, and a bedroom featuring the biggest bed he’d ever seen.

The manager’s spiel finally broke him out of his stunned state. “This is one of our honeymoon suites. A special breakfast will be delivered to your room tomorrow morning at whatever time you’d like. Just call room service. There’s also a welcome gift on the coffee table.” The man looked from him to Travis, encompassing them both in his welcome. “If you have any questions at all during your stay, don’t hesitate to call the front desk. Congratulations again on winning the contest, and I hope you enjoy your time here at Fantasies.”

The manager departed, leaving them in total silence. They looked at each other. Travis stared, wide-eyed, his gaze darting from the room to James and back again. His lips twitched. “We’re in the honeymoon suite.”

James stared back at Travis in horror. No one had mentioned anything about them staying in the honeymoon suite. What must the manager think of them? What was Travis thinking? His cheeks burned.

Travis’ lip twitched again, and then he was laughing. “Honeymoon suite!”

James scowled. “It’s not funny. That manager probably thinks we’re together.”

That made Travis laugh harder. He doubled over with it, his hair hiding his eyes completely.

“Well I’m glad you think it’s so hilarious.” Annoyed, James turned his back on his cackling companion and scanned the suite. At least the room was beautiful, and it looked comfortable.

The laughter stopped, and Travis laid a tentative hand on his arm. “Okay, I’m sorry. I can see this is bothering you, and I shouldn’t be making fun.”

He shrugged. “And I shouldn’t be so uptight. I’m just surprised.” *Really, really surprised.*

“Don’t worry about it. This is going to be fun. You’ll see.” Travis removed his hand and offered a cajoling grin.

James tried to smile back. He told himself he wasn't disappointed that Travis had stopped touching him.

Chapter Six

This place was unreal. Each new feature he discovered astonished Travis all over again. He had never even imagined staying in a hotel suite with its own formal dining room, a balcony the size of his kitchen, and a gigantic canopy bed. He hadn't seen the bathroom yet because James had gone to take a shower, but he imagined it was awesome.

He grinned, remembering the expression on James' face when they'd been told they were staying in a honeymoon suite. The other man's reaction should have annoyed him. For some unknown reason, he'd been charmed instead. James' hazel eyes were really nice, even when they were wide with horror.

A lot of things about James were nice. Unlike Travis, James wasn't skinny or gangly. He wasn't fat, or bulky, just...solid. When Travis had touched his arm earlier, he could feel the muscle. After the way James had freaked out about them being in the honeymoon suite, he'd restrained himself from stroking that arm like he'd wanted to. He liked strong men.

He didn't mind guys a bit older than he was either. He didn't know how old James was, but he'd guess about thirty. Five years wasn't a big deal.

Of course, thinking about any of this was ridiculous. Straitlaced, buttoned-down, *oh my God, what if the manager thinks we're together*, James' statement made Travis smile. He seemed like the type of guy that wouldn't be interested in a vacation fling. If he was, he'd probably freak out if Travis so much as smiled at him in public. Travis had been there, done that, and he'd been out and proud long enough not to want to do it again, even for a week.

"Your turn."

James' voice startled him out of his thoughts. He looked up to find the other man standing in the doorway, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. His stance was more relaxed already, and the soft material of the shirt pulled tight around his shoulders and arms. Travis smiled. "Thanks."

He grabbed the change of clothes he'd laid out and went into the bathroom. Gleaming marble and light, airy colors greeted him. A big whirlpool tub took up one corner, and a freestanding, glass-enclosed shower was set in another. He cast a longing glance at the tub. With a sigh, he settled for the shower instead.

Under the hot spray, Travis considered his roommate for the week. The man was a mass of contradictions. He blushed at the thought of being in a honeymoon suite together, but he'd invited a stranger on his vacation without hesitation. He was by turns friendly and reserved. James Hastings was a puzzle, and Travis had

always been fascinated by puzzles. He was determined to get to know James better before their trip ended.



Clean and relaxed, Travis went back into the living room to find James. The man was nowhere to be found. He peered into the dining room with no luck. Then he remembered the balcony.

James glanced over as he opened the door. “Feel better?”

He nodded. “I’ve never been on a trip this long before. I never knew sitting all day could make me feel so tired, and dirty.”

James smiled. The expression lightened his serious face. “Yeah, it’s strange how that works.”

Flopping down in the chair next to James’, Travis looked out at the bright blue ocean, stretching out as far as he could see. Below them, people walked or sunbathed on the wide strip of beach. The sun soaked into his pale, Midwest-winter skin, and a soft breeze ruffled his hair. He closed his eyes, listening to the rush of the ocean, the cries of birds, and the voices of the people below.

If James hadn’t invited him here, he’d be at home, freezing his ass off. He opened his eyes and turned to the other man, who was watching the ocean. “Thanks for inviting me, man. This place is incredible.”

The corners of James' mouth turned up in a half-smile. "You're welcome. Like I said, you had just as much to do with me winning the trip as I did. Maybe I should thank *you*."

His stomach chose that moment to growl just as loudly as it had earlier in the day. He grimaced. "I don't suppose you could thank me with food?"

James laughed. "Is room service okay?"

Going out didn't appeal. He nodded. "Perfect."

"What would you like?"

He shrugged. "Whatever they have; nothing fancy. A burger or some kind of sandwich would be good."

"Coming right up." James disappeared back into the suite.

While James was gone, Travis zoned out for a while, lulled by the sounds and scent of the ocean. The sound of the glass door opening made him jerk.

"Did I startle you? I'm sorry."

James didn't sound sorry at all. Travis laughed. "I bet."

"You'll forgive me when you see what I've got." The other man carried a silver tray over to the table. When he set it down, Travis could see two plates, each containing a giant burger and a pile of fries. There were also two sodas, one of which was his favorite. James handed him the Mountain Dew.

“Hey, thanks.” He grinned, pleased that James had remembered what kind of soda he liked. Suddenly starving, he picked up his burger and bit into it. The flavors of perfectly cooked beef, lettuce, tomato, onion, mustard, and ketchup burst over his tongue, and he moaned.

James raised an eyebrow. “That good, huh?”

His cheeks heated. The burger was good, but James’ stare made him feel silly. “Try yours. You’ll see.”

They ate in silence until they were both finished. His last bite eaten, Travis stood and stretched. “I’ll take the tray.”

He gathered everything up and put it all on the tray, which he left in the hallway. On the way back outside, he spotted a few things on the coffee table. He stopped and laughed. A bottle of real champagne, the kind from France, sat in a bucket of ice, ready for the honeymooners. Right next to it sat two crystal champagne flutes and a plate of chocolate-covered strawberries. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t noticed them earlier.

Still chuckling, he grabbed the plate and somehow managed to gather both the champagne and the glasses. He went back outside. “Look what I found.”

James turned, his expression caught between embarrassment and pleasure when he saw what Travis held. “Those must be the honeymoon welcome gifts.”

“I don’t think we should let them go to waste.” Travis set the plate on the table and put a glass in front of each of them. “You want to open this?”

“Sure.” James took the bottle and opened it, managing to make much less of a mess than Travis would have. He poured them each a generous serving of the sparkling wine.

Travis lifted his glass. “Cheers.”

“Cheers.” James tapped his glass to Travis’ lightly, a slight smile on his lips.

Travis took a sip. The champagne tasted a lot better than he expected, sharp with a hint of sweetness. He selected a strawberry coated in white chocolate and bit into it, the explosion of sweet-tart went perfectly with the wine.

Minutes passed in silence as they both watched the sun dip lower, painting the horizon with shades of pink, gold, and red. The sight awed him. Normally he couldn’t just sit for a long time, but something about sitting on the balcony, watching a sunset and drinking champagne soothed him. The company might have had something to do with that. James didn’t seem uncomfortable with the silence at all.

As the last rays of the sun disappeared, James broke the silence. “So, what do you do?”

He grinned and pushed his hair out of the way to reveal his eyebrow ring and the assortment of studs in his ears. "I'm a tattoo artist mostly, but I also do piercings. What about you?"

"I'm in IT. Or at least I was, until last week." James frowned and poured himself another glass of champagne. "Want some more?"

Travis nodded. "So you lost your job? That sucks."

A bitter laugh and sarcastically upraised glass greeted his comment. James took a big gulp before he spoke again. "It was a rough week."

"Have a strawberry." Travis held the plate out until James took one, and he grabbed another for himself before putting the plate back on the table. He bit into the sweet fruit, thinking back to their discussion in front of the liquor store. He thought he remembered something. "Didn't you say you got dumped the day you won the contest?"

"I got a Dear John email right before I left work that day. That was after my cat died a couple days before. Like I said, it was a rough week." James kept his voice level, but Travis heard an undercurrent of pain.

A white-hot flash of anger filled Travis at the insensitivity of the woman who'd dumped James by email right when he'd needed her most. He scowled. "An email? That's not right."

By that time James had downed his drink and was pouring what was left in the bottle into their glasses. “I couldn’t believe it. I mean, I knew our relationship wasn’t perfect, but he never gave me any sign he wanted out.”

“He?” Travis didn’t realize he’d spoken aloud until James’ head jerked up. In the dim light, James’ hazel eyes had a panicked look to them. A bright red blush crept up his neck and face.

“Oh, shit. I didn’t mean to blurt that out. I don’t want you to think I invited you here because I wanted to take advantage of you or something, because I didn’t, I swear. I—”

One of Travis’ fingers placed over James’ lips stopped the horrified babbling. Travis smiled. “I don’t think you invited me here to ‘take advantage’ of me. But if you did, I don’t think I’d mind all that much.”

James’ pretty eyes nearly popped out of his head. When Travis removed his finger from James’ lips, James whispered, “You wouldn’t?”

Travis shook his head, still smiling. He never got a chance to answer, because warm lips covered his own. Startled, he remained still as a tongue stroked along the seam of his lips. They parted of their own accord, and he tasted chocolate, champagne, and James. He wondered what James thought of his tongue stud.

As suddenly as it had begun, the kiss ended. James jerked back, panting. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.” After a brief, tense pause, James added, “I’ll sleep on the couch.”

Okay, that wasn’t good. “This is your trip. I’ll take the couch.”

James looked like he wanted to argue, but he didn’t. He nodded. “I need to take a walk. I’ll be back.” He fled the balcony without a backward glance.

Alone on the balcony, Travis frowned up at the sky. “That went well.”

He heaved a sigh and picked up the last chocolate-covered strawberry. Since he obviously wasn’t going to be having any real sex tonight, he might as well have a substitute. At least the strawberry wouldn’t freak out and run away. Even as he bit into it, he knew chocolate wasn’t going to make him feel much better...not this time.

Chapter Seven

A loud, insistent beeping dragged James out of a sound sleep. He sat up with a start, disoriented. At last he realized the alarm beside the bed was going off. He slapped the snooze button. The bright blue numbers on the digital display read eight a.m. Whoever had stayed here last must have liked getting up early, or had a flight to catch. It would have been nice of them to turn the stupid alarm off when they left.

He flopped back on the bed, scowling. His scowl deepened when he thought about the previous night. Had he really kissed Travis?

Yes, he had, and the kiss had been incredible, while it lasted. He covered his face with his hands, mortified. The whole scene had replayed in his mind over and over last night as he'd been trying to get to sleep. Why had he drunk so much champagne? And why, why, *why* had he kissed the man? Now he'd have to endure days of awkwardness. Travis seemed like the type who'd be nice enough to pretend last night hadn't happened, but James wasn't very good at pretending.

He also wasn't a coward. He forced himself to get up and dress. He brushed his teeth and scrutinized his reflection in the mirror before he went into the living

room. His short, dark brown hair wasn't sticking up or anything. Other than the grim set of his face, he looked passable, in a boring sort of way.

In the living room, Travis lay curled on his side on the too-short couch, his legs drawn up and the small blanket he'd brought for the plane wrapped around him. His head lay awkwardly on the arm of the couch and his little pillow. Seeing Travis scrunched up on the couch without a proper pillow or blanket made James feel worse. He hadn't considered the taller man's comfort once while he'd been moping last night. Some travel companion he was turning out to be. At least he could order breakfast.

He made the call from the bedroom, not wanting to wake Travis. The man at room service promised they'd have their "special" breakfast in ten minutes.

True to the man's word, about ten minutes later James heard a soft rap on the door, followed by, "Room service."

He opened the door. A young man in uniform stood in the hallway. The cart he pushed bore a large, covered silver tray. He smiled at James. "Good morning, sir. Where would you like this?"

"I'll take it. My..." How to describe Travis? "...friend is still sleeping."

"Certainly, sir. When you've finished, leave the cart in the hallway and we'll take it."

“Thanks.” James gave the man a tip and wheeled the cart inside as quietly as he could.

Despite his care, Travis was sitting up on the couch when he turned around. Travis’ hair stuck up in wild tufts and spikes, and he rubbed his eyes like a little boy. Against his will, James found himself charmed.

Then Travis smiled at him. “Tell me that’s breakfast.”

Relieved at Travis’ apparent willingness to let last night go, James smiled back. Maybe he could pretend after all. “Correct as usual, King Friday.”

Travis laughed, obviously recognizing his reference. “I used to love *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*! I watched it every day when I stayed with my grandma.”

James rolled the cart over to the couch and put the tray on the coffee table. The glasses and three very small pitchers of unknown beverages went next. When he’d finished moving everything, he sat on the other end of the couch, as far away from Travis as he could get without being obvious, and lifted the tray’s lid. There appeared to be much more food than even two hungry men could eat: eggs Benedict, a basket of pastries with butter, jelly, and jam to go with them, and a platter of fruit.

Travis rubbed his hands together. “Great, I’m starving.” He grabbed a plate and loaded it up. “What’s in the pitchers?”

“I don’t know.” James lifted each lid and peered inside. “Orange juice, coffee, and some kind of tropical fruit juice. Which one would you like?”

“Tropical fruit sounds good. I can get it.”

“No, you eat. I’ll get it.” He poured a glass of juice for Travis and a mug of coffee for himself, and then fixed his own plate of food.

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Everything tasted delicious. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten pineapple, or a croissant, and he’d never tried eggs Benedict before. Travis appeared just as interested in the food, picking his eggs apart as he ate them.

Finally Travis sat back, patting his stomach. “That was really good.”

James grinned. “Did you even taste any of it? You ate it so fast.”

That got him an elbow to the ribs and a haughty raised eyebrow. “I’ll ignore that.” Travis leaned back again, putting his arms behind his head. “So what are the plans for today?” He paused for a moment. “I mean, if you want to hang out together. If you want to do your own thing, that’s cool.”

James hadn’t considered what they’d do. He also hadn’t considered going off without Travis. What fun would hanging out alone be? He shrugged. “I hadn’t really thought about what to do. What do you think about going to the beach? I don’t think I’m up for anything too strenuous today.”

“Sounds good to me. Let me do something about my hair and get dressed, and I’m ready whenever you are.” Travis stood and stretched. His shirt rode up, exposing his flat stomach, right at James’ eye level.

Fighting a bizarre urge to lick the exposed skin, James stood as well. “You can have the bathroom first, then.”



Half an hour later, James and Travis took the elevator down to the first level of the resort and walked out the back entrance. A few steps later, they were on the beach.

Travis gazed around, wide-eyed. “Wow. I’ve been to the beach in Florida and South Carolina, but this is gorgeous.”

James nodded. “Gorgeous” summed it up pretty well. The slice of sand they stood on extended as far as he could see in either direction. Palm trees dotted the beach, and mountains capped off the view at either end. Teal-blue water lapped against the shore. He wanted to sit down and soak it all in. “Want to find a place to put our stuff?”

“Sure.”

Together they set off down the beach. A short distance away they found a bit of shade beneath some palm trees, away from the other people on the beach. By unspoken agreement, they laid out their towels and sat side by side.

He took a deep breath of the sea-scented air. Next to him, Travis toed off his sandals and buried his feet in the sand. He followed suit, enjoying the feeling of the soft, dry sand between his toes. The tension he had been carrying around for two weeks drained away.

Another kind of tension replaced it a few minutes later. Travis peeled off his t-shirt, revealing wide shoulders, a slim but hard chest, and the flat stomach James had glimpsed earlier. Small silver rings glittered in both nipples. James tried not to stare. None of the guys he knew had any piercings at all, let alone nipple rings. He was surprised by how hot it looked.

Travis turned to rummage in the small drawstring bag he'd brought, and James gasped. Travis' back was nearly covered by a large tattoo of a phoenix, inked in bright reds and oranges and edged in crisp, black lines. Though he didn't like tattoos as a rule, Travis' was beautiful. He gave up all pretense of not staring. "Your tattoo is incredible."

Travis found whatever he'd been searching for and turned back toward James. "Thanks." He rubbed his shoulder absently, his fingers tracing over the

upper edge of a wing. “I got it to remind me that something good can come out of anything, if you keep going long enough to see it.”

“Sometimes that’s hard to believe.”

Travis gave him a half-smile. “I know. You have to keep trying, though. You won this trip, right? So some other good thing might be right around the corner.”

He grinned at Travis’ optimism. “I hope you’re right.”

“I’m always right.” Travis held up a bottle of sunscreen. “I already got the front, but could you do my back for me? I don’t want to be a lobster the whole time we’re here.”

Touching Travis, even for something as innocuous as putting on sunscreen, seemed like a terrible idea. Still, if he said no it would look like he was dwelling on last night. He forced a smile and took the bottle.

He smoothed the slick, coconut-scented sunscreen over the soft, warm skin of Travis’ back in long strokes, trying to get finished as soon as possible. Travis let out a quiet sigh and relaxed under his touch. He traced Travis’ tattoo absently, admiring its bold lines, and the taut muscles beneath the ink.

He had to force his hands away. “There. All done.”

“Thank you.”

Travis’ smile made him blush. To break the moment, he jumped up. “Last one in has to sleep on the couch tonight.”

He ran toward the water, Travis' cry of "Hey, no fair!" ringing in his ears.

Chapter Eight

A cool, ocean-scented breeze washed over Travis as he watched another spectacular Waikiki sunset. He rested his head on his knees, thinking about the events of the day. Rather than the wary guy Travis had thought he was, James had turned out to be fun. He'd loosened up a lot on the beach, laughing and playing in the waves. They'd eaten lunch at a hole-in-the-wall Korean place and explored a few of the nearby stores. They'd laughed at the oddity of Christmas decorations when it felt like summer, especially the ones featuring surfing Santas. They went back to the beach for the afternoon. Thanks to several reapplications of sunscreen, he'd managed to get through the day without getting sunburned. Now he was tired and hungry, but happy. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had so much fun.

The sliding door opened and James appeared, dressed in khaki slacks and a long-sleeved button-up shirt. The temperature had cooled enough to make wearing long sleeves comfortable, although the air was warm compared to the frigid temperatures at home.

James held out a couple of slips of paper. “We have vouchers for dinner at the main restaurant tonight. I hope that’s okay.”

“Sounds great.” He stood. “Do I look okay?” He hadn’t packed many nice clothes. Other than the black slacks and blue shirt he wore, he didn’t have much to choose from.

James didn’t even look at him before saying, “You look fine.”

He rolled his eyes and followed the other man back into the room and then out into the hallway.

They were silent on the short walk down to the restaurant. Travis used the time to consider the puzzle that was James. The man had been laid-back and fun on the beach, but now he seemed to have reverted to the tense behavior of last night. Travis wasn’t quite sure what had happened to change things. All they’d done since coming back from the beach was shower and change. Travis hadn’t had time to say anything dumb.

Their arrival at the restaurant pulled him from his thoughts. Bold, black letters above the entrance read “Chimera.” At the door, they were greeted by a pretty young woman, who checked them off her list and escorted them to a table in the back, by a large bank of windows. The restaurant had simple, elegant furnishings and dim lighting. Each table featured a small, modern floral centerpiece and a couple of candles, giving the place a romantic air.

After the woman left, Travis turned his attention to the view. The bright moonlight bathed everything outside in an unearthly blue-white glow. Fascinated, he watched the moonlit waves roll in until their waiter appeared.

The waiter, an older man with salt-and-pepper hair, introduced himself as Neal. He showed James a wine list and made suggestions.

“What would you like?”

Surprised at James’ question, Travis looked from James to Neal. He knew next to nothing about wine. He shrugged. “Whatever you want is fine.”

James ordered the wine. The waiter poured them each a glass of water and left them to look at their menus. James gave him a half-smile. “Not big on wine?”

He laughed. “I’m more of a beer guy. The last time I had wine was at a cousin’s wedding.”

“I’m more of a beer guy too. My ex was the wine connoisseur.” James blushed, as if embarrassed to have mentioned his ex again.

“And I bet he always wanted to get the ‘best’ wine.”

James nodded. “I didn’t notice how pretentious he could be at the time. Neither of us came from money, but he always had to act like he did.”

James’ ex sounded like a real piece of work. Travis couldn’t restrain his sneer at the thought of a guy who acted like he was rich and dumped someone via email. “Sounds like you’re better off without him.”

Whatever James intended to say went unsaid as Neal returned to take their orders. James asked for filet mignon. Travis hadn't done more than glance at the menu. He ordered the first thing he saw, grilled salmon. The prices would have made his eyes pop out if they hadn't had vouchers.

Their salads arrived a few minutes later, along with bread. Travis raised his eyebrow at the elegant arrangement of greens on his plate. Lettuce, tomato, and a few things he didn't recognize were artfully placed on the plate and drizzled with a careful starburst of dressing. Trying not to laugh, he speared a forkful of the salad and ate it. The dressing added an unexpected burst of tangy sweetness to the otherwise bitter greens. To mess up the perfect plate by actually eating the food almost made him feel bad. He took a sip of his wine, feeling out of place.

He was relieved when Neal brought their entrées and, when the waiter was sure they had everything they needed, he made himself scarce. Travis eyed his and James' plates. His plate held a cut of grilled salmon with a swath of some sort of creamy sauce on top, a small pile of green beans, and some rice. James' filet mignon sat next to a few stalks of asparagus. Neither entrée appeared to be meant for eating.

Travis leaned across the table as far as he dared. He kept his voice soft, not wanting to be overheard. "This is so not my kind of place, man."

James grinned and reached out to brush Travis' hair out of his face. "Mine either, but we can fake it for a while, right?"

"Right." Reluctantly, he sat back, his forehead and cheek tingling where James' fingers had touched his skin. He picked up his fork and speared a green bean.

James ate a few bites before speaking again. "So, you're a tattoo artist. How long have you been doing that?"

"Seven years. I started as an apprentice when I turned eighteen, working part time while I went to school. After I finished my art degree, I decided to do tattoos and piercings full time."

"I bet you meet a lot of interesting people." James paused to drink some wine before he continued. "What does your family think?"

He laughed. "My parents are the original hippies. I've done tattoos on both of them. They don't care that I'm gay, either. I could show up wearing a dress and makeup and they'd be fine with it."

"That must be nice." James' smile didn't reach his eyes. "My family is very conservative. My parents died right after I graduated from high school. Pretty much all my other relatives stopped talking to me when they found out I was gay."

"That sucks." Travis dared to cover the other man's hand with his own, pleased when James didn't move away.



Half an hour later, they'd both finished their meals. By magic, Neal appeared by the table moments after Travis ate his last bite. "Would you care for dessert?"

His meal hadn't really filled him up, but Travis didn't want to sit in the restaurant any longer than he had to. The place was nice, but in a stifling kind of way. He shrugged at James.

James seemed to consider. "Are you in the mood for chocolate?"

Whatever James had in mind, Travis was in, because he was always up for chocolate. He nodded.

To the waiter, James said, "We'd like the Chocolate Fantasy cake, but could you box it up for us?"

"Certainly, sir."

Neal returned in record time, bearing a pristine white box with the Chimera logo on the side. He handed the box to James. "Enjoy the rest of your evening, gentlemen."

"Thank you." James took the box and motioned for Travis to precede him out of the restaurant.

When they reached the lobby, Travis breathed a sigh of relief. James laughed. "I hope that wasn't a sign that you were bored to death all evening."

He hastened to reassure the other man. “I wasn’t bored. The food was good and everything. The place just made me kind of, I don’t know, nervous I guess.”

A thoughtful expression crossed James’ face again. “I know what you mean. I would have never come to a place like this if I hadn’t won. I’d have been just as happy eating hot dogs on the beach.”

Travis grinned at the thought. “Let’s do that tomorrow.”

James grinned back. “Sounds like a plan.”

Travis had to turn away to stifle a sudden urge to kiss that smiling mouth. He busied himself pushing the elevator button.



Back in the suite, Travis sat on the couch and toed off his shoes.

James joined him, carrying the box. “Ready for some cake?”

“Sounds good. I’m still hungry.”

Chuckling, James opened the box. The sides folded down into a clever plate. Two forks—actual silverware, not plastic—sat next to an enormous slice of chocolate cake. Bright red raspberries and shavings of dark, milk, and white chocolate garnished the moist, multi-layer cake. James handed Travis a fork. “You can try it first.”

Travis speared a forkful. The rich dessert melted in his mouth. “Mmm. You’re going to love this.” Without thinking, he forked up another bite and offered it to James.

After a moment’s hesitation, James leaned forward and took the cake off Travis’ fork. He chewed the bite slowly and swallowed. “That’s incredible.”

Not as incredible as you. A tiny smear of chocolate on James’ bottom lip called to him. He wanted to lick it off, but settled for running his fingertip over James’ lip instead. “I’m about to say something way out of line. Feel free to tell me to fuck off, but I’m really attracted to you.”

Those pretty hazel eyes widened. “You are?”

He moved closer. “I am. And I think you’re attracted to me, too.”

“I am.” James paused. “But I just got out of a relationship, and you and I are so different.”

Travis smiled. “Opposites attract. We’ve got five more days—why not have fun while we’re here? No strings, no regrets.”

James stood, his lips curving into a slow smile. He held out a hand to Travis. “No strings, no regrets.”

Travis took the other man’s hand and allowed himself to be pulled up. Hand in hand, they walked to the bedroom.

Chapter Nine

No strings, no regrets. And no freaking out.

James couldn't help the surge of nerves he felt as he and Travis reached the bedroom. Everything about this was so far from his normal experience he wasn't quite sure what to do next. He didn't sleep with guys he hardly knew—and he'd never known anyone like Travis. His friends and former boyfriends were all conservative, professional types, not pierced, tattooed artists. His boyfriends had also all been shorter than his five eleven. Travis was several inches taller.

Then Travis kissed him, and all his doubts fled. He leaned into the other man, kissing back. He shivered as Travis' tongue stud stroked against the sensitive tissues of his mouth. How much better would it feel against other parts of his body? His half-hard cock came to full, aching stiffness at the thought.

Needing to touch, he attacked the buttons on Travis' shirt, pushing the garment off his shoulders the moment he had them all undone. His greedy hands roamed over Travis' shoulders, surprisingly broad for someone that thin, and down his arms. He didn't linger, wanting to get to his true objective.

Finally, he reached Travis' chest. He traced his fingertips over the smooth, hot skin. Travis moaned into his mouth as James found his nipple piercings. Fascinated, James broke the kiss to look down at the tiny silver rings. He brushed his finger over one, watching the little brown bud draw up tight. He did the same thing to the other one, just to tease. Travis sucked in a sharp breath.

James smiled up at the taller man. "Do you like that?"

Travis' blue eyes were dark with arousal. "I think you can see that I do." He ran his hands up James' chest. "And I think you should take this shirt off."

Who was he to argue with a great idea? James undid the top few buttons of his shirt and yanked it over his head. He tossed the shirt to the floor, attention caught by the sight of Travis sliding his slacks and boxers over his hips. The hard cock that sprang out was long and sleek like the man himself, and James couldn't wait to get his hands—or mouth—on it. Determined to put his thoughts into action, he gave Travis a light push.

Travis fell back onto the king-sized bed, laughing. He leaned up on his elbows and grinned at James. "Pushy much?"

"Often, but it gets me what I want."

Travis' eyes glittered at him from beneath a veil of red and black. "And what do you want?"

James closed the short distance between them and knelt on the floor between Travis' knees. "You."

"You've got me. Now what are you going to do with me?"

James grinned. He knew just how to wipe the smirk off Travis' face. "Whatever I want to." Without another word, he bent and licked Travis' cock from the base to the head. Travis hissed and arched toward him. James opened his mouth and took as much of the long, slender cock as he could, sucking lightly.

With a low cry, Travis let his head fall back. James put all his focus on giving the other man as much pleasure as he could. Suddenly impatient, he pushed two fingers into his mouth alongside Travis' dick, wetting them with saliva. When they were wet enough, he found Travis' hole and pushed in.

Travis let out a ragged sound, half moan, half whimper. James kept sucking, harder now, and curled his fingers. His fingertips scraped over the spot he'd been seeking, and Travis writhed. "Oh, fuck, do that again."

He pulled off Travis' cock. "What, this?" With a slow, deliberate motion, he rubbed Travis' prostate again.

Travis narrowed his eyes. "You. Are. Evil."

He laughed. Then he went back to work. He took Travis' cock as deep as he could go, moving his fingers in time with his mouth. Travis lasted only a few more minutes before he tensed. "I'm gonna—"

James didn't pull off. He swallowed the thick, bittersweet fluid until Travis was completely spent. Afterward, he sat back on his heels and licked his lips. Travis pushed himself up on his elbows and peered at James through sated, heavy-lidded eyes. "Come up here."

James stood and climbed onto the bed, stretching out next to Travis. Without another word, Travis wound his arms around James' neck and drew him down for a deep kiss. He gave himself up to it, teasing Travis' tongue with his own.

A few minutes later, Travis broke the kiss. Gazing up at him, eyes hot, Travis whispered, "Your turn. What do you want?"

What James really wanted was to bury himself inside Travis, right now. He started to say just that, but a thought stopped him. Condoms. He hadn't packed any, figuring he wouldn't need them. Could there be some left in his bag from another trip? He frowned.

Travis' brow wrinkled. "What's wrong?"

"Condoms. I don't know if I have any."

Travis flopped back onto the bed, covering his face with an arm. "Oh, man. I know I don't."

Looking at Travis' long, lean body spread out beneath him, James couldn't believe he could be so lucky and so unlucky at the same time. He sat up and

jumped out of bed. “I’ll be right back.” He almost laughed at the desperation in his own voice.

In the bathroom, he tore through the small bag he kept his shaving gear and other toiletries in. He found all kinds of things, but no condom. Finally, at the very bottom of the bag, he spotted a square packet. “Yes!”

“Did you find one?” From the other room, Travis sounded as excited as James felt.

“Yeah,” he called back. He rummaged through the bag some more, searching for lube. He turned up nothing. To be so close, yet so far away was maddening. He sighed and went back to the bedroom.

Travis was sitting up on the bed. He beckoned to James. “Get back over here. I’m not finished with you yet.”

James stayed where he was. “No lube. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Damn it.” Travis paused, scowling at the bedcovers as if they’d wronged him somehow. His gaze came back up moments later, hopeful again. “Wait, is it lubed?”

A quick glance at the package gave James the answer he wanted. He grinned. “Yes. With ‘ultrasmooth’ lubricant.”

“Ooh, fancy.” Travis smirked at him and leaned back on one elbow.

“Only the best for you, baby.”

Narrowed eyes greeted his words. Travis opened his mouth to speak, probably a smart-ass retort, but James reached the bed and rolled him onto his stomach before he could say a word.

“Oomph.”

James let out a short bark of a laugh, but his amusement died at the sight of Travis, sprawled and his for the taking. He wanted to take his time exploring Travis’ body. Unfortunately, his own body was too keyed up to wait. He ripped the condom package open and rolled the thin latex sheath onto his erection as quickly as he could.

There was extra lube left inside the condom wrapper, so he scooped it up with two fingers. He smeared the slick, cool wetness over Travis’ hole, and then pressed his fingers inside.

Travis moaned and writhed against the sheets. “More.”

James wasn’t in the mood for teasing. “Up.”

His incoherent order must have made sense to Travis, because the other man drew himself up onto his hands and knees. James withdrew his fingers and replaced them with the head of his cock. As soon as he began to push in, he knew it was going to be quick. Travis was tight and hot. His body gripped James like they were made to fit together.

James groaned. “God, you’re tight.”

“Been a while.” Travis shivered. “Move. Please?”

Travis’ words set him free. He pulled almost all the way back and slammed back in. Travis cried out and pushed back toward him, meeting him thrust for thrust.

Everything faded away except for the two of them. James could hear only Travis’ cries, and the sound of their bodies meeting. The scents of sweat, sex, and Travis surrounded him. He pumped into Travis until the other man begged to come, and then he reached around to grab Travis’ pulsating cock. Travis came almost the moment James touched him, setting off his own orgasm.

It was fast and hard, and perfect.

Drained, he collapsed onto the bed beside Travis. They both lay there, breathing heavily, for several minutes.

Finally he made himself get up to take care of the condom. He also grabbed a few tissues to help Travis clean up.

Travis’ bright blue gaze locked on him as he came back into the room. Giving him a sleepy, sated smile, Travis said, “Wow, Jamie. You don’t fuck like you look.”

Jamie? No one had called him Jamie since he was small. And what was *you don’t fuck like you look* supposed to mean? Not sure whether he’d been insulted or not, James offered Travis the tissues. “Thanks, I think.”

Travis took the tissues and blotted at the semen on his stomach and the sheets. “That was definitely a compliment. Trust me.”

Rolling his eyes, James climbed back into bed. He’d never been very comfortable sleeping with another person, but great sex and a long day made falling asleep a lot easier. Even when Travis curled up near him, he found it comforting rather than annoying.

Travis’ idea of fun with no strings was already turning out to be a good one after all.

Chapter Ten

A barely there touch brought Travis out of a light sleep. He opened his eyes slowly, not quite ready to face the day. The first thing he saw, James, watching him, made him smile. “Hey.”

“Hey.” James traced Travis’ jaw with his fingertips, an unexpectedly tender gesture.

Travis wanted to nuzzle into the touch, but he didn’t. He caught James’ hand instead, and nipped at the fingertips. “What’s the plan today, Jamie?”

Rolling his eyes, James pulled his hand away from Travis’ teeth. “I thought maybe we could explore a little within walking distance. We could spend some more time on the beach, and the zoo’s not far. I know going to the zoo is kind of a kiddie thing to do—”

“I think that’d be fun,” Travis interjected into James’ nervous babble.

James smiled. “Okay, good. I haven’t been to a zoo in years.”

“Breakfast first.” Travis stopped, considered. Maybe they had time for something else first. He gave James a wicked grin. “Or shower first, and then breakfast?”

Eyes heating, James rolled out of bed. “Shower first.”

Travis would have laughed at James’ eagerness, if he hadn’t felt the same way himself. He jumped out of bed and followed the other man into the bathroom.

James had already started the water by the time he entered the room. He snickered. “Patience is a virtue, you know.”

“It’s one I don’t have right now. Come here.” Crooking a finger at him, James stepped into the large shower stall.

Travis didn’t even consider arguing. He crossed the room in a few quick strides and stepped into the glass enclosure. James drew him in close the instant he shut the door. Before he could say a word, James picked up a bar of soap and lathered his hands. Travis couldn’t contain a low moan as James’ slick, soapy hands ran along his shoulders and chest.

James smiled, then leaned forward and kissed him. He kissed back, twining his tongue around James’. All the while, James’ hands continued to roam over his body. He broke the kiss with a sharp gasp when James closed a hand around his cock and stroked firmly.

“You like that?”

He closed his eyes and nodded, unable to form the words. Heat and arousal coursed through his body. James moved his body against Travis’ until Travis stood against the wall, the slight chill of the marble tile providing a delicious contrast to

the hot water and his overheated skin. James continued to work Travis' cock, fast and tight. His other hand moved to toy with Travis' right nipple ring. He pressed his mouth to Travis' again, hard and demanding. Travis surrendered willingly, letting James plunder his mouth. Sensation bombarded him, overwhelmed him.

Being pushed against the shower wall and manhandled shouldn't have been such a turn-on, yet it was. He moaned into James' mouth as the hand on his dick tightened, stroking faster. At the same time, James' other hand twisted his piercing. His orgasm boiled up from somewhere deep inside.

"Jamie, oh, God!" His head fell back into the tile with a thud, but he didn't even feel the pain. Pleasure burned through him. Jets of thick, warm semen coated James' hand and his own stomach. James latched onto his shoulder and bit, while his hand continued milking Travis' cock until he had nothing more to give.

Spent, Travis stood gasping for breath. His legs felt like jelly. James held him, kissing and nuzzling at his neck.

Finally, James drew back. "I can't believe how hot you are when you come, or how much I want to fuck you right now."

Travis shivered at the memory of James thrusting into him last night. "Please."

Regret flickered across James' face. "I can't. No condoms, remember?"

In his head, Travis cursed a blue streak, but he didn't voice any of the words. "That's okay." Just because they didn't have condoms didn't mean they couldn't have any fun.

First, he took a moment to admire James' body, so different from his own. In the heat of the past few minutes he'd barely even glanced at the other man. Arms, shoulders, chest, everything on James was strong and sexy. The man must work out, which didn't fit the stuffed-shirt business image he'd projected the first time they'd met. His cock, thick, hard, and flushed red with arousal, stood out rigidly from his body, begging for attention.

A bead of water running down James' neck caught Travis' attention. He licked the drop off moist skin, causing James to moan with pleasure. With sudden boldness, he grabbed James' arms, using them to turn James so that his back was pressed against the wall.

"What—"

Not letting James finish, Travis dropped to his knees and swallowed James' cock down in one smooth movement.

"Travis!" James' cry echoed off the walls.

Travis lapped at James' cock, savoring the softness of the skin and the musky, masculine scent. James threaded a hand through Travis' hair to cup the

back of his head, but he didn't do anything else. The muscles in his thighs trembled as if he were holding himself in check.

That was the last thing Travis wanted. Needing James to lose control, he sucked harder and brought a hand up to roll James' balls gently. He then teased the sensitive underside of the head with his tongue stud.

James cried out and tightened his grip on Travis' head. He jerked forward. "God, Travis, your mouth..."

Rough didn't normally trip his trigger, but Travis' cock hardened at James' tight, desperate grip on his hair. He relaxed his throat and let James fuck his mouth with short, hard thrusts. It was almost too much. He could have grabbed James' hip to slow him, or backed away. Instead, he took his own cock into his free hand and stroked its length while James slammed into his mouth.

After the first few thrusts, James' rhythm faltered. Several erratic movements later, his cock pulsed. Travis swallowed around him, drinking down his release even as his own splattered onto the shower floor.

The hand in his hair loosened, the touch going from commanding to caressing. He released James' dick and glanced up. James gazed down at him, panting, with bright spots of color on his cheeks. For a long moment they stared at each other in silence. James continued to stroke his hair. His body hummed. Aftershocks of pleasure, as well as some discomfort and confusion, left him dazed.

He had never minded giving blow jobs, but he couldn't believe how much he'd liked giving one to James. Or how much James had seemed to enjoy receiving one from him.

Just as the silence was about to get awkward, James held out a hand to him. He took it, and the other man drew him to his feet. James kissed him, softly this time. His lips throbbed and tingled, but James' kiss soothed the sting a little.

Without speaking, James guided him into the stream of water. He picked up the soap again. His hands, so forceful earlier, were gentle as he washed Travis. He lingered over Travis' back, kneading the muscles until Travis melted. He even washed Travis' hair, massaging the shampoo into his scalp and rinsing it out without getting any in his eyes.

Travis let him. To his surprise, he enjoyed being taken care of. He even let James wrap him in a big, fluffy towel when they finished.

He drew the line there, though. "I'm not a baby. I can dry myself."

James frowned. He traced the line of Travis' throat with a fingertip. "Your voice sounds scratchy. Did I hurt you?"

Shrugging, Travis admitted, "It was a little intense, but with you? I liked it." His voice did sound scratchy, and, now that the heat of the moment had passed, his throat felt kind of raw.

One corner of James' mouth turned up. His eyes held both heat and what looked suspiciously like tenderness. "I liked it too."

Tenderness wasn't part of their deal. To break the mood, Travis grinned and smacked James' ass. "You know what else I'd like? Some breakfast. And some juice."

A *big* glass of juice, to soothe his throat and maybe keep him too busy drinking to say something dumb.

Chapter Eleven

The walk to the Honolulu Zoo took them about half an hour. At the gate, James paid their admissions, brushing off Travis' protest. He took a guidebook and they entered the zoo.

At first James strode along the path, but he had to slow to accommodate Travis' ambling gait. After a few minutes, he found himself enjoying the slow, calm pace.

He also enjoyed the silence. Rich had never been one for long silences. His ex had filled nearly every moment with idle chatter and gossip. Travis, on the other hand, seemed content to stay quiet for the most part. He pointed out some unusual birds at the first habitat they came to, but otherwise he looked around with a rapt expression rather than speaking.

Watching Travis watch the birds shouldn't have been fascinating, yet it was. Those big blue eyes lit up with interest, and Travis smiled at each new sight, his enjoyment in such a simple activity obvious. In no time at all, James was paying more attention to Travis than the animals.

They wandered through the reptile habitat, and into the primate area. Though he tried to concentrate, James' focus alternated between the creatures they were supposed to be viewing and his companion. In the bright sunshine, Travis' hair gleamed inky-black and flame red. He moved with an effortless grace, unhurried and somehow sexy. James couldn't help remembering the taut, responsive body beneath Travis' blue t-shirt and cargo shorts.

Even here, out in public in bright daylight, James wanted to touch him, kiss him, push him up against the wooden fence and do whatever Travis would let him do. His cock stirred at the thought, and his face felt hot. He pretended to watch a group of monkeys playing in the trees, unnerved. He usually had no trouble controlling himself and his desires, especially out in public.

As they stopped in front of a primate enclosure, Travis turned to him. "What's your favorite animal?"

James shrugged, relieved to have something else to think about. "I don't know. I guess I haven't really thought about it, at least not since I was little. What's yours?"

"The pygmy marmoset. I wanted one so bad when I was a kid." Travis grinned, pointing out a tiny monkey. "My mom said no."

It wasn't difficult to picture Travis as a child, begging for a pet monkey. With those big blue eyes, he had to have been downright irresistible when he

asked for something. James laughed. “I once asked my mom if I could have an elephant. She told me not to be ridiculous.”

Snickering, Travis bumped his shoulder into James’. “An elephant? At least I wanted a small animal.”

James shrugged again. “If you’re going to dream, dream big.”

Travis rolled his eyes. “I’m sure that says something about you, but I’m not sure what.”

They watched the pygmy marmosets for a few more minutes, then walked back the way they’d come, through part of the reptile section and toward the African Savannah habitat. James’ stomach chose that moment to growl. Travis looked from his face to his stomach, laughing. “Hungry?”

“Hey, I didn’t eat as much breakfast as you did.”

Mischievous eyes peered at him through a fringe of hair. “I could eat, though.”

Now it was James’ turn to snicker. “What else is new?”



Fifteen minutes later they sat at a picnic table, eating hot dogs and potato chips and drinking soda. James couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten a hot

dog, or eaten at a picnic table. The food reminded him of ball games, and cookouts, and childhood camping trips. He smiled.

Across from him, Travis licked ketchup and mustard from his fingers. “You look happy. What are you smiling about?”

He stifled the urge to grab the younger man’s hand and do a little licking of his own. “I was just thinking about how long it’s been since I had food like this.”

“You haven’t been to a zoo in years, or eaten hot dogs... Jeez. Do you ever have any fun?” Travis’ exaggerated expression of horror made him laugh.

“Yes, smarty pants, I do. It’s just a different sort of fun.” Even to himself, he sounded pompous and boring. If he were honest, he hadn’t had much fun in the past few months, if not longer. He’d been too consumed with work and keeping Rich happy, both of which had left little time for fun. His smile faded.

“Hey, what did I say?” Travis gave him a coaxing grin. “We’re on vacation, right? No frowning allowed.”

“Okay.” His smile was only a little forced. It was hard to be gloomy around Travis.

“Good. Now hurry up and eat. I want to see the cheetahs.” As if to help him, Travis reached across the table and stole several of his chips.

“What are you, five?” Laughing, he passed the rest of the chips across the table, ready to see what would happen next.



James was almost disappointed to leave the zoo. Seeing the animals had been fun, in large part because of Travis' unflagging enthusiasm. Being around Travis made him forget about the problems that awaited him at home and focus on the present, which could only be a good thing.

They exited the zoo and headed toward the hotel. James had been planning to go straight back to their suite to rest a while, but he caught Travis' longing glance toward the ocean and changed his mind. "Want to walk on the beach a bit?"

Travis' bright smile was all the answer he needed. They walked along the sidewalk in companionable silence, the light, sea-scented breeze ruffling their clothes and Travis' hair. He wanted to reach out and touch the shifting strands.

Just before they reached the beach, James noticed an ice cream store. Remembering Travis' reaction to the chocolate cake the other night, he stopped. "Want to get some ice cream?"

"Well, I am kind of hungry."

James laughed. "When are you not? Let's go, then." He led the way into the well-lit store, the scent of waffle cones and chocolate hitting him the moment he opened the door.

Travis went to the end of the short line, peering at the posted menu of ice creams. The store had a lot of different flavors, most of which they mixed to order on a cold, flat stone. “Which one should I get?” Travis’ kid-in-a-candy-store expression had him suppressing a smile.

“Something chocolate,” James suggested.

A few minutes later, they reached the counter. Travis ordered a waffle cone with German chocolate cake flavor. His eyes widened when the girl behind the counter handed it to him. “Wow. That’s a lot bigger than I expected.”

James smirked. “The bigger the better, right?”

Travis faked astonishment. “Did you just make a joke, Jamie?”

Trying to maintain an innocent expression, James paid the guy manning the cash register. He held the door for Travis and his enormous ice cream cone. They walked across the street to the beach, strolling and people-watching.

After a few bites of his ice cream, Travis held the cone out to James. “This is good. Want to try it?”

Had he ever shared an ice cream cone with anyone? James didn’t think so. He accepted it and took a bite, wincing at the cold. The flavors of chocolate, coconut, caramel, and pecan burst over his tongue. He took another bite and handed the cone back, imagining he could taste Travis as well.

Suddenly, he wanted to get back to the resort. Fast.



“That was fun.”

“Yeah, it was fun.” The words weren’t a lie. James would never have guessed how much fun going to the zoo and walking on the beach eating ice cream could be. Of course, the day wasn’t over yet. He had a few plans for the evening, and a quick stop at the resort’s gift shop a few minutes earlier had brought those plans one step closer to fruition. Smiling, he shut the suite door behind them.

Travis crossed the room and stood at the balcony door. “I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of this view.”

The view from James’ vantage point was nice as well. “Me either.” He closed the space between them, stopping just behind Travis. “In fact, it’s been driving me crazy all day.”

Travis stilled. “I don’t think we’re talking about the same thing.”

“We were talking about the view, right?” James leaned forward and brushed his lips against Travis’ neck, making the other man shiver. “I think I want to see some more.”

“Mmm, I like the sound of that.” Travis tilted his head, giving James greater access to his neck.

James took immediate advantage, kissing a path from his jaw down to the collar of his shirt. He brought his free hand, the one not holding the gift shop bag, up to tease Travis' chest through the soft material of his t-shirt. Travis moaned and pushed back, grinding his ass into James' rapidly hardening cock. James hissed. He dropped the bag and gripped the hem of Travis' shirt, yanking the garment over Travis' head. "Hands on the door."

Travis shuddered and did as James ordered him to, putting his palms on the glass. Without being told, he pushed back and spread his legs slightly. James had to restrain a shudder of his own. Travis had spread himself out like a banquet. For a long moment, desire overwhelmed James and he wasn't sure where to start.

The phoenix still drew him. He ran a hand over the tattoo, relishing the way Travis arched into his touch. Travis whimpered when James traced his spine with his tongue. The sound spurred James on. He reached around to toy with one of Travis' nipple rings. His other hand found the button on Travis' shorts and popped it free.

James paused for the few seconds it took to unzip Travis' shorts and shove them, along with Travis' boxers, down over his slim hips to the ground. Travis didn't try to step out of them or move at all. He remained where he was, hands pressed tightly against the glass door. Travis' complete submission turned James

on in a way nothing else had. His cock throbbed behind his cargo shorts, demanding release.

“God, the way you look right now...” James snatched up the bag he’d discarded earlier. Inside it, he found the lube and condoms he’d bought earlier when Travis was busy looking at souvenirs. He ripped the box open and shoved one of the condoms into his pocket, then opened the lube with a snap.

“What—” Travis broke off with a sharp gasp as James pushed a well-lubed finger into his hole. “Oh, *God*. When did you?”

James laughed. “I went shopping while you were looking at souvenirs.” He added a second finger, twisting and pumping until Travis cried out.

“Please, Jamie, more.”

Outside, the sun had begun to set, painting the ocean in oranges and pinks. James barely noticed. All he could see was Travis, spread out before him, all color and slim beauty, speared by his fingers. He withdrew them, ignoring Travis’ whimper of protest. His cock screamed to be inside Travis, and he didn’t want to wait any longer. He paused long enough to unfasten his shorts and shove them, and his boxers, down as far as he needed to. Sheathing himself with the condom took only seconds, and he was finally ready.

One long, smooth push and he was in, his erection surrounded by the tight heat of Travis’ body. He groaned at the sensations that threatened to overtake him.

Several seconds passed before he could thrust again. He pulled out almost completely before slamming back in, hard and fast.

Hands scrabbling against the glass, Travis pushed back into his thrusts. “Yes, Jamie, harder!”

James couldn’t have done anything else if he tried. Travis’ cries spurred him on. His hips snapped forward and back without any conscious direction on his part. Each thrust brought him closer and closer to the edge.

“Jamie.” Travis’ voice emerged as a ragged whisper. His back arched, his inner muscles clenching around Jamie’s cock as he came.

James couldn’t resist any longer. The sudden tightness wrenched his orgasm out of him. Pleasure streaked through him. He thrust a few more times, prolonging the feeling.

Slowly he came back to earth. He looked down at Travis, whose hands were still pressed against the door. The younger man’s head was down, his breathing heavy.

James turned his attention to himself. He realized he was still fully dressed, which made him want to laugh for some reason. Instead, he pulled out as gently as he could and discarded the condom in a nearby trash can. He went into the bathroom and cleaned himself up a bit, then zipped his shorts.

By the time he returned, Travis was still standing at the balcony door, but he had turned around. His brilliant blue gaze locked on James' face. "Jesus. That was...well, I don't know what that was."

Amazing. Incredible. The hottest thing I've ever experienced.

Before he could settle on a reply, Travis burst out laughing. He gestured at himself. "I'm totally naked, making a mess all over the freaking door, and you're still dressed?"

"I had other things on my mind, like getting inside you as fast as possible." James' face heated at the admission, but the truth was the truth.

Travis smiled. "Can you hand me a tissue? I'm not leaving this mess on the door for the maid."

James laughed and went to get the tissue. He took pity on Travis and helped the other man clean the glass as best they could. He gathered up Travis' clothing as well.

Travis yawned. "It's not that late, but I'm tired. Nap?"

James nodded. Together, they headed into the bedroom. James stripped his clothes off and climbed into bed.

Travis got in and curled against him. "Is this okay?"

Instead of answering, James wrapped his arm around Travis and drew him in closer. He was beginning to like sleeping with another person.

The sound of the other man's soft, steady breathing lulled him to sleep.

Chapter Twelve

Travis awoke to the rich scent of coffee. He opened his eyes just in time to see James setting a tray on the table next to the bed. Freshly showered and dressed in only a pair of shorts, James looked downright edible. Remembering the way James had fucked him up against the door, and their less fevered second round in the middle of the night, Travis shivered.

James smiled at him. "You're awake. Good. Want some juice?"

"I'd love some." Travis sat up, stretching. He noticed James' eyes locked on his chest, which made him grin. "See something *you* want?"

"Definitely, but we don't have time. We've got a bus to catch at nine thirty."

The clock read nine. Travis pretended to pout. "Damn. I'll settle for breakfast and a shower, then. For now."

Carrying a glass of juice and a small basket, James came to the bed and perched on the edge. He handed Travis the juice and placed the basket between them. "I only got bagels, cream cheese, and jelly since we slept in so late."

“Whose fault is that?” Travis gulped down half his juice. Thirst sated for the moment, he selected a bagel, broke it apart, and smothered it with strawberry-guava jelly.

James pointed at him. “Don’t try to blame me. I didn’t hear you complaining at the time.” He paused. “Forgot my coffee.” He stood and went to get it, coming back moments later.

“I wasn’t complaining.” How could Travis complain? Last night had been incredible. Part of him still couldn’t believe he’d let James do the things he’d done, but he trusted James. Although they’d known each other a handful of days, he knew James would never hurt him. At least not physically, and he wasn’t about to give James the power to hurt him any other way.

Shaking off his thoughts, he grinned at James. “And anyway, I’m sure you’ll make it up to me tonight.”

James’ eyes darkened. “You can count on that.”



After an hour-long bus ride during which James stubbornly refused to tell him where they were going, Travis had no idea what to expect. The bus driver’s announcement that they had arrived at the Polynesian Cultural Center didn’t give him much of a clue.

At the entrance, James paid their admissions and got a map. Travis tried to take the map, but James held it away from him, laughing. “Patience, grasshopper. Don’t you like surprises?”

“Ugh, shut up.” Travis fell into step beside James. Before he had the chance to say anything else, a hot Polynesian guy dressed in traditional garb approached them.

The guy grinned. “You want to get your picture taken with us, right?” He indicated a pretty young woman, also in traditional dress.

Travis could see James was about to refuse, so he jumped in. “Oh, yeah. That’d be awesome.”

James gave him a dirty look but allowed himself to be drawn in between the pretty girl and Travis. James even smiled at the photographer’s urging. Travis had no trouble summoning up a gleeful grin at his tiny bit of revenge.

All thoughts of revenge and annoyance fled when they stepped through a second gate into what appeared to be a small Polynesian village. For the next few hours, he felt like a wide-eyed kid as they watched people from various Polynesian islands demonstrate skills, dances, and elements of everyday life in their traditional cultures. He was especially impressed by the man who peeled and opened a coconut with a speed he wouldn’t have believed was possible.

Later in the day, they shared a plate of nachos as they watched a parade of canoes pass by, each one carrying dancers dressed in colorful costumes. Travis took a ton of pictures.

Beside him, James laughed. “What are you going to do with all those pictures?”

Travis shrugged. “Whatever I want.” Just to tease, he snapped a few pictures of James.

That earned him a scowl. “Keep doing that and you’ll break your camera.”

“Aw, with your cute little face? Never.” Travis patted James’ cheek in the most condescending manner he could manage.

“Watch the parade, Travis.”

He laughed. Then he clicked the shutter one more time, to capture James’ fierce scowl.



“We get to go to a real luau? That is so awesome.” Travis beamed at James, who looked pleased.

“I thought you’d like that. And it’s all you can eat.”

Travis burst out laughing. “You seem to think all I care about is food.”

Raising an eyebrow, James leaned closer to him. “I know that’s not *all* you care about.”

Travis couldn’t help his shiver at the intent look in James’ eyes. Too bad they couldn’t do anything about it. In fact, they were about to reach the front of the luau line.

A woman in a Hawaiian shirt greeted them at the entrance. Another woman put a pink and purple orchid lei over each of their heads. They posed for a picture with two more costumed employees similar to the ones at the front gate, without a peep from James this time, and finally they were directed to their table.

Several others were already seated at the table they were escorted to. Travis smiled at them. “Hey, everyone. I’m Travis, and this is James. We’re from St. Louis.”

An old woman across the table nodded at him. “Hello, Travis. I’m Mabel.” She pointed to the man next to her. “This is my husband, Herman. We’re here to celebrate our fiftieth anniversary.”

“Wow, that’s cool. Congratulations.” Travis couldn’t imagine being with someone for fifty years.

A young couple next to James introduced themselves as Sabrina and Gil, newlyweds from San Diego.

A heavily tattooed couple arrived to take up the last seats at their table. The man tipped his head at Travis. “Nice piercings.”

“Nice ink.” Travis grinned, happy to meet someone who shared his interests.

While they waited for their table to be ushered to the buffet line, Travis talked shop with Dennis and Sandy, who were bikers from Arizona. They each planned to get more tattoos soon. Next to him, James chatted with the other occupants of the table. The entertainment began a few minutes later, and the table quieted.

Finally it was time to eat. Travis got a little bit of everything: roast pork, teriyaki chicken, fish, and an interesting dish called chicken long rice. At the end of the table, he picked up sample-sized portions of a few more dishes, including raw fish, and poi, which was a weird purple paste.

Back at the table, everyone dug in. A slight cough from beside him made him turn. James was gulping his soda.

“You okay, Jamie?”

James gave him a rueful look. “Apparently I don’t like poi.”

Travis grinned and lifted his own little cup of poi. He ate a big bite, rolling it around in his mouth to get the taste. The paste was sort of tangy and bland at the same time. He swallowed and shrugged. “It doesn’t really taste like anything to me.”

The rest of dinner flew by. Everyone at the table except for Travis and James went to the stage to dance to the Hawaiian Wedding Song. Watching Mabel and Herman dance, Travis felt a stab of envy. He'd only been in love once in his life, and that had lasted two years; two perfect, happy years, followed by months of crushing despair. He reached up to rub at his shoulder, remembering.

"Hey. What's wrong?" James touched his arm, stroking it gently.

Travis shook his head. "I'm fine. I was just thinking."

"Well, stop. We're on vacation."

Travis laughed. "Sorry. I won't do it again."

"See that you don't."

When they left the luau, Travis had almost forgotten about his sad thoughts. He enjoyed their final activity of the night, a show featuring traditional dances, fire, and amazing costumes. Even James was awed by a few of the fire dances; he could tell by James' rapt expression.

Travis wasn't quite as focused. His gaze kept wandering to James instead of the show. He didn't manage to make himself pay attention until James caught him staring—then he watched the stage for the rest of the show, embarrassed and annoyed at himself.



Tired from the long day, Travis was not in the mood to talk. He dozed for most of the hour-long bus ride back to the resort. He blinked when James nudged him. “Are we here already?”

James smiled. “Yeah, we’re back. Come on. Let’s get you up to bed.”

Up to bed. Travis could go along with that idea. He gave James a sleepy grin. “Only if you’re coming with me.”

Rolling his eyes, James stood and motioned for Travis to precede him. “Let’s go.”

They exited the bus and went up to their suite in silence. Once inside, they got ready for bed, taking turns quickly showering and brushing their teeth. Travis finished first, and climbed into bed naked. He might have been tired, but he wasn’t *that* tired.

A few minutes later, James slipped into bed beside him, dressed in boxers. When Travis curled up against him, James let out a quiet laugh. “Are you trying to tell me something?”

“Am I succeeding?” Travis shifted, rubbing his hard dick against James’ thigh.

James groaned. “Yes.”

“Good.”

James staved off any further smart-ass remarks with a kiss. The contact started off soft, but soon deepened.

Travis couldn't help the quiet whimper that escaped at the sensation of James' tongue stroking along his own. Kissing James felt right, deep down, in a way he hadn't experienced in a very long time. That probably should have scared Travis, but he was too turned on to care. Impatient, he rocked into James' thigh again.

"You don't play fair," James muttered against his lips.

Drawing back, Travis traced his fingertips along James' cheekbone. "I'm sure there's a saying about that, but I can't think right now." In his best stage whisper, he added, "Pretend I said something really clever."

James laughed, his eyes crinkling at the edges with genuine amusement. Instead of replying, he kissed Travis again. Travis fell into it, blocking out everything except James' lips on his—at least until James reached down and caught both their erections in his hand.

At first James stroked slowly and almost gently. Travis put his hand over James', encouraging him to move faster. Together, they pumped faster, slick pre-come making their strokes smoother.

Arousal and anticipation built until Travis thought he'd explode. Jerking off together shouldn't have been so hot, but somehow it was one of the hottest things he'd ever done.

He came with a suddenness that caught him off guard. His head fell back, breaking the kiss, as semen gushed over his and James' hands and stomachs. James groaned and kept stroking through his own orgasm, wringing more from Travis than he knew he was capable of. The whole time James pressed little kisses to Travis' jaw and throat.

Finally James released their spent cocks and slipped out of bed. Travis heard water running in the bathroom. He turned onto his back, floating in a sated, tired haze. The bedside lamp clicked on, and he blinked. "Jamie?"

James handed him a damp washcloth. "I thought you might want to clean up."

"Thanks." Travis took the cloth and wiped his hand and stomach. Fortunately they'd caught most of the mess so he didn't have too much to clean up on the sheets. Once he was sure he wouldn't end up sticky and uncomfortable later, he rolled onto his side.

James smiled and took the washcloth back. He tossed it into the bathroom and turned off the lamp. Moments later, the mattress dipped from his weight as he

got back in. Without speaking, he spooned up behind Travis and wrapped an arm around him.

Travis relaxed in James' loose embrace. His chest tightened at how comfortable he felt. His last thought before sleep claimed him was a reminder to himself: *no strings, no regrets.*

Chapter Thirteen

Getting up early to catch a bus to the USS Arizona Memorial had seemed like a brilliant idea a few days before. At seven in the morning, James didn't feel too brilliant. Sluggish and irritated would be better descriptors. He sat on the sofa, zombie-like, waiting for room service.

Travis ambled into the living room. He wore cargo shorts, a black Superman t-shirt, and a bright smile. He dropped onto the sofa next to James. "Morning, Jamie."

James was saved from answering by a knock on the door and quiet call of "Room service."

"I'll get it." Travis hopped up and strode across the room. He pulled the door open and grinned at the startled resort employee. "Good morning."

The young man recovered quickly. "Good morning, sir. Where would you like this?"

"I'll take it." Travis took the small tray the man held and handed him a folded bill. "Thank you. Have a nice day."

“You too, sir.” Still looking a bit puzzled, probably at Travis’ incredible good cheer so early in the morning, the man left.

Travis closed the door and brought the tray to the coffee table. He lifted the top, revealing the to-go cups of coffee and juice, as well as muffins. “Muffins, yum.” He grabbed one that appeared to have coconut on top and turned to James. “Ready to go?”

“You’re disgustingly chipper this morning.” James picked up his coffee and a muffin and stood. “Let’s go.”

Laughing, Travis stood as well. He gave James a light kiss. “Come on, grumpy.” He breezed out of the room, pausing to pick up his camera case on the way out the door.

James trailed after him, feeling unaccountably better. As he left the suite, his just-kissed lips turned up in a smile.



Just over an hour later, they got off the bus at the USS Arizona Memorial. Their first stop was the visitor center, to get tickets. It was early enough that they wouldn’t have to wait very long to view the movie and take the boat ride out to the Arizona. James figured they’d have just enough time to see the museum first.

Although James didn't think of himself as an overly emotional guy—in spite of recent evidence to the contrary—the museum got to him more than he'd expected it to. Little mementoes like photos and cheerful letters home from men who'd died days or weeks later made history feel suddenly real. Numbers and names on a sheet became real people, some of whom had deliberately sacrificed their lives to save others.

Before their trip out to the memorial, they went into an auditorium and watched a documentary movie detailing the events of December 7, 1941. Seeing everything play out on film was even more wrenching. Next to him, Travis seemed equally affected. James reached over and took his hand. The squeeze he received in return told him Travis appreciated the gesture.

On the short boat ride to the memorial, all the people around them chatted while they sat in silence. Neither of them spoke even after they reached the memorial. Travis took a few pictures and they looked around. James stayed at the engraved list of names for several minutes, thinking. When he turned, Travis had gone.

He found Travis a few minutes later, gazing down at the water. They stood together and watched a droplet of oil rise to the surface. Travis sighed. "It's hard to imagine, isn't it? They were just going about their business, doing their jobs, and

then so many of them were gone.” He rubbed at his shoulder, a gesture James had seen him do before.

“It is hard to imagine.” James’ gaze followed the droplet as it widened into a sort of rainbow halo.

Travis appeared to be on the verge of saying something else, but he didn’t. Instead, he smiled and bumped his shoulder into James’. “Sorry, Jamie. I’m getting all depressing on you.”

Sensing that Travis didn’t want to talk about anything deep, he shrugged. “That’s okay.” He paused, trying to think of a way to change the subject. “Do you want to go to the beach after lunch?”

Travis’ expression was relieved. “Sure. And maybe tomorrow we can do some shopping? I have to buy some Christmas gifts.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

On the boat ride back to the visitor center, Travis chattered about shopping and all the things they’d seen over the past few days, but James wasn’t fooled. The way Travis’ hand stole to his shoulder showed he was still upset about something. James wondered if he wanted to know what it was.



As James had suggested, they went to the beach after lunch. James bought a couple of inexpensive body boards—the store clerk referred to them as *boogie boards*—for them and they spent hours out in the surf. Travis took to the sport right away, catching waves easily. James had a little more trouble, but he had fun anyway.

On their last run, Travis made it to shore long before James did. James caught a wave perfectly at last, and left the water pleased with his accomplishment. He headed for the patch of sand they'd staked out as their own to tell Travis about his success.

His triumphant grin faded when he glanced up and saw a young man crouched beside Travis' towel, listening to Travis, who sat laughing and gesturing as he talked. James had to admit the guy was hot, with sun-streaked blond hair, a dark tan, and a great body. Travis certainly seemed to be enjoying their conversation. Maybe he would prefer it if James stayed away and let him talk to the man for a while. It wasn't like James and Travis were together, after all. They were having a vacation fling, with no strings. Travis was free to do whatever, or whoever, he wanted.

James' stomach churned as he watched the blond put a hand on Travis' shoulder. It took him a moment to put a name to what he was feeling, but when he did it was obvious. He was *jealous*. He stopped in his tracks, horrified. He had no

reason to be jealous. Just because he and Travis were sleeping together didn't give James any claim over Travis. He'd agreed to Travis' suggestion of no strings, no regrets. Getting upset now would be stupid and childish. Still, he couldn't help the way his hand clenched around his body board, or the tightening in his chest. He forced himself to keep walking toward Travis.

As he neared the two men, Travis glanced up. His smile widened. "Hey, Jamie!" He made a waving motion from the blond to James. "Pete, this is James. James, Pete. Pete lives here. He's a surfer."

James managed something approximating a smile. "Nice to meet you."

Pete the surfer gave James a nod and an insincere smile in return. Then he turned right back to Travis. "So, there's this party tonight. I was thinking you could come with me." He ran his fingertips along Travis' arm, making James grit his teeth. "I'm sure I could find somebody for your friend too."

Ooh, he's willing to find 'somebody' to keep me busy so he can get with Travis. How generous of him. James wanted to shove the jerk's face in the sand, but he managed not to. He even kept his fake smile pasted on.

Travis didn't hesitate. "It's really cool of you to invite us, but we've got plans."

Pete sat back on his heels. "Maybe another time then. I'm here pretty much every day." He gave Travis a last smoldering look and stood.

The second the surfer was out of earshot, James murmured, “We have plans?”

Travis’ smile faded. “I’m sorry. Did you want to go to the party? I can go after him and tell him we’ve changed our minds.”

Travis started to stand, but James stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “I didn’t want to go. But...if you do, you should go. I think Pete really liked you.” The words nearly choked him.

Travis pushed his hair away from his eyes and gazed up at James, his eyes serious. “I have this thing, one at a time, you know?” A mischievous little grin appeared on his face. “Besides, you’ve been keeping me pretty busy every night.”

The tight feeling in his chest eased, and James was able to grin back. “Apparently we have some important plans tonight, too. Maybe we’d better go back up to the room to get ready.”



Back in their suite, James took a quick shower and then ordered dinner. It had been a long day, and he didn’t feel like going out. Travis came into the living room, toweling his hair, as James hung up. “Dinner?”

“It’s on the way. It’ll be here in a few minutes.” Watching Travis, James wished they’d showered together instead of taking turns. He also wished they had more than a few minutes.

Travis tossed his towel toward the bathroom and sat on the other end of the sofa. “Good. I’m starved.” He let his head fall back against the cushions and put his feet up on the coffee table. “I’m also tired. I must be getting old or something. It’s not that late.”

James had to laugh at that. “You’re not getting old. What are you, early twenties? We went to bed too late last night and got up early this morning. It’s been a long day.”

Travis gave him a lazy half-shrug. “Yeah, I guess so. And I’m twenty-five. How old are you?”

“Thirty. Maybe I’m the one who’s getting old.”

His eyes sparkling from behind the damp veil of his hair, Travis swung his feet to the floor and leaned forward. “Not too old to fuck me into the mattress later, I hope.”

A burst of arousal stole James’ breath, and a moment passed before he was able to speak. “I think I could manage that.”

“Good.” Travis sat back again as if nothing had happened.

Before James had a chance to try to make Travis lose his cool façade, there was a knock at the door. “Room service.”

Rolling his eyes at Travis’ Cheshire cat grin, James went to answer the door.



One dinner and sunset on the balcony later, James and Travis went inside. The long day had worn James out, but not enough to make him forget Travis’ words from earlier. He waited until they had both finished their preparations for bed, and then he pounced.

He came up behind Travis in the bathroom, where Travis peered at his own reflection in the mirror. The creamy skin of Travis’ shoulders and chest was marred by a hint of pink. James moved closer until his groin pressed snugly against Travis’ ass. “Got a little sunburned, did you?” He dropped a soft kiss on Travis’ right shoulder.

Travis smiled at him in the mirror. “It doesn’t hurt, but feel free to keep kissing it better.”

James lifted his eyes. Their gazes met and held. “Oh, I plan to do a lot more than that. I recall someone saying something about being fucked into the mattress.” To underscore his point, he rubbed his rapidly hardening dick against Travis’ ass.

Shivering, Travis ground back into his body. “Hmm, I don’t remember that. You’d better remind me.”

“Come to bed, and I will.” James left the bathroom, pushing his boxers to the floor on the way. Travis followed, shoving his underwear down over his hips as well.

Naked, they climbed into the huge bed. James wanted Travis, maybe more than he’d ever wanted anything or anyone in his life, but he didn’t rush. Instead of going straight for Travis’ cock, James kissed him. He teased Travis’ lips with his tongue. They parted right away, so he deepened the kiss. He explored Travis’ mouth slowly, not touching anywhere else until Travis whimpered and tried to press closer.

Unable to refuse the unspoken plea, James stroked his fingertips along Travis’ chest and hips, still avoiding his straining erection. He kept up the gentle torture until his own arousal grew too strong to ignore. Finally, he took Travis’ cock in his hand.

Travis broke the kiss, panting. “Yes!”

James leaned up and reached over him, snagging the lube and a condom off the bedside table. He popped the lube open and coated two fingers. He pumped Travis’ dick with one hand while he found Travis’ hole with the other.

“Jamie. God, fuck me,” Travis moaned as James pushed the two fingers into his body.

Not wanting to stop what he was doing, James muttered, “Condom.”

Travis felt along the sheet for the foil packet and finally found it. He opened it quickly and twisted until he could roll the thin latex over James’ cock, now rock-hard and needy.

More than ready, James rolled Travis onto his back. Travis lifted his legs almost to his chest, his blue eyes glittering up at James. In his open position, Travis looked vulnerable, and beautiful enough to make James’ chest ache.

The feelings building inside him made James uncomfortable. The only thing he knew how to deal with was the desire. He sank into Travis’ body in one long, smooth glide. They both moaned at the pleasure of it.

From the first moment inside Travis, James knew he wouldn’t last long. It felt too good. He let himself fall into the sensations, each thrust into Travis’ tight, perfect heat sending shafts of pleasure through him.

Travis’ throaty sounds and cries of pleasure were an indication that he was as close to his release as James. He gripped Travis’ cock and stroked it in time with his thrusts, needing Travis to come. With just a few short strokes, Travis’ face contorted in ecstasy, and thick, hot semen gushed over James’ hand.

James' own orgasm wasn't far behind. He collapsed onto Travis, heart racing. His whole body felt like it was electrified.

They lay there in silence for a while. James drifted, enjoying the sensation of Travis' long, slender fingers combing through his hair. Eventually the cold stickiness of Travis' come and the need to deal with the condom made him move. He went to the bathroom to throw away the condom and bring a washcloth for them to clean up with.

After they were both clean and un-sticky, Travis drifted off to sleep, lying on his stomach next to James. Exhaustion tugged at James, but sleep wouldn't come. In the dim light, he could make out Travis' face, soft and peaceful, and the bright riot of color on his back. James traced a finger over one of the lines on the tattoo, careful not to wake Travis.

Something was happening to James. Something more than even a long, strange day and great sex could explain. He lay there tracing the lines on Travis' back for over an hour before he slept. The answer didn't come.

Chapter Fourteen

Sunrise over Waikiki beach was an incredible sight. Travis curled up in a chair on the balcony, watching the first rays of golden light pierce the clouds on the horizon. He rested his head on his knees, tired but not ready to go back to bed.

A few minutes earlier, he'd awakened with his head on James' chest, one of James' strong arms wrapped around him. His first instinct had been to snuggle in and go back to sleep. For some reason he hadn't. Instead, he'd gotten up and come out to the balcony.

Alone, he could let himself think about the mass of conflicting emotions filling him. The visit to the Arizona Memorial had been more affecting than he'd expected it to be. Thinking of all those men whose lives had been lost so unexpectedly had made him think of Curt. After all these years, the memories didn't make him as sad as they once had, but he knew they would always have a bittersweet tinge. For all he knew, they might have broken up by now if Curt hadn't died. There was no way to know, and he would always have that little bit of regret that he would never find out. He traced the top edge of his tattoo with his fingertips.

Far out on the horizon, Travis saw some surfers already out on the waves. Maybe Pete from yesterday afternoon was out there. At home, Pete would have been just his type—fun, hot, and outgoing. They'd have lasted a few weeks at most, but it would've been an enjoyable few weeks. Yesterday, though, he hadn't felt any attraction toward Pete at all. All he'd wanted was James.

He still wanted James, and not just for the sex. He liked waking up with him, and spending time with him. All the things they'd done had been great because they'd done them together. He was getting in a lot deeper than he'd intended when he thought up the idea of a vacation fling. Did he want something more? Should he back off? Travis didn't know.

No strings, no regrets. I am an idiot.

Travis let his head drop to his knees. Goose bumps spread over his skin, either from his sudden realization or from the cool breeze that kicked up. Several cold, stinging raindrops pelted him. Reluctantly, he stood and went back inside. The moment he shut the balcony door the rain started in earnest, pounding the balcony.

Chilled, tired, his mind whirling with conflicting, confusing thoughts, he padded back into the bedroom. He slid into bed as quietly as he could, not wanting to wake James.

"Travis? What're you doing?"

Eyes half open, voice husky with sleep, James was adorable. Travis smiled at him. “Nothing. Go back to sleep.”

James reached out and drew Travis into his arms. “Mmm, you’re cold.” His breathing evened out again as he went right back to sleep.

After about half an hour, Travis was finally able to shut down his thoughts and drift off.



Waking up for the second time that morning was a lot more pleasant, mainly because Travis awoke to the sensation of a hot, wet mouth closing over his dick. His eyes flew open. James was nowhere in sight, but he saw a large lump in the sheets about halfway down the bed.

He lifted the sheets. “I like the way you say good morning.”

James’ eyes sparkled up at him. Travis had a feeling James would be smiling if his mouth wasn’t busy. He reached down to tug at James’ soft, straight hair. “Hey. Turn around so I can play too.”

James pulled off his cock with a soft pop. “Good plan.” He maneuvered himself until his hard, bobbing erection was inches from Travis’ mouth. “How’s that?”

“Perfect.” Travis leaned forward to nuzzle along the crease of James’ thigh, teasing.

Retaliation was swift. James took Travis’ cock into his mouth again with one quick, deep move. At the same time, one of his fingertips found Travis’ hole and stroked over it in a feather-light touch.

Moaning, Travis gave up on teasing and got serious. He licked and sucked at James’ erection, running his tongue stud along the sensitive skin. James shuddered and doubled his own efforts, making Travis shudder as well.

Travis was close already, *much too close*. The way James worked his cock, like he was starved for Travis, brought him to the point of no return with embarrassing speed. Travis didn’t want to come alone. He sucked faster, adding flicks of his tongue to each stroke. James let out a low cry, muffled by Travis’ dick, and then pushed a finger into Travis’ ass.

Travis lost it. He thrust into James’ willing mouth with quick, ragged movements. It only took a few seconds before every muscle in his body tensed. Molten pleasure coursed through his veins as he came down James’ throat.

His orgasm seemed to spur James’ ecstasy. James gripped Travis’ hair with one hand and pushed into his mouth only a few more times before he came. Travis swallowed the thick, bittersweet fluid until James had nothing left to give.

They both fell back to the bed, panting. James' hand lay inches away from Travis' on the bed. After a minute, Travis gave in to temptation and curled his fingers around it. At first there was no response from the other man, but finally he squeezed Travis' hand.

Warm tendrils of something Travis didn't want to name unfurled in his chest.



The rain stopped just before eleven—perfect timing in Travis' mind, since they didn't get out of bed until after ten. By the time the rain tapered off and disappeared altogether, they had eaten breakfast and dressed.

Grabbing their wallets, Travis and James headed out to do some shopping. Travis had never liked shopping for himself, but he loved shopping for other people. The joy of finding the perfect gift for someone always made him happy. With several people to buy Christmas gifts for, Travis' day promised to be a good one.

James, on the other hand, seemed at loose ends. At each store they stopped in, James wandered around aimlessly, looking at various items but never buying. When he picked up a cat toy, a mouse wearing a Hawaiian shirt, and stared at it for a full thirty seconds, his expression blank, Travis understood.

Travis put his hand on James' arm. "You don't have anyone to buy Christmas gifts for, do you?"

James shrugged, and then shook his head. "No, not anymore. My parents are gone, no boyfriend. I used to buy Chester presents every year. Now I don't even have a cat to buy for. Isn't that pathetic?" He put the mouse back on the shelf.

"It's not pathetic at all." Travis' heart ached for James. He wanted to comfort James somehow, maybe invite him to spend Christmas with Travis' family, but with their no-strings deal he doubted the offer would be welcomed. Besides, he wasn't sure he could handle spending time with James once they got home. A clean break would probably be best. He didn't know what to say instead, so he just rubbed James' arm in silence.

Making a visible effort to shake off his sad thoughts, James smiled. "You've still got a ton of shopping to do, I bet. We'd better get going."

Travis let the subject drop. He followed James out the door and down the sidewalk to the next shop.



They returned to the resort in time for dinner, Travis weighted down with five heavy bags to James' one. Travis dozed off on the sofa after they ate, worn out from all the walking and shopping they'd done.

He awoke abruptly to the sound of the suite door opening. He sat up, blinking. A soft chuckle from near the door made him turn.

James stood in the entryway, smiling at him. "I see you finally decided to wake up."

Travis yawned and stretched. "I can't believe I fell asleep like that. Sorry."

"You were tired." James crossed the room, stopping next to the sofa. "You'll be glad for that nap tonight, I bet. I found something for us to do tonight, if you're interested."

Of course Travis was interested. "What?"

"There's a club downstairs. It opens at nine. I thought we could go check it out."

"Sounds good." Travis stood and stretched again, trying to wake up. "I'll go get dressed."

Together, they went into the bedroom to change. Travis put on his favorite pair of jeans. He liked the way they fit, snug but not too tight. He wasn't sure if the club had a dress code, so he picked a black button-up shirt with thin, diagonal red stripes. Dressed, he went into the bathroom to finish getting ready.

James joined him a few minutes later, wearing dark jeans and a white shirt. He picked up his toothbrush, squeezed a bit of toothpaste onto it, and brushed his teeth.

Travis looked at their reflections in the mirror, two very different men standing side by side. Even with the slight tan he'd gained over the past few days, and his relaxed expression, James still looked like an upper-class business type. Travis would bet any amount of money that James had never even considered sleeping with a guy like him until they'd been thrown together by a series of coincidences.

Fixing his hair while James brushed his teeth had an almost domestic feel to it, which should have freaked Travis out. It didn't. Instead, it was comfortable. That wasn't good. He shouldn't get used to this. He frowned at himself in the mirror.

James finished brushing his teeth and put his toothbrush away. He nudged Travis. "What are you frowning about? You look great."

"Nothing. I'm good." Travis pasted on his best grin. If he kept smiling long enough, maybe he would mean it.

Chapter Fifteen

At two a.m., they made their way from the club to the elevator. To James' surprise, he hadn't been bored. He wasn't much of a dancer, but Travis was. Thinking about the way Travis had moved on the dance floor made James hard all over again. He'd been in a state of perpetual arousal for most of the night.

Travis weaved a little as they reached the elevators. "Maybe that last Long Island iced tea wasn't such a good idea."

James laughed at him. "I told you so." He'd limited himself to only a few drinks. Travis would probably be sorry tomorrow. He looked at his watch. Later today, actually.

Rolling his eyes, Travis pushed the up button. The elevator doors opened immediately, and he stepped inside.

James followed. The doors closed, and he pushed the button for their floor. Travis stood against the wall, his eyes half closed and his gaze on James. The hot look kicked James' desire up another notch, and he smiled. "I hope you didn't have *too* much to drink." He stepped closer, until they were near enough to touch.

“Why?” Travis ran a teasing hand up James’ chest. “Did you have something in mind?”

James’ hand settled at Travis’ hip, fingertips stroking along the layers of cloth that separated them. “After the way you were dancing earlier, do you have to ask?”

Travis’ eyes fluttered closed. “Ask what? I can’t think when you’re touching me.”

Before James could respond, the elevator stopped. He stepped away from Travis as the door opened. Travis exited, still a bit unsteady on his feet, James right behind him.

The moment they entered the suite, Travis stripped off his shirt and let the garment drop to the floor. James followed him, smiling at the trail of clothing Travis left in his wake. When James reached the bedroom, Travis stood beside the bed. He paused to take in the sight of the other man’s slim, sleek body, naked and aroused.

Travis pushed his hair out of his eyes, which looked almost uncertain in the dim light. “Change your mind?”

“Definitely not.” James crossed the room to stand in front of Travis. “I just wanted to stop and look at you for a second.”

A shy little smile lit Travis’ face at his words. “I’m too skinny.”

“You’re sexy.” James’ voice lowered to a near-growl. “When you were dancing earlier, I wanted to push you up against a wall and fuck you right there in the club.”

Travis shivered. “God, Jamie. The things you say.”

James moved closer, leaning in to whisper. His lips brushed against the studded shell of Travis’ ear. “I could have bent you over, pushed your jeans down, and taken you in front of all those people.”

Travis moaned. “Take off your clothes and fuck me. Please.”

A sudden sense of heady power filled James. His cock throbbed. “Get on the bed.” He yanked off his shirt and toed off his shoes as Travis clambered onto the bed.

Travis got onto his hands and knees. “Hurry.”

Unzipping his jeans, James shoved them, and his boxers, down and stepped out of them. He climbed onto the bed with considerably more grace than Travis had shown. “Hold on to the headboard.”

Travis obeyed. James might have laughed at the white-knuckled grip of Travis’ hands on the headboard if he hadn’t looked so incredibly hot. The long, lean line of his back called to James. James leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss against Travis’ lower back, making him squirm.

“Don’t make me wait. Fuck me.”

Ignoring his own rock-hard, throbbing erection, James concentrated on Travis' pleasure. He kissed along the line of Travis' spine. When he reached the top of Travis' ass, he bit at one cheek. Travis let out a breathless laugh but didn't try to move away.

James nibbled and teased, interspersing quick little licks, kisses, and bites. Then he spread the taut, perfect globes of Travis' ass apart and licked a long line up from his balls. Travis arched toward him with a choked cry.

James didn't say a word. Instead, he teased the soft, puckered skin of Travis' hole with the tip of his tongue, reveling in the gasps and smothered cries coming from Travis. The sounds grew louder as he pushed his tongue past the first ring of muscle.

With just a few tiny thrusts, Travis' whole body trembled. "Stop! God, Jamie, stop. I don't want to come until you're inside me."

James practically lunged for the lube and condoms. He tore open the condom package and sheathed himself with fingers gone clumsy from desire. He poured some lube onto his fingers and put them at Travis' entrance, but Travis pulled away. "No, just fuck me. Make me feel it tomorrow."

The words made James want to come right then. He smoothed the lube onto his sheathed cock and pushed into Travis' body in one long, slow glide. Without stretching or much preparation, Travis was even tighter than usual. His ass

gripped James' erection like a vise. James had to stop and breathe for a few moments to get himself under control.

Travis must have grown tired of waiting, because he moved, fucking himself on James' cock. James hissed at the exquisite friction. "Travis."

"Hard and fast Jamie, I need it."

James felt the same way. He grasped Travis' slim hips and pumped into him, hard and fast. Everything disappeared except for Travis: the feel of his body gripping James' erection, the lithe beauty of his body, the way he chanted James' name softly under his breath, the scents of sex and sweat. Minutes blurred into each other, unnoticed. James kept moving, pounding into Travis' welcoming body.

Travis tensed and cried out, his ass clenching around James' cock. He'd come without a single touch to his dick. The sharp scent of semen, along with the tightening of Travis' channel, was irresistible. James' orgasm exploded through him. The pleasure seemed to go on and on as Travis' body continued to clench around him.

Then it was over, leaving him wrung out. He pulled out carefully and went into the bathroom to throw away the condom and get a washcloth to clean up.

Travis was still on his knees, clutching the headboard, when James returned, his body trembling and his head down. James went to him and rubbed a hand over his back. "Hey, you okay?"

“Yeah.” Travis’ blue gaze focused on him, unreadable. “Wow.”

James nodded. Wow was a good way to describe what had just happened. He eased Travis’ hands away from the headboard. “I don’t know about you, but I’m tired.”

“Me too.” Travis shifted onto his back. He reached out and took the washcloth from James, cleaning himself off with a few quick swipes of the damp cloth. When he finished, he tossed it toward the bathroom. “I think I’m still kinda drunk.”

James couldn’t help it, a quiet laugh slipped out at that. He rounded the bed and slid in behind Travis. As if drawn by magnets, his arm wrapped itself around Travis, who snuggled his back into James’ chest. They fit together like puzzle pieces.



James had expected to sleep in, but the clock read eight when he woke. During the night they had shifted, and Travis now lay facing him. The upper half of Travis’ face was mostly obscured by his hair. What James could see looked paler than usual. They didn’t have any real plans for their last full day at the resort, so James decided to let Travis sleep.

Slipping out of bed, he pulled on the first shirt and shorts he found and slipped his feet into sandals. He put his wallet into his pocket and headed downstairs.

His first stop was the gift shop for some aspirin. Travis would undoubtedly need some when he woke up. On the way to the counter to buy a small bottle of pills, a display caught his eye. Inside the glass case, a variety of unusual Hawaiian jewelry was divided into men's and women's styles.

A saleswoman approached. "Would you like to see something from the case, sir?"

He looked at the items. "What's that?" He pointed at a silvery bracelet with some kind of inlay.

The woman smiled and got it out of the case. She held it out to him. "This is a stainless steel cuff with Koa wood inlay. Koa wood is the largest tree native to Hawaii. The wood represents strength and bravery."

James traced a finger over the smooth wood. The cuff had a modern, masculine design that he could picture gracing a certain slim wrist. "How much?"

"This particular piece is one hundred and twenty-five dollars."

Without allowing himself to consider what he was doing, he spoke. "I'll take it. And I'd like it gift-wrapped, if possible."

“Certainly, sir.” The woman smiled and pulled out a sheet of thick, gold wrapping paper. She wrapped the bracelet box in a few quick moves and walked to the cash register.

On the way to the counter, James picked up a paperback copy of a new thriller and a couple of bottles of water. The gift shop employee bagged everything and subtracted the cost from the room credit, which he and Travis hadn’t used up.

“Thank you.” He took the bag and went back upstairs. He put the water in the refrigerator and called room service to have some breakfast sent up.

Travis still slept when James returned to the bedroom. He hid the gold-wrapped box in his suitcase and went back into the living room. Breakfast arrived a few minutes later. He drank some coffee and ate, saving a couple of plain bagels for Travis, who probably wouldn’t want anything heavy after last night.

James soon found himself bored. He didn’t want to watch television or go down to the beach by himself. At loose ends without Travis, he finally curled up in the armchair in the bedroom and tried to read the novel he’d bought.

For the first few minutes he almost succeeded, but the mystery couldn’t keep him from getting distracted. A tiny sigh from the bed drew his attention to Travis. The younger man had rolled onto his back. The sheet was tangled around his hips, leaving his chest exposed to James’ hungry gaze. The morning light painted his creamy skin and glinted off his nipple rings.

James watched Travis' chest rise and fall, a strange combination of arousal and tenderness welling up. He wanted to fuck the man blind, but at the same time he wanted to take care of him. Had he ever felt this way before? James couldn't remember, and that scared him. Today was their last day here. Tomorrow morning they'd be heading back home to go their separate ways. Travis had asked for no strings, and James wasn't about to ask him for more. A fun, sexy guy like Travis wouldn't be content with a boring guy like James anyway, and James' whole life had fallen apart on him only a few days ago. He couldn't jump into something new right now.

Travis shifted again, and his eyes half opened. "Ugh." He put an arm over his face. "What time is it?"

"Nine thirty." James put his book on the arm of the chair and stood. He approached the bed and sat on the edge. "How are you feeling?"

"Like someone is stomping on my head. In steel-toed boots." Travis moved his arm and peered up at James through barely opened eyelids.

Unable to resist, James smoothed Travis' hair off his face. He let the silky-soft strands sift through his fingers. "You want some aspirin? I went down to the gift shop and bought some earlier."

"You did?" Travis' lips turned up. "That would be great, thanks."

With a last, gentle stroke to Travis' hair, James stood and went to the living room to get the aspirin. He grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and the basket of bagels and took everything into the bedroom.

Travis sat up as he neared the bed. James handed him the water and two aspirin. He accepted the pills and downed them quickly. Putting the basket on the bedside table, James said, "If you want some breakfast I saved some plain bagels. I didn't think you'd be up for much more than that."

Travis touched his hand. "Thanks, Jamie. Really."

Ignoring the sudden lump in his throat, James smiled. "Don't mention it."

Chapter Sixteen

The pounding headache Travis had awakened with began to recede after aspirin, a whole bottle of water, and a bagel. By the time he ate the last bite, Travis felt close to human again.

He glanced across the room to James, who sat in the armchair reading a book, his forehead creased in concentration. James had been so sweet to him earlier. Travis couldn't believe the man had gone down to the gift shop to get aspirin for him. He'd nearly melted at the way James had stroked his hair and brought him things like he wanted to take care of him. Even now, James sat in the bedroom with him instead of going out and having fun.

If only James' behavior meant something more than what Travis knew—James was just a nice guy.

Stretching, Travis stood. Twinges throughout his body reminded him of all the dancing he'd done last night, and the incredible sex afterward. He needed a shower. And then they needed to do something fun and mindless that would distract him from his thoughts.

He padded into the bathroom naked. He could feel James' eyes on him the whole way, and it made him grin. The sight of his reflection in the mirror turned the grin into a grimace. Reddened eyes in a pale face peered back at him from underneath his tousled hair. Ugh. It was a wonder James hadn't run at the sight of him.

The moment he thought of James, the man appeared in the doorway. "What's wrong?"

"I look like hell."

James laughed, but it wasn't a cruel sound. "No you don't." He stood behind Travis and slipped his arms around Travis' waist. "You look hot."

Travis might have argued, but James nuzzled at his neck, distracting him. He closed his eyes. "I was going to take a shower, but now I think I'll make it a bath and try out the tub. You want to join me?"

"Mm, yeah. Definitely." James kissed Travis' neck and released him.

"Strip, then."

James laughed and obeyed.

While the tub filled, Travis brushed his teeth and tried to comb his hair. The wild strands weren't cooperating, so he gave up.

"Tub's full." James turned off the faucet and beckoned to Travis. "You first."

Travis crossed the room in a couple of strides and stepped into the bathtub, sighing. He couldn't remember the last time he'd taken a bath rather than a shower. He lowered himself down into the tub and sank down nearly to his neck.

"Feels good, huh?" James grinned down at him. "Make some room for me, Legs."

Travis scooted forward enough to allow James to get in behind him, and then leaned back onto James' chest. He closed his eyes to savor the warmth of the water and the firm strength of James' body behind him. "God, this feels good."

"Yeah, it does." James wrapped his arms around Travis and held him.

For several minutes they stayed that way. Travis was content to drift into a near-doze. James' lips brushing along the shell of his ear kept him from actually going to sleep. He shivered.

James chuckled. He trailed kisses down Travis' jaw and neck, and over to his shoulder. "When did you get your tattoo?"

"The day I turned eighteen. I'd sketched the design out a couple of months before, but I had to wait to get it." Travis tilted his head to give James better access, wondering if he should tell the whole story. He rarely talked about it, but he wanted to tell James.

James was silent for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was tentative. "You told me before that you got it as a reminder."

Travis took a deep breath. “Growing up, I was best friends with my neighbor. Curt was six months older than me, and in my grade at school, so we were inseparable for years. Even in junior high, when he got into sports and became really popular, he never ditched me. I wouldn’t have blamed him if he had. I was this skinny, lame emo-goth kid.”

James pulled him closer, as if he knew the story would get darker, but said nothing.

Travis let his head fall back onto James’ chest. “The day I turned sixteen, he came to my house and gave me a present. I opened it and said thanks, but he told me that wasn’t my real present. He said I had to close my eyes, so I did. And he kissed me.”

“Wow.”

He laughed quietly. “Yeah. I couldn’t believe it at first, but he was serious. We started dating right after that. We went everywhere together, including our senior prom. We even had plans to go to college together. A couple of weeks before graduation, Curt stopped to help somebody who’d been in a car accident, and a drunk driver came along and hit him.”

James sucked in a sharp breath. “God, Travis. That’s horrible.”

It had been; which was why Travis tried not to dwell on it. “Yeah. For a while I was pretty messed up. It took me a while to understand that even from

something like that, good things could happen. Our class pulled together and raised money for SADD, and a scholarship in Curt's name. I got the phoenix a couple months later."

Tracing the lines of the tattoo, James said, "It's a beautiful memorial."

"Thanks." After a moment of silence, Travis grimaced. "Sorry to bring you down."

James nuzzled his neck again. "You didn't. I'm glad you told me. I think maybe I've needed a reminder too, after all that's happened lately. There are good things all over the place if I look, like this trip. With you."

Aw.

James' sweet words went a long way toward lifting Travis' spirits. Then slick, soapy hands ran up his arms and chest, and he shook off the lingering sadness talking about Curt always caused. He opened his eyes to watch James' hands running up and down his chest, trailing little soap bubbles in their wake. His nipples hardened in anticipation of a touch.

Instead one hand closed over his stiffening cock, and he yelped.

That made James laugh outright. "You should have guessed I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off you."

Rather than answering, Travis turned his head to kiss James. The angle was awkward, but he needed the contact. They kissed deeply while James' hand

worked Travis' now rock-hard dick. Travis' hips moved of their own accord, pushing into James' grip.

It wasn't long before Travis came, whimpering into James' mouth. Without breaking the kiss, he twisted until he could reach James' cock and return the favor. After only a few strokes, James stiffened. His erection pulsed, spurting over Travis' hand.

"Damn," James mumbled against Travis' lips.

Travis leaned back to catch his breath. Damn was right. James always seemed to know what he needed. Travis had never been this hot for anyone, not even when he was younger and horny all the time.

Giving James up was really going to suck.



Lying on his towel on the beach an hour later, Travis watched James body boarding in the surf. James had finally mastered the art of catching waves, and it looked like he was having a lot of fun. Travis figured he would join James in a while, but for now he was content to watch.

A shadow fell on him, and he looked up. He squinted against the sun for a moment before figuring out who stood beside him. "Hi, Pete."

Pete crouched down beside him, grinning. "Travis. What's up, man?"

Travis shrugged. “Not much. How was the party?”

“Awesome. You should’ve come.”

“Oh, I had plenty of fun anyway.” Travis gave Pete his most devilish grin. “Believe me.”

Eyes narrowing slightly, Pete leaned forward. “At first I thought you and that Jamie guy were just friends, but you guys are together, aren’t you?”

“Not exactly.” Travis had to look away from Pete’s suddenly too-perceptive gaze.

“But you want to be.”

Sighing, Travis gave up and turned his focus back to Pete. “It doesn’t matter what I want. It’s complicated.”

Pete laughed. “Life’s complicated, man. I was going to give you and Jamie another chance to come out with me and a few friends tonight, but I can see you’re going to be busy.”

James, who had ridden another wave in and was at the shore, caught sight of them and began walking in their direction. He had his expressionless face on.

“You only regret the things you don’t do, or so I’ve heard. Good luck, dude.” With those odd words, Pete stood and ambled off.

Travis peered after him for a moment, wondering what he’d meant. Had that been a weird way of encouraging him to go for James?

He didn't get to think about it for long, because James sat on the sand beside him. "What did that guy want?"

Travis fought a smile at James' annoyed tone. The man almost sounded jealous. "Nothing. He was just saying hi."

"Uh huh."

The doubtful tone made Travis laugh. "Come on, grumpy. Let's go ride some waves."

"Okay." James stood, brushing at the sand on his butt. "Race you." He took off before Travis could even get up.

Travis rolled his eyes, grabbed his board, and followed. Some physical activity would take his mind off Pete's words.

Chapter Seventeen

“Ow. That hurts.” James flinched as Travis touched his sunburned shoulders.

Travis let out a long-suffering sigh. “It’s not that bad, don’t be such a baby. You should have reapplied your sunscreen.”

“I know. I forgot.” James brushed against the bathroom doorframe and winced. “Ow!”

“How about I put some aloe on it for you?”

At Travis’ suggestion, James nodded. His shoulders hadn’t felt too bad when they’d first come upstairs. After they sat watching television for a while, though, the tops of his shoulders had started hurting. As soon as he’d taken off his shirt it had been obvious why they hurt. Aloe would make them feel a lot better. He probably could have reached most of the sunburned areas himself, but he liked that Travis would offer to do it. Any excuse to be touched by Travis was good.

“Go sit on the bed. I’ll be there in a minute.”

James did as Travis asked and sat in the center of the bed. Travis came in a few minutes later, carrying a tube of aloe vera gel. He climbed up on the bed and

sat behind James. James heard the quiet snap of the tube opening, and then gentle fingers coated in cool, soothing gel touched his shoulders. Travis smoothed the aloe along his shoulders, collarbone, and upper back. The way Travis touched him, so careful not to hurt, warmed him.

“Does that feel any better?” Travis blew on the gel, sending a wave of blessed cold over the burned areas.

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Good. I’ll put some more on before we go to bed.”

James could hear the smile in Travis’ voice. He caught Travis’ hand and kissed the back of it. “You’re being nicer than I deserve. It’s my own fault I got burned.”

Travis let out a quiet laugh. “And it was my own fault I had a headache this morning.”

“True.” But James liked taking care of Travis. Travis’ mix of tough and vulnerable got to James, made him want to protect the younger man. After hearing the full story on Travis’ tattoo, that protectiveness had been amplified. He’d wanted to chase Travis’ sadness away and replace it with new, good memories of himself. That was ridiculous, given their bargain. No strings, no regrets, and in Travis’ case, probably no looking back.

James wouldn't be able to say the same. Not anymore. Things had gone much further than he'd expected them to, and now he didn't know how to go back, or if it was possible to do so. Hiding his sudden discomfort, he stood and grinned. "Now we're even, I guess."

"How about you go order dinner while I wash up, and we'll be even."

"Deal." James headed back into the living room to call room service. In honor of their last night, he ordered steaks and the Chocolate Fantasy cake.

By the time dinner arrived, James and Travis had both changed into jeans and t-shirts. James had to be careful in order to avoid touching his sunburn, but he managed.

He had the room service worker set their dinner up for them out on the balcony. Travis joined James a few minutes later.

Travis raised his eyebrow when he lifted the silver lid and saw what was underneath. "Steaks?" He opened the other, small silver dome and licked his lips. "And you got the cake. Yum. What's the occasion?"

Despite Travis' joking tone, James felt his face heating a little. They'd had the cake the first night they slept together, and it only seemed right to have it again tonight. "I just thought since it was our last night and all..."

Travis' lips quirked up into a half-smile. "Symmetry."

"Right." Symmetry and sentimentality, but he wasn't going to admit that.

They ate in silence for a while, watching the sun set. The air grew cooler, and a breeze ruffled Travis' hair. Travis' face was uncharacteristically pensive, without his usual smile.

James wondered what he was thinking. Did he wish they could stay longer? Would he be glad to get home, and back to his life? He had family, and a cat, to go home to. With his personality, James would bet Travis had a ton of friends waiting for him to come home. Maybe a few were guys who wanted to be much more. They'd been here for only a few days and that surfer, Pete, had wanted Travis. Travis was the kind of person other people wanted to be around, and that included James.

James had never possessed that particular trait himself, unfortunately. He'd had friends and boyfriends, but no one who'd loved him enough to stay with him for years. None of his boyfriends would wear a permanent symbol like a tattoo to remember him by if he'd died during their relationship, he was certain. Hell, his family had washed their hands of him when he'd come out to them, and they were supposed to love him. His parents had died before he came out so he couldn't be sure how they would have reacted; he doubted anyone had truly loved him in his whole life. Maybe no one ever would. What a depressing thought.

Stop being such a drama queen. James chastised himself, determined to shake off his self-pity and focus on the present. He may not have found a great love like in

the movies, but he was in paradise with a hot guy who, for some odd reason, wanted to sleep with him. He'd take the good things he had and be grateful for them. There would be plenty of time for dwelling on the bad in a couple of days.

When they'd eaten everything except for the cake, Travis gathered up the dishes and put them under the dome. He lifted the small container of cake and smiled. "Let's take this inside."

James took the dishes inside and set them on the coffee table. One of the hotel staff would be by to collect the plates tomorrow. He was much more interested in the cake, and Travis.

Sitting on the sofa next to each other, James and Travis shared the cake. Travis had the fork, so he fed James little bites. Between bites, they kissed. The chocolate flavor of the cake was delicious, but it was nothing compared to the taste of Travis.

James couldn't get enough. He was almost glad when the cake was gone. Kissing Travis was better than any dessert he'd ever had. He wanted to savor the experience, to store it up for remembering later.

Their clothes came off slowly. James pulled off Travis' shirt first, and then Travis carefully removed James'. Travis left a trail of moist kisses down James' chest until he came to the waistband of James' shorts.

The button and zipper posed no challenge for Travis' dexterous fingers. James' erection popped out, making Travis laugh. "Someone's happy to see me."

Not waiting for a reply, Travis took James' cock into his mouth. James moaned and let his head drop back, overwhelmed. Travis had a very talented mouth, a fact he proved over and over as he bobbed over James' cock. It wasn't just the heat, or the wetness, or the friction. It wasn't even the tongue stud. It was the fact that this was *Travis* sucking him that put James on the edge so quickly. He buried his fingers in Travis' hair and let go, fucking Travis' mouth with shallow thrusts until he came in a rush.

Needing to give something back to Travis, James dropped to his knees and opened Travis' shorts. Travis' long, slender cock had never looked better. He relished Travis' soft cries as he licked and sucked the shaft while teasing Travis' velvety balls with his fingertips. He drank down Travis' pleasure like it was the finest wine.

Afterward, they brushed their teeth side by side and Travis put some more aloe on James' shoulders. They crawled into bed together, as they had on the previous nights, and spooned up together.

Everything was the same as it had been the nights before, yet it wasn't.

They lay there for a long time. James could tell Travis was awake by his breathing, but neither of them spoke. What was there to say? If he tried to say

anything, it would come out sounding trite, or worse, pathetic. They'd both known the score when they started this thing—this vacation fling, or whatever it was—and he could hardly expect to change the rules now.

Instead, he kissed Travis' shoulder softly, and held him close. He doubted Travis would understand what he was trying to say. He wasn't even sure what he would have meant if he said the words.

Travis finally fell asleep around midnight. James closed his eyes and listened to Travis' breathing, trying to memorize the sound and feel of him.

Chapter Eighteen

“Travis. It’s time to get up.”

Travis groaned, reluctant to leave the great dream he’d been having. He and James had been back home, making love in his bed. It wasn’t a grand or exotic dream, but he figured it was about as likely to happen as the one he’d had years ago about fucking Jake Gyllenhaal in Paris.

“Come on, sleepyhead.” The bed dipped as James sat on the edge. He pushed Travis’ hair out of his eyes. “We have to eat breakfast and pack.”

Sighing, Travis opened his eyes. “I don’t want to get up.”

James smiled. “I know. I didn’t want to either, but we have a lot to do before we leave.”

The thought of leaving made Travis’ stomach clench. Words and emotion clogged his throat, but he didn’t try to speak. Instead, he wound his arms around James and pulled him down to the mattress.

“What—”

He smashed his lips to James’, not wanting to hear that they didn’t have time for this. A few tense seconds passed before James let out a choked sound and

kissed him back. Travis poured everything he had into the kiss, twining his tongue around James' and exploring his mouth.

James jerked away to strip off his shirt, shorts, and boxers and slid under the sheet with Travis. Their chests pressed together as James devoured Travis' mouth. Travis surrendered, trying to say with his body what he couldn't say in words.

Not breaking the kiss, James managed to snag the lube and a condom from the bedside table. Travis was impatient enough to snatch the foil packet out of James' hand. He tore it open and rolled the latex over James' cock while two of James' slick fingers breached his opening.

He moaned. James' fingers felt good, but they weren't enough. "Please, Jamie."

James removed his fingers and moved over Travis. Travis welcomed the slight burn as James' cock slid into him, inch by inch. Fully seated, James paused, eyes closed. Travis kept his open, needing to see everything.

Finally James moved. He set a slow pace, pushing in as deep as he could and drawing back until he almost pulled out. It was sweet torture, but Travis didn't try to speed him up.

Unbidden, Travis' hand reached up to stroke James' face. James smiled at him, hazel eyes lighting. A lump rose in Travis' throat, and his eyes stung. To cover up his sudden emotion, he braced himself on an elbow and leaned up for a kiss.

Despite the awkward position, Travis' orgasm built quickly. The dual sensations of James' cock filling him and the heat of James' mouth against his were too much to resist. His erection pulsed, pleasure pouring through him as he came, painting his and James' stomachs with thick, warm semen.

His ass clenched around James' cock. James thrust a few more times and collapsed onto Travis, breaking the kiss. Travis wrapped his arms around James and held on.

James rolled off him after a couple of minutes. "Sorry, I didn't mean to crush you."

"You weren't." Travis turned onto his side, not caring that he was still a mess. Next to him, James lay tousled and flushed, and achingly beautiful. A few hours from now he would be gone, out of Travis' life.

No. The original plan might have been no strings, no regrets, but plans could be changed. Travis wanted strings. It would be a risk, but he wanted something to tie himself and James together. The connection was already there, on his side anyway. Maybe James felt something for him, too. He opened his mouth to speak.

James beat him to the punch. “This trip has been exactly what I needed. I think I might remember how to have fun now. Thanks for reminding me.” He laughed. “I might even have another no-strings fling. I never knew how much fun they could be.”

Somehow Travis kept his expression neutral. “You’re welcome.”

Oblivious to Travis’ less-than-enthusiastic reply, James rolled out of bed. “I’m going to go clean up and get packing, unless you want to use the bathroom first?”

“You go ahead.”

James strode out of the room. Travis stared at the ceiling, struggling to compose himself. He had his answer now. James felt nothing for him, except for gratitude and attraction. Good thing he hadn’t said what he wanted to.

He put an arm over his eyes, wishing he could block out the pain as easily.



Breakfast and the shuttle ride to the airport were quiet. Neither of them seemed to have much to say. At the airport, James read his book and Travis pretended to sleep. He couldn’t think of anything else to do.

The wait for their flight to Los Angeles felt like a thousand years, but at last they were called to board. James fell asleep only a few minutes in. Travis watched him sleep, his heart aching.

For years after Curt, Travis had been what he jokingly referred to as a serial monogamist. He dated one guy at a time, but the relationships never lasted. A few weeks, or months, later they'd break up and he'd move on to the next guy. He knew he picked the wrong men—guys who were too much like him, or weren't into commitment, or were better friends than lovers.

With his track record, he'd been stupid to think he could make anything out of a relationship that had started as a vacation fling. So James was sweet, caring, and funny? He had also just lost his job and been dumped. Of course he'd want to have some fun before settling back into his life. And it wasn't like a guy like James would be interested in a tattoo artist, anyway. He probably preferred professional men, like bankers or lawyers. Sleeping with Travis had been nothing more than a little walk on the wild side for him.

Travis had been an idiot to let his heart get involved. When it was just hot sex, everything had been fine. As soon as he'd started wanting more, he'd ruined everything. Just like always.



Worn down by the weight of his emotions and from putting on a happy front at the LA airport, Travis slept through the flight home to St. Louis. He woke just in time to hear that they were about to land. Gathering his things gave him an excuse not to speak.

Strained silence enveloped them as they disembarked from the plane and headed down to baggage claim. Each minute spent waiting for his bag was torture to Travis. All he wanted to do was escape before he blurted out his feelings. He already knew James didn't feel the same way for him.

Finally, the conveyer belt on the baggage carousel started to run with a strained whine. Bags appeared from the chute. Travis' was one of the first to come out. He hefted his duffel, torn by his emotions. He wanted to get the hell out of dodge and go home to lick his wounds, but at the same time he hated to leave James. Could he be any more pathetic? He glanced over at James, who gazed back at him solemnly.

Forcing a smile, Travis said, "I guess this is it."

"Yeah. I guess so."

"Thanks for everything, Jamie." Before he could stop himself, Travis pressed his lips to James' in a gentle kiss. "Bye."

Without giving James a chance to reply, he turned and fled.



Being alone for the first time in a week was strange. Travis wished he'd stopped by to get Snickers from his parents' house, but he didn't feel like answering the questions they would ask about his trip. Needing something to do, he decided to unpack.

He sorted through souvenirs, gifts for his family, toiletries, and dirty clothes on autopilot. At first he barely noticed the small, square box he pulled from one of the side pockets of his bag. The gold paper caught his eye as he moved to set it aside.

Surprised, he muttered, "What the hell? This isn't mine." The little tag on the box read "Travis," though. How had it gotten into his bag?

James. Who else could have put it there?

He stared at the box for a long time, not sure if he wanted to open it. In the end, his curiosity wouldn't let him put the box aside. He removed the thick gold paper carefully and lifted the lid.

Nestled in the box sat a bracelet: a brushed stainless steel cuff with some kind of wooden inlay. He'd never seen anything like it.

Confused, he ran a fingertip over the smooth, satiny wood. When had James bought him a gift, and why?

Chapter Nineteen

Exhausted and restless was not a good combination. James couldn't remember the last time he'd been this tired, but he couldn't sleep. His sense of time was out of whack after being in another time zone for a week. Annoyed with his fruitless tossing and turning, he climbed out of bed. Maybe if he unpacked he would wear himself out enough to sleep.

Unfortunately, unpacking made things worse. The few souvenirs he'd indulged in seemed to taunt him. At the bottom of his suitcase, protected by two thin layers of cardboard, he discovered one of the photos Travis had insisted on buying at the Polynesian Cultural Center. He and Travis stood side by side, flanked by the PCC employees, Travis' arm slung around his shoulder. James had smiled dutifully, but Travis beamed like he was just plain happy with life.

An ache grew in James' chest as he looked at the picture. One thing he'd told Travis this morning had been true: Travis had reminded him how to have fun, and not just during sex. Letting go of Travis had been one of the hardest things he'd ever had to do. Before they'd left the resort, all he'd wanted to do was cling to Travis, to beg the man to stay with him after they returned home. He knew he couldn't do that. Travis had wanted a no-strings fling, and James had agreed. He

couldn't expect a guy as sexy, vibrant, and fun as Travis to want to stick with a boring guy like him. What reason could Travis possibly have to want him? He didn't even have a job.

To keep himself from getting pathetic and clingy right before they had to be on a plane together for hours, James had made a flippant little speech thanking Travis. When he'd said he might go off and have another no-strings fling, he'd felt almost nauseous. The idea wasn't at all appealing, but neither was making a fool of himself. Only proximity and luck had brought them together in the first place. James would have to be content with memories.

He set the picture aside and crawled back into bed. The cold mattress stretched like an ocean, far too big for him alone. He curled up in the center and huddled under the blankets, wishing for sleep.



The next few days were busy ones for James. He made countless phone calls and sent off resumes. During the daylight hours he managed to put thoughts of Travis aside. It was only at night that he found himself vulnerable. His dreams were filled with silky skin and soft touches, and he woke each morning aroused and alone.

Focusing on his job hunt might have been good in theory, but in practice it made for frustrating days. Most businesses seemed reluctant to hire anyone before the holidays. He scheduled several interviews for the first week in January, which left him three weeks to stress out.

By the time Saturday rolled around, James was going stir-crazy. The weather had been cold, gloomy, and icy, a rude awakening after the gorgeous weather in Hawaii. He felt like he'd been trapped in his apartment for months rather than less than a week.

Saturday evening, he put on his best jeans and a nice shirt and went to his favorite bar. He liked the place because it was small, had a mostly gay clientele, and the drinks were good, if a little pricey. As soon as he walked in the door, he recognized the bartender, who greeted him with a smile. He sat down at the bar and ordered a beer.

Someone sat on the barstool next to his. "I haven't seen you here before."

James turned to the newcomer, a man in his mid to late thirties. The man had short, light brown hair and a nice smile. "I only come here once or twice a month."

"Me too. We must be alternating weeks." The guy grinned and held out his hand. "I'm Stan."

James shook Stan's hand. "I'm James."

“So, James, what do you do?”

“Right now I’m looking for a job in IT. This isn’t the best time, though.”

James shrugged, trying not to let his discouragement show.

“I bet.”

They talked for an hour. Stan should have been exactly what James was looking for. The handsome, older environmental lawyer was genuinely nice. No matter how many times he told himself that, though, James didn’t feel a spark between them. After the physical and emotional connection he’d experienced with Travis, James didn’t want to settle for less, or lead anyone on. He sighed.

Stan stopped talking about sports and leaned against the bar. “What really brings you out tonight? You seem distracted.”

“I’m sorry.” James gave him a wry smile. “I came out to be distracted from something else, but instead I can’t seem to shake it off.”

“Let me guess. It’s a guy.”

James laughed. “Am I that transparent?”

Stan smiled. “I’ve been there enough myself to see the signs. What was it? Breakup? Fight?”

How to answer that? James shrugged. “Neither. It’s complicated.”

“Matters of the heart usually are.” Stan sipped his drink for a moment, as if thinking. “I’m about to say something very stupid considering I was going to try to

ask you out, but have you tried talking things through with him? Maybe things aren't as bad as you think."

The last time James had talked to Travis he'd said something incredibly stupid, and untrue. Even if the man had any feelings for him, he'd probably stomped them to bits with his comment about running off to have another fling. He sighed again. "I wouldn't know what to say. He and I are way too different, anyway."

A raised eyebrow greeted his answer. "So you're going to give up?"

To phrase it that way made giving Travis up seem like the coward's way out. James hadn't given Travis a chance to reject him, because he'd rejected Travis first. He'd thought that was what Travis wanted. Remembering the way Travis had looked at him at the airport, and the kiss he'd given James before he left, made James wonder. He frowned. "I don't want to. I'm just scared, I guess."

Stan laughed. "What's the worst that could happen?"

Stan was right. James had already lost Travis. He had nothing left to lose. He grinned. "You're right. Thanks, I needed to hear that."

The other man inclined his head. "You're welcome. And if it doesn't work out, maybe we'll meet again one of these days."



Finding Travis was easier said than done. On the way home from the bar, James realized he had no way to get in touch with the man. They hadn't exchanged phone numbers or anything. All he had to go on was Travis' name and occupation.

His first thought, the phone book, was a bust. There were no listings for a Travis Barton, or even a T. Barton. He didn't want to call every Barton in the phone book. In the end, he did an internet search for tattoo parlors in St. Louis with an artist named Travis. He got two hits.

On Monday he called both places. A woman answered the phone at the first one right away. "Inked. Can I help you?"

Unprepared, he stammered out, "Does Travis Barton work there?"

"No. Travis Jackson does. Is that who you were looking for?"

"No, I guess I've got the wrong place. Thanks." He hung up.

Taking a deep breath, he dialed the second number.

A deep-voiced man answered on the third ring. "Quill and Ink Tattoo and Body Piercings."

James swallowed against a sudden attack of nerves. "Is Travis Barton working?"

"Yeah, he's doing a tat right now. You want me to have him call you back?"

He hadn't really planned out what his next move would be after finding Travis. He panicked and made something up off the top of his head. "No, I was just

wondering if I could get in to talk to him sometime this week.” He paused, and finally managed, “About a tattoo?”

“Hold on, I’ll see what he’s got open. We’ve been hella busy, guess everyone’s getting art for the holidays. Plus we’ve got some people out on vacation, so he’s gotta do all the piercings.” James heard rustling sounds, and then the man spoke again. “He’s pretty booked up this week. I can get you in for a consult at nine thirty on Wednesday night.”

“I can be there then.”

“Cool. What’s your name, man?”

“JC.” He told himself he wasn’t really lying. His name was James Christopher, but nobody had called him JC in years.

“All right, I’ve got you down. See you Wednesday at nine thirty, JC.”

James hung up the phone, battling another surge of nerves. In two days, he’d see Travis again. He only hoped the man would be happy to see him.

Chapter Twenty

“Make sure you follow aftercare instructions, okay? And good luck with the new boyfriend.” Travis waved at the young woman whose tattoo he’d finished a few minutes earlier. She had broken up with the guy whose name was stamped on her lower back, and wanted Travis to cover the name with the name of her new boyfriend. He’d convinced her to get a pretty floral design instead.

Tattoos lasted a lot longer than love. He’d learned that lesson firsthand.

Tired, and stiff from leaning over to see what he was doing, Travis stretched. Everyone had gone home except for himself and Ven, who ran the counter. He was ready to go home too, but he still had more than half an hour. A glance at the little schedule Ven had printed out and taped to his station showed he had an appointment at nine thirty. Ven had scrawled, “JC—consult, tat.” At least a consultation would be an easy way to end a long day.

The whole week had been long. He’d been working nonstop since the day after he got back from the trip, and sleep had been hard to come by. Sleeping alone shouldn’t be hard after only a few days of sleeping with someone else, but his bed felt empty and lonely without James. He hadn’t managed a full night’s sleep once

since he got back, which made him angry at himself for being such a baby about the whole thing.

Ven approached his station, carrying a bottle of water. He held it out to Travis. "You look tired, man."

Travis took the water and twisted off the top. A long swallow refreshed him somewhat. "I am."

Ven laughed. "And you just got back from vacation. In Hawaii! You should be relaxed. What the hell happened out there?"

"Nothing. I got some sun, saw some sights. It was fun."

Travis' casual tone didn't fool Ven. The big man rubbed a hand over his bald, tattooed head. "I don't buy it. You've been acting weird ever since you got back."

To escape his friend's penetrating gaze, Travis busied himself organizing his supplies. "I told you I won the trip and I was going with a friend. That wasn't exactly true."

"Okay." Ven drew out the word. "So what really happened?"

"I went with a guy I met at the liquor store. We both went for the same six-pack. I let him have it, and then I loaned him ten bucks. He won the trip because of the beer, so he invited me to come with him." Travis shrugged.

"And this is bad how? Did the guy turn out to be crazy or something?" Ven leaned in to peer at him, his expression a mix of curious and concerned. Concern

looked pretty funny on a big, tattooed guy with more piercings on his face than Travis had on his whole body.

“No.” Travis sighed and stopped pretending to organize. “He was perfect.”

Ven’s dark eyes widened. “Oh, no. You fell for him, didn’t you?”

Travis nodded. “I know it’s stupid. We were only together a week, and he was so not my type.”

“Are you sure it’s over? I mean, you met him at the liquor store so he has to live around here, right?”

Somebody had been watching romantic comedies again. Rolling his eyes at the other man’s hopeful expression, Travis turned back to his supplies. “It’s over. He told me so right before we left the resort.”

“Ouch. That sucks, Trav.” The bell over the door interrupted whatever Ven planned to say next. He slapped Travis on the back and headed for the counter.

Travis finished cleaning up and looked at the clock on the back wall. Nine thirty. His consult should be showing up any minute now, and then it would be time to close. He wondered idly if “JC” was a man or a woman.

“Trav! Your nine-thirty’s here!” Ven called from the front.

Travis turned to face the newcomer, a greeting on his lips. The words died before he could get them out. He stared in shock as James crossed the floor of the shop to stand in front of him.

James put his hands in his pockets and gave Travis a crooked smile. “Hey, Travis.”

For a long moment Travis couldn’t believe what he was seeing. How had James found him, and why? They’d said all that needed to be said back in Hawaii. Or at least James had. “James. What are you doing here?”

Smile fading, James raked a hand through his hair. His face was pale and drawn, and he had faint circles under his eyes. “I’m here to see you.”

What possible reason could James have for wanting to see him? A stupid little part of him leaped with joy and hope. Mostly to crush his own stupid, traitor heart, Travis frowned. He kept his voice cool and unconcerned. “Well, now you’ve seen me.”

An awkward silence fell over them. James seemed to be searching for something to say. There were a million things Travis wanted to say, or ask, or do.

He was torn between throwing himself into James’ arms and yelling at him to get out. Either of those things would make him look like an idiot, so he did nothing.

With a sigh, James met his eyes. “I’m screwing this up. I’m sorry.”

Butterflies filled Travis’ stomach. “What are you trying to do, exactly?” He reached up to rub at his shoulder, not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

Chapter Twenty-One

The nervousness James had experienced after he called the tattoo shop was nothing compared to the stark terror he felt now, standing in front of Travis. He'd gone over and over what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it, but all his planned-out words had flown from his head the second he saw Travis. His tongue tied itself up in knots, and he stood there like an idiot while Travis watched him with wariness in his eyes.

The thought that he might be the reason for that look, with his callous words before they left Hawaii, made James feel even worse. Of course, he reminded himself, Travis could be regarding him this way because he hadn't wanted to see James again. His stomach lurched at the thought.

Then Travis reached up to rub his shoulder in his standard nervous gesture, drawing James' attention to his wrist. Hope filled James' heart. "You're wearing the bracelet."

Travis covered it with his other hand in an almost defensive move. "Yes."

All of his beating around the bush wasn't doing anything but upsetting Travis. James took a deep breath. "You probably didn't want to see me again, and I'm sorry for showing up here. This was the only way I knew to find you."

Travis' voice dropped to a near-whisper. "Why?"

It was time to step out on a limb. "Because I couldn't keep my end of the bargain."

Forehead creased in confusion, Travis stared at him. "What bargain?"

James stared right back. "We said no strings, no regrets. That was what I thought I wanted at first, but not anymore. Every single day since we got back I've regretted letting you go at the airport, and the stupid things I said to you that last morning."

Travis chewed his lower lip in silence for several seconds before he spoke. "Okay, so you have regrets, but what about the other part of the deal? What kind of strings do you want?"

Was Travis' question a good sign or a bad one? James wasn't sure. He could only tell the truth and hope for the best. "I want them all. I want to be with you. Exclusively. I want to meet your cat, and maybe even your hippie parents."

Travis watched him without speaking. His eyes were unreadable. The moment stretched out for what felt like an eternity. James' chest tightened. He'd waited too long, or maybe he never had a chance in the first place. He lowered his head, ready to apologize and leave.

Then Travis smiled and stepped toward him. "I want those things too. I really, really do."

James reached out and drew Travis into his arms, relief and joy washing over him. Their lips met in a kiss that was sweet and almost chaste, at first. Travis let out a tiny whimper and parted his lips, allowing James' tongue to sweep inside.

God, he'd missed this. James fell into the kiss, savoring the wet heat and relearning Travis' taste. He would have been content to kiss Travis forever if the sound of a throat clearing hadn't interrupted. They pulled apart and turned to look toward the sound.

"This your vacation guy, Trav?"

James' face heated at the sight of the big, bald guy from the front counter, who stood grinning at them.

Travis smiled, that joyful, beaming expression James had missed so much. "Yep. I guess I was wrong earlier. Ven, meet Jamie."

"Nice to meet you, Jamie. Or should I say JC?" The big man laughed, a booming sound. "Why don't you two go on home, and I'll close up."

"Thanks. I owe you one." Travis grabbed James' hand and tugged him toward the door. "Should we go to my place? We can get started on a couple of those things you wanted to do."

James squeezed his hand. "Sounds perfect."



After following Travis to his apartment and meeting Snickers, who was more adorable in person than he had been in Travis' photos, James found himself lying on Travis' bed, naked and strangely nervous. It wasn't like they'd never had sex before, but somehow this felt different. This would be the first time they were really together, both physically and emotionally, and it was kind of scary.

Travis stripped off his clothing and climbed into bed next to James. "I'm a little nervous. Is that dumb?"

So he wasn't the only one. James smiled, relieved. "No, it's not dumb at all. I'm nervous too. I want it to be perfect for you."

"It will be." Travis kissed him, a soft, open-mouthed contact that drew James in. "Fuck, I've missed this."

James laughed against Travis' mouth and kissed him again, running his hands over Travis' back and arms. "Me too."

Travis nipped at James' lower lip. "I've missed a lot of things." As if to demonstrate, he licked and teased his way down James' neck and chest. When he reached James' bobbing erection, he met James' eyes and licked the head.

"God!" James had to struggle not to shut his eyes in ecstasy as Travis sucked and licked the head of his cock. "I forgot how incredible that tongue stud of yours feels."

Travis gave him a few more teasing swipes of his tongue, before he spoke again. "I want you. Inside me. Now."

What little blood was left in his brain rushed south at those words. "Condoms?"

Travis leaned over and rummaged in the bedside table. He located the condom and handed it to James. "Sit up against the headboard, and put this on."

James did as he was told. He watched, desire building, as Travis prepared himself, pushing lubed fingers into his own hole. The sight was nearly hot enough to make him come on its own.

Travis straddled James and lowered himself onto his waiting cock in a slow, steady motion.

James closed his eyes and clenched his teeth at the incredible feeling of being inside Travis again. They both moaned.

"Jamie. Look at me."

James opened his eyes and met Travis' gaze. Those bright blue eyes held so many emotions, and he knew his own eyes must as well. He touched Travis' face, unable to find the words to express how he felt.

Travis smiled. He lifted his body until their connection was nearly lost, and lowered himself in a long, slow grind.

After that, James lost himself in the sensations. He lost count of how many times Travis moved on him, the tight friction building with each stroke. He needed more, so he pulled Travis in and fused their mouths together. The touch sent Travis over the edge, and thick, hot semen spurted between them.

When James' orgasm came, it wasn't the wild explosion he might have expected after a week apart, but a slow, deep wave of pleasure that seemed to go on forever. Travis collapsed against him and he held him close, feeling his heart beat and listening to his quiet breathing.

James nuzzled Travis' hair out of the way and kissed his ear, smiling at the feel of the cold, metal studs there. "To think I might have gone my whole life without meeting you if I hadn't gotten fired and decided that called for some beer."

Travis laughed. "And to think I thought you were so straitlaced when we met."

James laughed too. Then he met Travis' eyes. "This is the real thing, isn't it?"

Travis gave him a soft kiss, and nodded. "Strings and all."



The clock read twelve when they settled down in bed to sleep—Christmas Eve. A warm and drowsy Travis snuggled up against James, back to chest. "Night, Jamie. I'm glad you came to find me tonight."

“Me too.” James smiled and closed his eyes. He might not have a job yet, but Travis had been right all along. Good things could come from anything, and he had living proof curled up in his arms.

The End

www.cassandragold.com

Author Bio

By day, Cassandra Gold is a middle school teacher who spends most of her time trying to get sixth and seventh graders to read. On nights and weekends, she can usually be found reading and writing stories about men falling in love. To find out more about Cassandra and her writing, go to her website at www.cassandragold.com.

Red Rose Publishing

Fantasies series

New Year's Eve

Independence Day

Thanksgiving

Fool for Love

Stray

Cobblestone Press

In a Wolf's Eyes

Double or Nothing,

Outcasts: Saving Ciaran

Torquere Press

Hit by Love

Alpha

Omega (with Beth Wylde),

The Morning After (with Beth Wylde)

Freya's Bower

Special Delivery

Total-e-Bound

One Night Stand (in the Friction anthology)

Phaze

Trust (in the Broadly Bound Anthology)

The Carpenter and the Fairy