

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

ELLORA'S CAVE

# *Quickies*

*Naughty Nuptials*

*Claiming*

*Kate*

Zannie Adams

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Claiming Kate

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# *CLAIMING KATE*

**Zannie Adams**

## Chapter One

In just over a week, Kate Appleton would marry Mason Cooper.

They'd been engaged for almost a year, living together for six months. Because the construction on their new house had been delayed, they'd moved into the guesthouse on his parents' estate.

For months now, Kate had been planning the wedding, spending more time on that than on her job as a legal assistant. She'd wanted to get married since she was five years old and, because of the Cooper family connections, her wedding was going to be an elaborate, fairytale affair.

Everything was primed for this to be the happiest time of her life.

It wasn't.

Lately, she'd been spending more time with – and getting more attention from – her fiancé's cousin than from Mason himself.

At the moment, Bryce Cooper had her backed up against a wall in the guesthouse. One of his hands was planted next to her shoulder.

He was a handsome man – dark hair, high cheekbones, full lips. He looked like a model on a romance novel cover, larger than life and almost unnatural.

Kate wasn't really attracted to Bryce. His looks were too overblown for her taste. But she wasn't pushing him away at the moment – even though her fiancé could walk in at any moment.

Maybe she was letting Bryce get so close *because* Mason might walk in.

It had been a long time since any man had acted like he couldn't keep his hands off Kate. She missed the feeling. At one point, she'd believed Mason found her irresistibly sexy but she wasn't so sure anymore.

She wasn't actually going to *do* anything with Bryce—in fact, the idea of having sex with him made her giggle—but she wasn't pushing him away.

"Your hair is gorgeous," he murmured, stroking her honey-brown hair and then caressing downward until he was stroking something other than hair.

Kate wasn't remotely affected by the feel of his hand grazing her chest. But she had to restrain a snicker at such a brazen move. Adjusting to protect her breasts with one arm, she raised an eyebrow. "Uh, thank you. You realize Mason will be back any time now?"

"All the more reason to take advantage of his absence." Bryce's dark eyelashes seemed to thicken as he narrowed his eyes—in what she supposed was his sensual expression. "You have the most beautiful skin I've ever seen."

"It's one of my only good features."

It was certainly her *best* feature. Her skin—all over her body—was a nearly perfect ivory and she'd always been rather proud of it, since she wasn't beautiful or unusual in any other way.

He leaned closer, so close she could feel his breath against her cheek. "I beg to differ." His eyes focused on her breasts—on the outline of her nipples visible through her white tank top.

"Are those the best lines you have?" She was starting to get a nervous feeling in the pit of her stomach. It wasn't from lust or excitement. Rather, it was a jittery sensation caused by expecting Mason's appearance. "Do they work on the impressionable females you usually hit on?"

Bryce looked momentarily nonplused at her blunt question. But then he smirked. "I've never had any complaints before."

"I bet you haven't." Although she hadn't done anything wrong, she was starting to feel a little guilty. Just because she wanted to be this close to Mason—and hadn't been for a while—didn't mean she should amuse herself with Bryce's ineffective attempts at flirtation. "But would you mind backing up a little? I'd rather—"

Bryce didn't back up. "You'd rather what?"

"I'd rather you leave, as a matter of fact," came a familiar male voice from behind them. "We only have enough dinner for two."

Kate jumped at the sound of Mason's voice, even though she'd known to expect him. She tried to push Bryce away from her and he finally consented to step back, although he didn't withdraw as much as he should have after being caught leaning into his cousin's fiancée.

Kate peered over his shoulder at Mason Cooper, the man she was going to marry a week from today. He was as tall as Bryce but not so beefy. His muscle tone, like his personality, was smoothly efficient and competent. At the moment, he looked tired. He was dressed in his usual after-work clothes—slightly wrinkled khakis and a worn t-shirt. His thick brown hair was rumpled and he was carrying a bag of the Italian takeout he'd gone to get them for dinner.

He was staring at Kate and Bryce with slightly lifted eyebrows.

For just a moment, Kate thought he was going to get angry. The set of his broad shoulders looked tense and his steel-gray eyes looked hard.

The jittery tension in Kate's gut intensified and she held her breath. She hadn't deliberately set this scene up but now that Mason had caught them, she was hoping he would react.

She *wanted* him to get angry. To get jealous. To act possessive, defensive, even petty.

She wanted his control to snap.

She needed to know Mason still wanted her that much.

But he didn't break into an angry outburst. His eyes just flickered over Kate questioningly, from her long hair to her bare feet. Then he looked back at Bryce—who was doing his best to appear nonchalant, although Kate knew he'd always been intimidated by his older and far more accomplished cousin.

"I'm serious," Mason continued, "I'm hungry and there's not enough food. You aren't planning to stick around, are you?"

"I'll go. I can take a hint." Bryce gave Kate a smoldering look. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"We're trying to work out the landscaping on the house," Kate explained, seeing Mason's inquiring look. Bryce owned a landscaping company and Kate and Mason had hired him to do the work on their new house. "That's why he came over."

Mason nodded absentmindedly and set the bags on the table. "By the way," he mentioned, just as Bryce was about to walk out, "I moved your car. It's back by the garage. You'd left your keys in the ignition."

Bryce scowled. "Why did you move it? Now I have to walk a mile to get to it."

The Cooper estate was huge and sprawling and most of the parking was in front of the main house.

"You were parked in Kate's spot and I needed to park her car there."

Kate started to question this statement but Bryce beat her to it. His interest, however, was on a different part of Mason's comment. "The spot beneath the maple tree was empty. Why didn't you park her car there?"

"I parked there last night and this morning my car was covered with bird crap. I wasn't going to leave Kate's car there to be crapped on tonight."

Finally Kate couldn't hold back anymore. "Why did you take my car in the first place?"

"One of your tires looked low." Mason was already pulling containers of food out of the bag. "So I took it by the station, since I was going out anyway."

Kate hadn't noticed her tire being low and her shoulders stiffened in resentment. "You could have asked me before you made off with my car. What if I needed it?"

Bryce was looking on with interest and he likely would have stayed to witness the impending argument, but Mason had been serious about not wanting company.

Without a word, he shouldered his cousin out the front door and locked the door behind him.

"I knew you weren't going anywhere," Mason said, moving back to the table and continuing the conversation, as if he hadn't just thrown his cousin out of the house. "You're already in your pajamas."

Kate glanced down at herself. She was wearing pink flannel pants, a tank and a hoodie sweatshirt. For no logical reason, she felt insulted. "I was tired. I had a long day. I worked on the damned wedding with your mother for hours. And, anyway, that's no reason to take my car without asking. I could have gone out like this."

Mason just rolled his eyes and bit into a breadstick. "You're not even wearing a bra. Some women might be able to get away with the braless look. Not you."

Kate sucked in an outraged breath. "What is that supposed to mean? Are you saying my boobs are saggy?"

This was the way it had been between them for weeks. Snipping and quibbling and getting defensive over the silliest things. They were both stressed—Kate from wedding plans and Mason from department politics at the university. They hadn't gone out on a date for a couple of months and they hadn't had sex since they'd moved into the guesthouse three weeks ago.

Kate was starting to wonder why they were even getting married.

Mason certainly wasn't acting like he wanted to.

He gave her an exasperated look and went over to stare into the refrigerator. "Don't be absurd. You know you have great boobs."

Kate put her hands on her hips and glared at his back. "Then what was that crack about a bra supposed to mean?"

"It didn't have an underlying meaning. Just that you wouldn't go out in public without a bra. At least, you never have before." He muttered something else but it was under his breath and she couldn't make out the words.



It sounded snide though. “What?” she snapped.

“Nothing.”

“*What?*”

He let out an sigh she could hear from the other side of the room. “It was nothing.”

“Would you shut the damned refrigerator!”

Mason finally grabbed a half-empty bottle of red wine and swung the refrigerator door closed. After pouring out two glasses, he returned to his breadstick. “What are we arguing about anyway?”

Kate had to think back but she soon remembered the source of her irritation. “You took my car without asking.”

“Sorry about that.” He carried his linguini into the living room and sank down onto the floor, leaning back against the sofa. “I’ll make sure to ask you next time. I didn’t think you’d mind.”

His apology sounded sincere and he said no more as he started to eat.

Kate stood simmering for a few more seconds but then she relaxed too. It was ridiculous to have these arguments about nothing. They were both stressed but they could do better than this.

*She* could do better than this.

She picked up the glass of wine Mason had poured for her and the baked ziti he’d gone out to get her—even though he was just as tired as she was. Then she joined him on the floor.

Instead of leaning against the big chair, as she normally did, she sat next to Mason. She leaned against him, draping an arm across his belly. “Sorry I was snippy,” she murmured, kissing the side of his jaw and then nuzzling his ear. He smelled warm and masculine—very Mason-like. “I guess I’ve been prickly lately.”

Mason relaxed beside her and pulled her against him more snugly. He needed a haircut and his brown hair was falling over his forehead in the adorable way it had done for as long as she'd known him.

She'd known him for twenty of the thirty years she'd been alive.

They'd sat next to each other all through fourth grade and they'd been best friends ever since.

"Me too," he admitted, although Kate figured he was just being generous. He hadn't been particularly prickly lately. Distant and absentminded but not prickly.

She kissed him just beside his ear, tasting the salty bite of his skin. "Thank you for going to get dinner. And thank you for checking on my tire."

"You're welcome." He smiled at her and a familiar warmth filled Kate's belly—an absolute trust and security she only felt around Mason.

They ate in pleasant silence, broken only when Mason dropped a mushroom on his t-shirt. Kate giggled and dabbed at the spot with her napkin.

Then she giggled even more when Mason frowned at her for mocking him.

As Mason finished off his wine, he glanced over at her. "You mentioned problems with the wedding plans today?"

Kate thought back to what she'd said earlier. "Not problems. It's just getting to be a lot of work and your mom obsesses about such nitpicky details."

"Is she becoming a problem?" he asked slowly, carefully.

Kate swallowed hard. She was heartily sick of Mason's mother. She was a nice woman and meant well. But living with her—even in the relative privacy of the guesthouse—was not ideal. Mrs. Cooper had gotten far too involved in planning what was supposed to be Kate's wedding.

But Kate wasn't going to add another source of tension between them. "She's fine. I'm just getting tired of talking about flowers, menus, seating charts and music. It's all blown up out of control."

“We could have just eloped.”

He spoke the words so casually, so offhandedly, that Kate experienced a surge of resentment. “I always wanted a simple wedding. It was your family who wanted the big one.”

More specifically, it was his mother.

Something odd flickered in Mason’s gray eyes but it disappeared so quickly she couldn’t identify it. He just shrugged. “It will be over in a week. Let me know if you need me to talk to my mother.”

And that was it. He’d dealt with the issue—the subject that had been making Kate crazy for the last few months—in a couple of seconds.

For the zillionth time, Kate wished Mason weren’t so matter-of-fact and controlled about everything. She wanted to see him get mad or throw a fit. Wanted to know he was as human as she was.

She wanted to see him let go.

There didn’t appear to be much chance of it happening at the moment. When she finished eating, Kate got up to go to the bathroom. She stared in the mirror for a moment, considering whether she should try to put on something sexier.

She wanted to have sex tonight but she didn’t want to throw herself at Mason if he wasn’t in the mood. She *really* didn’t want a pity fuck.

She thought she looked cute enough. Her figure had always been good—curvier than fashion dictated but men had never complained. And her hair hung down in a sleek straight fall to the middle of her back, the honey color matching her eyes.

The flannel pants weren’t her sexiest wardrobe choice but they were comfortable and the tank top revealed the lines of her breasts. So instead of changing clothes, she just took off the sweatshirt, baring a clear expanse of skin along her arms, neck and shoulders.

Deciding this would have to do to seduce her fiancé, she returned to the living room. Mason had shown her more attention this evening than he had lately so maybe he was starting to get horny too.

She hoped so. Three weeks was a really long time.

Mason was sitting in the same position she'd left him in, legs bent up, hair over his forehead, a spot of sauce on his shirt.

But now he'd put his glasses on and had a notebook in his lap.

He was evidently planning to work this evening.

Again.

With a pang of disappointment, Kate went to get the bestseller she'd been reading for the last few days. She'd been reading a lot lately, since there wasn't anything else to do in the evenings.

She wondered if other engaged couples were like this. All she and Mason did was argue and sit around. Surely it wasn't normal.

Maybe it was a sign they shouldn't get married.

Kate still wanted to marry Mason. More than anything.

But she wanted to marry a man who wanted her, who needed her, who felt passionately about her.

They'd been friends most of their lives. But maybe they'd been wrong to take it even further.

Sixteen months ago they'd been watching TV when Mason had kissed her out of the blue. They'd kept kissing—carried away by a wave of desire and intimacy that had swallowed them without warning.

They'd made love for the first time that night. And the following morning, instead of the awkward tension she would have expected after having sex with her best friend, they'd both been filled with a giddy excitement and the certainty that this was where their friendship had always been headed.

They'd had sex again that morning. And then again in the evening. And then the next evening. And the next. Until they were living together. Engaged.

Soon to be married.

But maybe the lust had been temporary—at least on Mason's part. Maybe he felt about her now as the friend he'd always been.

Maybe everyone was right when they'd warned her that falling in love with a friend was never a good idea.

Kate still loved him. Still lusted after him.

But a slow dread had been building up—in her chest, in her gut—telling her they were acting more like friends than like lovers.

Should she marry Mason, even if he wasn't crazy about her? If he didn't look at her and want to rip her clothes off? If he didn't even care that he'd just caught his cousin groping her?

He glanced up when she curled in the big chair with her book. She saw him note the absence of her hoodie, his gray eyes scanning over her bare skin and the heavy swell of her breasts through the thin top.

But then his focus returned to the notebook on his lap.

"What are you doing?" she asked, feeling the need to draw his attention again.

"Work."

She frowned, immediately prickly again. "What work?"

"Research," he explained, his gaze meeting hers matter-of-factly. "Do you want me to explain it?"

It was a serious question, although it might have sounded rude to someone else. Mason was a mathematics professor at the prestigious state university and most of his research was far beyond Kate's feeble math skills.

Mason had always been smart. Really smart. In high school, he'd been a little on the nerdy side. He hadn't been a cluelessly embarrassing geek but he'd never been one of

the popular guys—football or soccer players—whom Kate had always dated. For years, she'd never dreamed he could be a romantic possibility.

But Mason was now confident, sexy and successful and most of those other guys weren't.

When they'd gone to their ten-year high school reunion a couple years ago, Kate had been so proud of him. They hadn't even been dating then but Kate had attached herself possessively to his arm, glaring at any woman who dared to approach.

A lot of women had tried to approach him.

Another man would have gloated to all of his former classmates who had looked down on him in high school. Not Mason. He wasn't a saint. It just never occurred to him that he was now so much better than everyone else.

Kate shook her head, her thoughts returning to their conversation. "No. It's not worth the trouble."

Mason nodded agreeably and went back to his pencil and notebook.

Kate pretended to read and fiddled with the button on her flannel pants.

Evidently, equations and abstract mathematics were more compelling companions than she was.

Maybe he was regretting the turn in their relationship.

Maybe he secretly wanted his freedom back. She knew he could have any woman he wanted. Before they'd gotten together, the single women in town—from ages eighteen to forty—had been throwing themselves at him.

Maybe Kate should have realized all along how lucky she was to have him. Maybe she should have worked harder to be sexy and alluring.

Maybe he was hoping she would dump him so he wouldn't have to hurt her.

Maybe they should have left well enough alone. If they'd never become a couple, she wouldn't be paralyzed by these insecurities.

And she wouldn't be at risk of having her heart broken.

Why didn't Mason want to have sex with her? He hadn't made a move on her for weeks.

As she brooded endlessly, her tension grew so high she accidentally snapped the button off her pants.

It flew out of her hand and onto the hardwood floor, rolling halfway across the room and then under a bookcase.

Mason put down his notebook, automatically ready to retrieve it for her.

"I'll get it," she told him. She knelt on the floor in front of the bookcase and reached into the inch of space between the bottom shelf and the floor.

When she didn't feel the button, she lowered her head and shoulders to the floor to peer into the dark space.

The button, of course, had rolled all the way against the wall.

Her fingers could slide under the shelf but the heel of her hand didn't comfortably fit into the small space. She groaned and tried to force her hand in, adjusting her shoulders so she could see and reach at the same time.

When she finally felt the button with the tip of her longest finger, she was hit with the awareness of how she must look.

She was on her knees, her head to the floor, her ass in the air—the most ungainly, unattractive position imaginable.

So much for looking sexy this evening.

Maybe Mason was working and hadn't noticed her.

But when she drew the button out of its hiding place and straightened up, she saw that Mason was watching her.

"Find it?" His voice was kind of thick and she could see a muscle twitching in his cheek.

He must be laughing at her, trying to repress his hilarity out of pure decency.

"Yes." She sprawled out in a heap on the floor in front of bookcase, absently rubbing the back of her hand, which had scraped against the bottom of the bookcase.

As she did so, the button dropped out of her hand again, rolling its way toward Mason now.

"Fuck!" Her cheeks burned in embarrassment and exasperation. Why couldn't she be one of those graceful, enticing women who never made such fools of themselves?

Giving up any pretense of dignity, she scuttled after the button before it rolled under something else.

She caught it a few feet from Mason, slamming her hand down to trap it with a silly expression of victory. "Gotcha!"

Now she was on her hands and knees but at least this time she was facing Mason. The straps of her tank top had fallen over her shoulders and her hair fell over her face.

When she lifted her eyes, she saw Mason was biting his lower lip.

Evidently his hilarity now knew no bounds.

Deciding it was silly to take this absurdity too seriously, Kate chuckled. "Damned button. Thought it could make an escape."

"Indeed." His voice was still thick and his face more flushed than usual. From suppressed amusement, she assumed. He arched an eyebrow at her. "It was intent on making a getaway. But who am I to complain, having been treated to such a show?"

Kate *knew* he'd been laughing at her.

She gave him a good-natured scowl. "I thought you were working."

He cleared his throat and managed to tear his eyes away from where they'd been lingering on the ungainly sprawl of her body. "Right."

She hauled herself up and sat back down on the big chair. She peered suspiciously at Mason and decided, from the remaining tension in his shoulders, that he was still doing his best not to laugh.



She supposed it showed the kindness at the core of his nature that he was trying not to howl his head off at her clumsy display.

Although she would have preferred him to have been overwhelmed with desire, sweep her off her feet and carry her to bed to make passionate love to her, his reaction to this whole incident was very Mason-like.

*He* was very Mason-like. Especially in his glasses. He never wore them when he was trying to be sexy but Kate secretly found him irresistible in them.

A wave of tenderness washed over her as she watched him. She loved him. She wanted him so much. She couldn't give him up.

She just wished their relationship hadn't fallen back into this casual dynamic.

More than once, she'd considered just telling him, letting him know her concerns. But then, being Mason, he would go way out of his way to make her feel loved and cherished – if only out of pity.

And she would never be sure he even meant it.

After almost an hour, she put down her book. "I guess I'll go to bed." She paused before completing the thought, hoping he'd take the hesitance as a hint.

Surely he would want to have sex with her tonight.

He glanced up from his work. "All right."

He watched her, just as she was watching him. But she couldn't see anything like heat or interest in his gaze.

He was calm and matter-of-fact. Like he always was.

After a long moment, she let out the breath she'd been holding, feeling a crushing wave of disappointment. "I'll be in my room."

There were two bedrooms in the guesthouse and they were staying in different rooms. Mason's mother was old-fashioned. Although she must know they'd been having sex for months – they'd been sharing an apartment, after all – she preferred not to see any concrete proof of carnal relations between unmarried persons.

So they'd respected her preferences and kept separate rooms. They could, of course, sleep together whenever they wanted without Mason's mother being the wiser. And they often had, even in the last three weeks.

They just hadn't had sex.

And apparently they weren't having sex tonight either.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate brushed her teeth, washed her face and got into bed to wait. Maybe Mason would join her in bed eventually.

If he just made the smallest of moves, showed the slightest bit of interest, she would fill in the gaps and make the rest of the advances.

But if he didn't even act like he wanted her, she wasn't confident enough to jump him.

No matter how much she wanted to.

At about eleven-thirty, she heard him moving in the main room—putting dishes in the sink, checking to see if the doors were locked and then pausing, it seemed, in the hallway outside her room.

She held her breath, tensing up under the covers.

Then drooped again as she heard him moving to his room and closing the door quietly behind him.

She lay in bed in the dark and thought about Mason. Imagined his coming into her room, hauling her up into a kiss and then fucking the daylights out of her.

She imagined it so vividly that soon she was aroused and even more frustrated.

This was ridiculous. They were about to get married. Why the hell shouldn't she have sex with him?

So, before she could talk herself out of it, she got up and padded barefoot out of her room. Maybe she would just crawl into bed with him. If he didn't make a move, she

could just sleep with him. That way, if he wasn't interested, she wouldn't have the humiliation of being rejected by her future husband.

She opened the door to his room without knocking, in case he was asleep.

He probably was. He usually went straight to sleep, while it always took her much longer.

It was so dark in the room after the dim light of the hall that she couldn't see her hand in front of her face. She scuffled blindly toward the bed, holding her hands out in front of her in an instinctive attempt to feel her way forward.

Her eyes adjusted slowly and could eventually make out the dark mass of the bed and even the outline of Mason's body.

She took one step too many, however and knocked her shin against the bed frame.

"Shit," she hissed, bringing up her right leg as the shock of pain hit her brain.

Mason rolled over. She couldn't make out his face but she tried to imagine what he must be thinking – his fiancée sneaking up on him in the dark like this.

She was still balanced on one leg when Mason made a wordless, guttural sound.

Then, before she knew what was happening, he had reached out and pulled her into bed with him.

She didn't resist. Couldn't have resisted, even if she'd wanted to. She was off balance from standing on one leg.

Feeling a swell of relief at his welcome, Kate opened her mouth to explain her presence.

But before she could get any words out Mason had rolled them both over so she was lying on her back. His weight on top of her was solid, warm and heavy and his face was so close she could feel his breath.

He gazed at her with silent intensity, something so hot and needy in his expression she could sense it in the dark.

Then he tangled his fingers in her hair, lifting her head up as he lowered his mouth into an urgent kiss.

Kate's arms wound around him, squeezing him in an embrace of matching intensity. She opened her lips beneath the invasion of his tongue, moaning deep in her throat as she squirmed to generate friction between their bodies wherever she could.

She was flushed all over and breathing quickly through her nose when he finally tore his mouth away. But her gasp of relief transformed into a gasp of surprised pleasure as his mouth descended to her neck, his lips sucking hard against her fluttering pulse.

Her hands grasped greedily at his bare back but she tried to soften her touch into a caress. She stroked the lean muscles and smooth planes of his shoulders and back, loving how strong and hot and solid he felt beneath her fingers.

Her hands slipped lower, to the waistband of his boxers. She edged her fingers under the fabric, pushing them down as she tried to reach the tight muscles of his ass.

But Mason moved lower on her body before she could reach, his mouth closing around one of her breasts. He sucked on one nipple, teasing it with his tongue through the thin cotton of her top.

Kate gasped again as she felt the corresponding tug between her legs. Her arousal was aching now – so strong it actually hurt.

She raised her hands until she was pulling on his shoulders, trying to bring him higher into a better position to ease the ache at her center.

He resisted, suckling and breathing loudly around her breast. Every flick of his tongue sent new sensations shooting down to her arousal and she writhed and arched up as her hands flew above her head to clutch the headboard.

He hummed against the damp cotton between his mouth and her flesh, one of his hands sliding down the side of her body until he was cupping her bottom. He used his grip and the weight of his body to hold her still as she wriggled frantically.

“Ah!” she gasped, wondering if she was going to come just from his mouthing her breast. She was afraid if she let go of the headboard, she might shatter completely.

He hummed again, the vibrations causing her to arch up and hook her legs around his thighs.

Then she felt his hand slip from her bottom to the space between her thighs. He palmed her groin and he must have felt how hot she was, even through the flannel of her pajamas.

She ground herself against his hand, exhaling in shaky relief as the pressure eased a little of her need.

Then his hand was gone. She mewed in disappointment and frustration, trying to pull him up higher over her body again.

This time, he moved at her urging, propping himself above her and then bending his elbows to kiss her again.

She clung to him, wanting him so much it felt like she could swallow him whole. He smelled like Mason, the warm, male scent heightened by the heat of his body and his urgency. The weight of his body on hers was a burden she never wanted to lose.

As they kissed he started to pull down her flannel pants and panties. She tried to help him by bending her legs and trying to kick them off. When one of her legs got tangled in the folds of fabric, she huffed in exasperation and reached down to yank them off her foot by force.

In the meantime Mason rid himself of his boxers and she spread her legs for him, pulling him into position between them.

He wasted time by slipping his hand down to finger her, checking to see if she was ready.

Her spine arched in pleasure when he stroked open her intimate folds, sliding his fingertips along the hot swollen flesh before sinking two fingers into her wet, pliant channel.

He grunted as he pumped his fingers, an oddly primitive sound that shot right to her pussy.

Her thighs tightened around him instinctively as she whimpered, her hips bucking up in response to his caress.

He didn't remove his hand as quickly as she'd expected. He kept up the intimate massage, causing her to whimper and buck up even more.

Soon her whimpers transformed to wordless pleas as the pleasure threatened to drive her crazy.

She let go of the headboard, which she'd been clinging to again, and reached to grab him low on the back.

She clawed at his ass and was rewarded when he pulled back his hand and braced himself on one elbow above her.

Reaching to the front of his body, she found his cock and something unclenched in her chest as she felt how hard and hot it was. He did want her after all. At least, one part of his body did. She stroked him, thrilling when he sucked in a quick breath in response.

She didn't have the time or leisure to fondle and tease him as much as she'd like. Instead, she tried to guide him into position. He reached down with his free hand to help her, lining up the tip of his cock at her entrance as she spread her thighs farther apart.

She cried out softly as he pitched his hips forward, pushing the hard length of his erection into her. Her wet passage yielded easily to the penetration.

Kate bent up her knees, drawing him in even deeper and she heard him grunt again. He was breathing heavily above her—the texture of his urgent panting matching her own.

Then he adjusted until his forearms were folded beneath her shoulders, holding her in a kind of embrace. She wrapped her arms around him and squirmed, the tight pressure of his cock inside her only fueling her desperate need.

He began to thrust then, responding to the demands of her bucking hips. He started slowly and evenly, his cock sliding slickly in her wet channel with sounds of wet suction. But his steady rhythm didn't last.

Kate squeezed him with her arms, her thighs and her inner muscles, huffing out eager sounds of pleasure and frustration. Mason's face tightened with effort and he jerked his head to the side instead of devouring her with his gaze, as he'd been doing before.

He was mid-stroke when Kate's frantically needy hands lowered again to his ass, her fingernails digging into the firm flesh there. He grunted and fell out of rhythm, driving into her in a short sequence of fast, clumsy thrusts.

The unexpected friction felt so good that Kate choked out, "Ah, ah, ah!" Her head tossed against the pillow and her eyes closed.

Then Mason jerked to a sudden halt, his cock still buried inside her. He breathed in ragged gasps through his nose and his body was so hot it burned her wherever they touched.

They were touching everywhere.

Kate understood he was having trouble keeping control—probably from going without sex for so long. But she was quickly approaching climax and she couldn't be patient.

She wanted to come. Wanted to make love to him. Wanted to see him lose control.

Wanted to know he really needed her. In every way.

She pumped her pelvis, causing lush friction as his cock moved inside her from the jerking of her body. She squeezed as hard as she could around the tight penetration, trying to silently urge him to move.

He rasped out an inarticulate noise—so desperate and primal she thought she might come just from the sound of it. Then he started to thrust again, no longer steady and controlled. His thrusts were hard, fast and uneven and his face lowered to the crook of her neck until he was panting against her throat.

More of his weight was resting on her now and it felt so good she wanted to melt into a puddle beneath him. Her nipples were chafing against his chest and she could feel his hair against her chin, his knotted muscles beneath her hands, the hair on his thighs against the smooth skin on hers.

She rocked beneath him, trying to get friction for her clit from the base of his cock, his pubic bone, anything.

Despite his own urgency, Mason must have sensed her need. He angled his hips so she got some hard pressure on her throbbing clit.

She could feel him try to slow down, try to sustain his control. His whole body was so tight it was shaking and he was now sucking down large gulps of air. She could both hear and feel his panting against the pulse in her neck.

She didn't want him to control himself. She wanted him to let go.

She wanted him to *need* to let go.

The speed of her frantic undulation accelerated until she was sweating and her chest felt like it might explode. But she was rewarded when she heard him make a guttural sound of desperation and then release the control he'd been striving for.

He drove into her fast and hard. She could feel his ass rise and fall in quick succession beneath her hands. He was huffing now in time with his rhythm and she knew it wouldn't be long before he came.

With that knowledge, her orgasm came hard and unexpectedly.

One minute she was rocking, pumping, trying to match his motion.



And the next minute she was slammed with waves of intense pleasure, the spiraling sensations starting at her center and pulsing out to overwhelm her whole body.

She bit her lip hard to keep from screaming in shocked pleasure but the involuntary sounds came out anyway, in rasps, mews and whimpers through her nose, as she shook through the duration of her climax. Her body convulsed beneath Mason's weight, her channel clamping down on his cock, pulling him into climax himself.

He made one more rasping sound—one that sounded like he was baring his teeth against her neck. Then he froze, his body tightened like a coil.

His release was hard and visceral. He reared up on straightened arms, his pelvis jerking clumsily against hers.

Her eyes were adjusted to the dark enough now that she saw his face change as she came, the tension transforming into a wash of pleasure and relief.

Her thighs were tight around him as she felt him come inside her. She loved the feel of it with a possessive neediness. Loved the kind of intimacy it implied.

And she loved how he collapsed over her afterwards, all of his weight suddenly pushing her into the mattress.

She clung to him as tightly as he was clinging to her. His body was still scorching but it was relaxed now, the hard, lean lines softening the way they only did after sex.

She loved him so much. And maybe this was all they'd needed to remind them both of why they were together.

Maybe he wasn't getting tired of her after all. Maybe he wasn't as matter-of-fact and cool about her as he usually acted.

She was just starting to get uncomfortable under his hot, sweaty heaviness when he raised his head from her neck. Her skin was wet from the moisture of his mouth.

He looked down on her and she was sure he was about to tell her he loved her.

That was all she needed to hear. It was all she needed for her silly insecurities to fade away completely.

She waited for it, her heart as full as it had ever been.

Instead of speaking, he kissed her. The kiss was as soft as his cock, still sheathed inside her, was becoming.

He pulled his face away from hers. "Thank you."

Kate blinked at him.

Had he just said "thank you"? *Thank you?*

After they'd had what she'd thought was loving, urgent, needy sex?

He'd *thanked* her—as if she'd just done him a favor?

"You're welcome," she managed to force out, since that was the only way she knew to respond to a "thank you".

But the pressure of dread that had been lurking in her belly and chest for the last few weeks rose with a surge into her throat. Tightened into unreleased sobs.

Starting to panic and not wanting him to see—since obviously this hadn't meant what she'd thought it meant—Kate squirmed beneath him, this time her movements obviously a request for release.

Mason didn't resist. He rolled off her, his cock easily sliding out of her slippery channel.

Kate rolled over onto her side, facing away from Mason.

What the hell was happening here? They were supposed to be as close, as happy, as romantic as two people could be. They were getting married in a week.

And instead everything was falling apart.

Was Mason even in love with her anymore?

She swallowed over the insistent sobs and hugged her arms to her chest. Then she felt Mason roll over until he was spooning her from behind.

He pushed her hair aside and kissed the back of her neck, draping his arm around her middle. His body was relaxed behind her. And his breathing had become slow and heavy.

He was already almost asleep.

While Kate had to struggle not to cry.

She lasted a minute, breathing with forced slowness and keeping her eyes wide open.

But finally her emotions caught up to her resolve and tears burned in her eyes.

She crawled out from under his arm and then out of bed.

Mason made a sleepy, questioning grunt.

"I'm hot. I'm going to sleep in my bedroom," she muttered, not bothering to offer a better explanation.

At this point, she didn't care what Mason thought. She just needed to get out.

She made it to her room before the silent sobs ripped from her throat.

She wasn't surprised when Mason didn't follow and didn't ask if anything was wrong.

## **Chapter Two**

Kate slept in late the following morning and Mason was gone when she got up. He'd left her a note, explaining he'd gone into his office at the university.

Since he worked in academia, he didn't always keep normal hours. His schedule was more flexible than it would have been in a business setting but there was always something he could be working on – even during semester breaks.

Kate stared at the scrawled note on the table for a long time, her throat aching with emotion. It was no big deal. He always worked some on the weekends.

But today the note stood out to her as a sign, a symbol of all her panicked insecurities about the wedding and their relationship.

She ate breakfast and took a shower, determined to be a mature adult and not break down and cry her eyes out because Mason had decided to go into work this morning.

Then she went into town to check on her wedding dress. After the most recent alterations, it fit perfectly so she took it home with her.

When she pulled up in front of the guesthouse, she saw Bryce's truck in her parking space again. She rolled her eyes and parked under the maple tree, hoping her car wouldn't get crapped on before she could reclaim her parking space from Bryce.

Mason still wasn't home when she returned. And Bryce was nowhere to be found. Feeling heavy and glum, she took her dress into her bedroom. Then decided to try it on again.

It was a beautiful dress. Not ornate or ostentatious but almost stark in its simplicity. It was sleeveless with thick straps and a deep square neckline. The fitted bodice shaped her figure perfectly and the full skirt fell to the floor in a smooth fall of heavy satin. There was no train and the only decorative elements were the intricate embroidery on the hem and the delicate pearl beading on the bodice.

She stared at herself in the full-length mirror. Her hair was going to be up on her wedding day, not falling over her shoulders the way it was now, but she still looked really good.

She wondered what Mason would say when he saw her in this dress. Would he be awed? Overwhelmed with love and desire? Feel like his dreams were coming true?

Would he even care?

With an ache in her throat, she figured he'd probably be as matter-of-fact about her wedding dress as he was about everything else. Maybe make a dry comment on how much more practically she could have spent so much money.

She sniffed, smoothing down her skirt and swinging her hips to make the fabric swirl around her bare feet.

When she heard someone at the door, she squealed — thinking Mason would catch her in her dress. But she heard a different male voice call from outside, "Kate! Are you there? Open up — I'm about to drop this!"

Bryce. He sounded annoyed so she hurried to open the front door.

He was carrying a huge potted plant. Some kind of ficus tree.

"What is that?" she asked, standing to the side to let him in.

He set down the tree with a melodramatic groan. "Wedding gift from Bill and Linda. Damn thing weighs a ton."

Kate stared at the ficus. "Oh. Thanks for bringing it by."

"You weren't here earlier so I went to say hello to Aunt Dora. I parked in your space so I wouldn't have to walk a mile carrying the damn heavy tree."

"Okay." With a shrug, she moved into the kitchen to get a drink.

"You look gorgeous," Bryce remarked, his voice growing husky and low. "Good enough to eat."

The double entendre was intentional and obvious — reinforced by the hot look in his eyes as they crawled over her body.

Kate leaned against the kitchen counter, feeling naked even though she was fully clothed.

She hadn't wanted Bryce to see her in her wedding dress. Not before Mason did.

Bryce came over, standing so close she was trapped between his body and the counter. "Are you sure you want to be wearing it for *him*? I'm not sure he can appreciate someone as sexy as you."

Kate had been worried herself about whether Mason still appreciated her sexually. But she certainly wasn't going to let Bryce speak that way about her fiancé.

About *Mason* — who was Bryce's superior in every way that mattered.

Mason, who was brilliant, with a dry humor and quick wit. Whose good looks were subtle and sophisticated, rather than crudely overblown. Who was eminently competent and coolly efficient. Who always thought about her before he thought about himself.

Mason, who would have parked under the tree himself so her car wouldn't be crapped on.

Bryce enjoyed flirting with her, and trying to seduce her was a challenge to him. But Mason really loved her.

He loved her. As much as she loved him.

"Bryce, don't," Kate said, her voice colder than usual. She put a hand on his chest to push him away, getting tired of this little game. "Mason is going to be back —"

*"Mason is already back."*

The words were hard, cutting, snapped out like the slash of a blade. They'd come from the front door. From Mason.

Kate jumped with surprise and an odd sense of relief. But before she could react any further, Mason launched into action.

His expression stone cold and his jaw tightly clenched, he strode across the room into the adjoining kitchen. He moved purposefully and discreetly, like an animal stalking its prey.

Without a word, Mason grabbed the back of Bryce's t-shirt and hauled him away from Kate. Bryce stumbled back a few steps, clearly taken by surprise.

Kate was surprised too. Shocked, in fact. She gaped at Mason, a coil of excitement tightening in her belly.

Mason didn't look cool or matter-of-fact anymore. He was shaking with a frigid rage.

He pinned Bryce with hard gray eyes. "Kate is mine. You don't get to flirt with her. You don't get to hit on her. You don't get to touch her — *ever*."

Bryce's mouth dropped open. "Look, man, you misunderstood —"

"I didn't misunderstand anything. I know exactly what has been happening." Mason hadn't even looked at Kate. "It stops now. Get out."

Bryce stood frozen, his eyes darting from Kate's breathless surprise to Mason's predatory face.

"*Now*." Mason didn't even raise his voice but the one word was more powerful than a blow.

Bryce got out. Fast.

Kate barely registered his retreat. She was hypnotized by Mason's angry intensity, never having seen it before. Not in twenty years.

She'd wanted him to snap. But now that it had happened, she was a little nervous.

She breathed quickly, her heart racing and anxiety coiling in her belly. "Mason," she gasped, wanting to make sure he didn't think she had cheated on him. "It's not what you think. He's just been —"

Mason cut off her words. "Do you want to call things off between us?"

Kate's hand flew up to her mouth, her heart plummeting at the implication. "No! Mason, nothing happened! You can't think —"

"Fine," Mason interrupted again, taking two long strides toward her and backing her against the counter as Bryce had. Except he was nothing like Bryce. "If you don't want to call off the wedding, then you'll explain to me why I keep finding you rubbing up against my cousin."

Kate's nerves were still buzzing but something else was now growing inside her. Something passionately alive and resentful at the same time. "Let's get one thing straight. I was not rubbing up against him. *He* was rubbing up against me. And the asshole is *your* cousin."

Mason's voice grew silky and dangerous. "So you're telling me you've been suffering through his advances out of generosity toward *me*?"

"No," Kate replied, raising her voice in her exasperation. Mason's body seemed stronger and more substantial than Bryce's. And it was right there in front of her — its virile presence almost intimidating. "But he's been coming on to me. I certainly haven't encouraged it. And you haven't seemed to mind before now." The last comment slipped out, her tone involuntarily bitter.

"You haven't told him to stop." His sharp, controlled drawl shifted into gravelly rage again. "I'm tired of walking into my own home and finding my fiancée in the arms of another man." Before Kate could counter the outrageousness of his remark, Mason continued, planting both hands on the counter, trapping her. "I'm telling you right now — I'm not putting up with it anymore."

For some reason she couldn't process, Kate was a little turned on. She was annoyed and nervous and excited and disoriented and shocked by what was happening. But somewhere in the turmoil of all her emotions, an inexplicable arousal was starting to build.

Then she remembered she was wearing her wedding dress.

"Hey! Close your eyes. You're not supposed to see me in this!"



Mason narrowed his eyes, disregarding her words. "I'm still waiting for an explanation."

Kate felt dizzy and she hardly recognized her Mason in the angry, primal stranger in front of her. So she pushed him away and ducked under one of his arms. "Well, you can keep waiting," she snapped, starting toward her bedroom. "I'm going to change clothes. And I'm not going to talk to you when you're acting like a silly, jealous child."

She chose the words intentionally and figured they'd put Mason on hold until she pulled herself together some. The strategy had always worked before.

But she hadn't counted on this new side of Mason. He followed her. Instead of arguing, he unceremoniously scooped her up and hoisted her over his shoulder like a sack of grain.

She squealed and kicked out her legs, instinctively resisting his hold.

Securing his arms around her flailing legs, he said, "We *are* going to talk about this. Right now. I'm not going to let you keep running away from us." He strode through the hallway toward his bedroom.

Kate let out an exclamation of outrage, more from the injustice of this remark – after he'd spent the last few weeks running away from her – than from the indignity of her position. "Put me down, you disgusting Neanderthal. I'm not your possession. You can't just haul me around."

She squirmed as much as she could – wondering if something was wrong with her when she got even more turned on. His arms were like steel on her legs and his body beneath hers was hot and tense. Her helplessness and confusion only fueled her excitement. And she couldn't help responding to the intense passion radiating from him.

Her body didn't seem to understand the passion as anger, not lust.

When his arms tightened even more, hefting her back into place, Kate gasped, "My dress! If you ruin my dress with your caveman tactics, I swear I'll strangle you!"

Now in the bedroom, he set her on her feet in front of him.

Kate's knees buckled and she had to catch herself on the dresser behind her. Her first concern was for her dress, however, so she peered down, assessing the state of her precious dress.

"Your dress is fine." Mason's eyes were crawling over her body but she couldn't tell what he thought about her dress or how she looked in it.

"It's all wrinkled," she sniffed, her cheeks flaming and her fingers trembling. She brushed off the skirt and examined the beading to make sure it wasn't damaged. "And you're not supposed to see me in it until Saturday."

"My concern is hardly seeing you prematurely in your wedding dress." Mason stepped forward, standing very close but not actually touching her. "I've been holding back for weeks now but there's only so much a man can take. I figured you were having last-minute jitters about all the changes in your life. I was willing to be patient for as long as I could. But I'm not going to let you play me for a fool."

Kate gasped, reaching behind her to grip the edge of the dresser. "What? I've never played you for a fool."

"What do you call it then? When a man's fiancée ignores him but lets herself get groped by his oaf of a cousin?"

Choking on her outrage, Kate scowled into Mason's handsome, furious face. "Don't you dare blame this mess on me! You're the one who's been rethinking things. You're the one who's been ignoring me!"

"That is manifestly absurd. And a clear distortion of the facts." Mason's hands closed hard around her hips, pulling her pelvis against his. "Especially coming from the woman I just caught in a clinch with my cousin."

"We were not in a clinch!" Her words were rather strangled and not as strong as she'd intended. But she was brutally distracted by the feel of Mason's groin against her middle.

Evidently, their argument had aroused him as much as it had her.

Mason hadn't acknowledged his physical condition. His fingers tightened on the flesh of her ass through the expensive satin of her dress. "You seem to forget that I saw you together. Twice." There was a muscle twitching in his temple and a sheen of sweat on his face. "Tell me where he touched you."

Kate was so turned on now she was panting, her arousal pulsing almost painfully. This was what she'd wanted for weeks. What she'd needed. Evidence that Mason wanted her—so much he'd shed his civilized demeanor and claim her with instinctive possession.

She wanted—needed—to see this through, to let him claim her this way.

But she couldn't get past one major distraction. "Mason," she whimpered, praying she wasn't going to break his momentum with her plea, "My dress."

Something like understanding flickered across Mason's features but it was only there for a moment.

Then, "Take it off."

The brief command was as hard and textured as gravel.

Kate gulped. "What?"

"Take off the dress." The authority in his voice was as erotic as the feel of his hard body. "If you don't want it damaged, take it off." When she just gaped at him, he continued, pressing the bulge of his arousal insistently against her lower belly. "You can feel what kind of mood I'm in. I'm not going to be gentle. If that's not what you want, you can leave now. If you stay, take off your dress."

The sound of his thick voice and everything his words implied sent a pulse of hot desire to her pussy.

But there was no way she was going to let him rip off her wedding dress.

"I'll take it off," she whispered.

Mason took a step back, freeing her from the dresser. Without a word, he waited, his eyes raking over her body with demanding possessiveness.

Kate's hands were still shaking as she reached behind her to unfasten the dress. The pearl buttons down the line of the back were purely decorative but she couldn't seem to unhook the hook-and-eye closure at the top. She worked on it with trembling fingers for almost a minute before she asked, "Can you help me?"

"Turn around."

She'd never been the submissive type but for some reason his blunt directives were as sexy as anything she'd ever heard. She was so aroused now she had trouble not squirming as she let Mason unhook the closure and then unfasten the rest of the dress.

He left it hanging open in the back. When she turned around again, he was standing in his former position. "Take it off."

Kate slipped the thick straps off her shoulders and let the dress slide down her body. After stepping out of it, she bent over to pick it up and carefully hung it up.

She was naked except for pink lace panties when she returned to stand in front of Mason. His eyes were sweeping over her, lingering on her smooth legs, swaying breasts and the juncture where her legs met her pelvis.

The juncture where her panties were damp.

"Now," he gritted out, pushing her against the dresser again. The edge poked her hard on the back of her thighs. "Tell me where he touched you."

"He didn't touch me," she insisted, feeling strangely naughty to be naked in the middle of the day when Mason was fully clothed in khakis and dress shirt. "Not *that* way."

"Don't assume you know what I'm talking about." He pushed into her. The bulge at the front of his pants felt even harder and tighter. "Tell me where he touched you."

"He touched my hair. He said it was gorgeous."

She added the last comment as an intentional goad, wanting to test Mason's reaction.

He made a low sound in his throat, almost like a growl. "It is gorgeous." He reached behind her for a handful of her hair, letting the shiny strands slip through his fingers. "But he doesn't get to touch it." He lifted it again as he leaned over, burying his face briefly in the soft hair. "It's mine."

"Uh," Kate objected—more on principle than any sincere feeling. Something small and wounded in her heart was knitting itself together at having Mason claim her this way. "Don't get carried away. The hair is mine."

He snarled and repeated, "Mine. Where else did he touch you?"

Kate took the demand seriously and tried to think back. "Nowhere. Wait, my arm, I guess." She paused, waiting to see what Mason would do.

She wasn't disappointed. He traced a line of kisses down the length of her right arm, murmuring rough, primitive endearments against her skin.

Kate was even more breathless when he finally reached her shoulder and her head lolled back in a ridiculous way. Limp with desire, she had to lean against the dresser for support.

"Oh," she choked, clinging to the back of Mason's neck. "He touched me here." She hesitated before her last word and then brought a hand to her left breast, which Bryce had brushed against the day before. "But it might have been an accident."

Mason bristled when he saw where she was pointing. "He *what*? You let him?"

"I didn't let him. I didn't expect it." Then her attempt at explanation broke off in a helpless whimper as Mason's head lowered to her breast. He took the bare flesh in his mouth, sucking softly and teasing the nipple with his tongue.

With his hand, he fondled her right breast at the same time until Kate shuddered and moaned in frustrated pleasure.

He was murmuring something against her skin. It sounded like a rough repetition of "mine".

Kate's back was arched so dramatically now she could barely stay on her feet. Her moans turned to whimpers and then to desperate sounds very close to sobs. She was so wet it felt like her pussy was dripping and she inhaled gulps of the hot, masculine scent of Mason.

She'd been gasping, "Oh God, oh God, oh God!" as Mason teased and sensually tortured her breasts. But finally she pleaded, "Mason, please! I never touched him. I never wanted him to touch me. You're the only man I want to touch me. Please! I'm dying here. Would you please fuck me now?" Then, hearing how pitiful she sounded, she couldn't help but add, "Domineering bastard."

It wasn't quite under her breath.

Mason obviously heard. His lips twitched and his eyes flared briefly with dry amusement but he recovered quickly. "I thought you wanted me to fuck you."

Kate's humor faded into panicked, lustful desperation when Mason took a step away from her. "I do! I'll be good. I promise."

This was apparently the right answer because he stepped forward, grabbing her by the hips and heaving her up until she was perched on the edge of the dresser. His hands moved possessively over her shoulders, her arms, her breasts, until one of them edged into the space between her thighs.

He fingered her through the thin lace of her panties, lingering on the place that was most wet and hot. "Did he ever touch you here?" His voice was no more than a hoarse whisper and his eyes were focused on his fingers, pushing against her swollen, intimate flesh through her panties.

Kate had released a mew of pleasure at his touch, so close to where she needed it. But at his question she sucked in her breath with a hiss. "No. Of course not. You didn't really think I would, did you? I was never even tempted by Bryce's dubious charms."

"I didn't think you would be," he admitted, his expression growing strangely still. "I always trusted you and never thought you would. But a couple of times, I—" He cut off whatever he'd intended to say and jerked his head to the side.

But Kate had seen that flicker of expression. Recognized it as insecurity.

Realized—for the first time—that Mason must have been suffering from the same kind of insecurities she had.

The final knot of uncertainty loosened in her chest.

"He's a selfish boy," she said quietly. "Why would I even consider him when I have a man like you?"

He met her eyes for a long moment and she saw his expression relax. Then soften into something fond and warm.

But she barely had time to register the swell of love that washed over her because Mason's expression transformed back into that hot, feral dominance.

Both of his hands started to move over the panties and she realized he must be searching for seams.

She knew she was right when Mason grabbed the fabric with both hands and pulled hard.

Kate cried out in response to the violent gesture, her arousal shooting back up to urgency. When he tore the second seam and dropped the remnants of fabric on the floor, Kate tried to wind her legs around Mason's thighs in an attempt to rub her clit against him.

He kissed her—long, hard and hungry—and when he finally tore his mouth away Kate's lips felt swollen and sore.

"Tell me what you want," Mason demanded, hooking one hand under her thigh to keep her from rubbing up against him.

Groaning in frustration and doing her best to hump his hip, Kate said, "Damn it, Mason, you know what I want."

"Tell me."

"I want you to fuck me."

"How?"

"Hard," she rasped, tangling her fingers in his thick hair and pulling on it in her urgency. "Hard and fast. Oh, God, Mason, I want to come." Her urgent wriggling had succeeded in finding the bulge of his arousal. She rocked against it as much as she could in her helpless position, feeling a thrill of victory when Mason closed his eyes and let out a low groan.

Before she could follow through, he had backed up slightly, grabbing her thighs and holding them apart. The move left her intimately exposed to his demanding gaze. He stared down at her pussy, his nostrils flaring with his heavy breathing.

Kate whimpered, bracing herself with her hands behind her on the dresser.

"You're wet," Mason said, his eyes never leaving the space between her legs.

Kate actually blushed. "Yes," she whispered, doing her best not to squirm. Then, her natural rebellion rising up, she added, "There's a shocker."

His lips quirked momentarily but he didn't break the mood. "How wet?"

Enjoying this far too much to not play along, Kate admitted, "Really, really wet."

"Let me see you touch yourself."

Giving a shaky moan of relief and heightened desire, Kate held herself balanced on one hand and moved the other down the line of her inner thigh. Mason was still gripping her legs, pulling them apart so she was splayed widely to his view.

Too eager to try to be sexy, Kate dipped one finger into her wet heat, drawing out more of the moisture collected there. Then she slid her slick finger up to her clit, letting out husky sigh of pleasure as she started to rub it hard.

"Not like that."

Kate gave a little sob but she responded to the rough authority in his voice. She moved her hand, leaving her clit aching even more.



“Fuck yourself with your finger.”

She obeyed, sliding her finger back into her channel. She pumped it in and out, starting to pant as she picked up the rhythm.

“Two fingers.” He was watching her hotly, his eyes never leaving her pussy as she joined the first finger with a second. The two fingers penetrated her entrance and slid in and out, glistening with her juices.

The sensations were building more slowly than if she’d been allowed to stimulate her clit, but Kate could feel an orgasm growing deep at her center as she masturbated for Mason’s pleasure. Her cheeks were scorching and she was starting to sweat. But she couldn’t remember ever feeling so hot, naughty and excited – all at once – in her life.

She was huffing out in intensifying pleasure when Mason moved his hand from her right thigh and closed his fingers around her wrist. “That’s enough.”

She almost cried in disappointment and frustration. She’d just been getting close to the orgasm she so desperately needed. Her body shook but she managed not to fight Mason’s grip on her hand.

“Tell me what you want.” He looked almost as hot and shaky as she felt.

“I want to come.” She wanted so much to wiggle her fingers, which were still buried inside her, that tears were burning in her eyes. “Please, Mason, make me come.”

“I will.” He was about to say something else but Kate suddenly lost her balance, supported now in her precarious position by just one of her hands and one of Mason’s. She almost toppled over. In catching her, Mason pulled the thigh he gripped a little too far from the other.

Her muscles protested the sudden pull of force and she cried out in unexpected pain.

Mason released her thigh and wrist immediately, wrapping his arms around her in automatic protection to keep her from falling.

Kate was disoriented and she buried her face in Mason's shirt and fisted her fingers in the fabric.

"Are you all right, baby?"

Despite her arousal, Kate couldn't help but snicker in fond tenderness. Mason was so instinctively considerate and protective—such a gentleman—that he couldn't force back that side of his nature, even when he was supposed to be dominant.

"I will be if you ever decide to fuck me," she complained, suppressing her reaction so she wouldn't break his mood.

She knew he needed this. And she needed it too.

He narrowed his eyes—suspiciously at first, as if he suspected she might have been laughing at him. Then the fire ignited once more and he released her, letting her slide to her feet off the dresser.

"Maybe we should move this to the bed," he suggested. "So I don't have to worry about your toppling over."

"Good plan."

He nodded to the bed. "Go on."

She walked slowly toward the double bed, feeling exposed and achingly aroused and still shaky on the feet.

When she sat on the side of the bed and looked expectantly at Mason, he shook his head. "Not like that. Get on your hands and knees at the foot of the bed."

Under normal circumstances, Kate never would have taken orders without question. It wasn't really her nature—in bed or any other aspect of life. But this afternoon every command he gave her made her even hotter—hotter than she'd ever felt in her life.

She crawled up on the bed and arranged herself on her hands and knees at the foot of the bed as he'd directed.

Now she was even more exposed. The position spread her open and the cool air against her hot flesh made her want to moan.

Her hair was falling over her shoulders and it kept sticking to her damp, heated face. She looked over her shoulder at Mason.

He was standing next to the foot of the bed, still dressed in his shirt and trousers. He looked as hot as she was—the edge of his hair was damp from sweat as were a couple of spots on his shirt.

“Mason, please.”

“Bend your arms,” he instructed, starting to unfasten his pants.

Kate bent her arms, lowering her shoulders and head, leaving her bottom in the air. It was as undignified a position as she could imagine, but she felt sexy and wild and naughty.

When Mason had rid himself of his pants, he got onto the bed behind her. He stroked the soft flesh of her ass, squeezing it. “Good girl. Now turn your head and look.”

Her cheek was pressed against the mattress as she watched Mason with hungry urgency, but at his gesture she tilted her head away from him and looked toward the wall.

They were aligned perfectly with the large mirror and she could now see her naked body, folded and waiting for Mason to fuck her.

Her face was red and eager, something almost desperate in her eyes. Her hair was spilling around her shoulders and her bottom looked round and full, the flesh jiggling slightly beneath Mason’s fingers.

A jolt of desire shot to her center at such a carnal display of her body.

“Watch,” Mason rasped. “Keep watching yourself as I fuck you.”

She groaned, clenching her inner muscles as if she could somehow pull him inside her. Licking her lips—watching as her tongue traced the swollen red line of her mouth—she wondered if it was possible for her to get any wetter. “Mason.”

“Keep watching.”

She did as he said. Didn’t look away from her debauched reflection in the mirror, even as Mason moved closer behind her on his knees and stroked along the crease in her ass until he found her entrance.

“You’re so wet,” he murmured, slipping in a finger to check her readiness.

Kate was about to whine in impatience but she wisely bit her lip. Complaining might delay this even more and she wasn’t sure she could handle waiting anymore.

She couldn’t see Mason clearly in the mirror—he was mostly out of her line of sight—but from the rustling of fabric she heard behind her she assumed he was taking off his shirt.

He would be naked then. As naked as she was. She wanted to turn back to look at him but she didn’t look away from the mirror.

Mason squeezed her bottom again, pulling the cheeks apart. Then she finally felt him lining up his cock at her entrance.

Felt the tight pressure of the penetration as he pushed his erection into her clinging channel.

“Ah, ah, ah,” she gasped, as the pressure eased some of her empty ache. The throbbing of her arousal compelled her to jerk her hips in a shameless attempt to get more friction.

Mason’s fingers dug into her bottom. “No,” he gritted out. “Hold still.”

Kate was almost sobbing as she tried to obey him. “Fuck, Mason. I don’t think I can.”

“Yes, you can, baby. Hold still this once. Let me fuck you.”

She bit down on her lip so hard it was painful and her hands clawed at the bedding beneath her. But she managed to hold her pelvis still as Mason buried his cock in her body.

When he was in as far as he could go, he slid his hands from her ass down her back. "Good girl," he said again, leaning over so that she could see him in the mirror, draped over her body. "How's that?"

"Good," she choked, the inability to move almost torture. "So good." She could feel Mason's balls against her flesh and she could hear him panting next to her ear. "But I need more. Mason, please. Fuck me."

He eased back and then slid into her again, his thrust slow and luscious.

"Again," she begged. "Please, again."

He started up a rhythm—controlled, steady and pleasing. On each stroke, he hit her G-spot and spirals of pleasure would shoot out from the contact. Kate couldn't stop moaning, couldn't stop gasping, couldn't stop babbling out broken pleas for more.

She clenched around him as much as she could but all of her concentration was focused on not shaking her bottom or pumping her hips to match his rhythm. Her clit was aching with need and all her instincts screamed at her to bounce and jiggle as much as she could to generate friction.

She didn't though. She let Mason fuck her as he wanted and the orgasm that began to grow at her center was slow and powerful and torturous.

His grip on her ass was bruising and painful but the feel of his hands only increased her excitement. Mason's motion was shaking the bed, shaking her whole body and her breasts and thighs were jiggling from the momentum.

"Tell me how you want it," Mason rasped.

"Harder. Faster." Saliva was pooling in her mouth and hair was in her eyes and mouth. "Harder. Faster. Please."

With a groan, Mason accelerated his rhythm, pounding into her with more force and speed. The additional stimulation was exactly what Kate needed and she sobbed with pleasure as her developing orgasm surged forward.

Mason finally seemed to be losing control. He started to make animalistic grunts, timed to the rhythm of his thrusting. Occasionally he'd fall out of rhythm, bumping with erratic jerks against her bottom—usually when her sobs were particularly helpless.

"Are you coming?" He adjusted his knees for better leverage.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," she huffed, staring in a wild stupor at the shameless reflection of her shaking body. "Gonna come. Gonna come hard."

He swallowed back another groan and leaned farther forward, bracing his weight with his hands on the bed. In this position, he couldn't make very long thrusts, but his hips pistoned into her from behind in short, fast jerks. His cock felt huge and tight in her overly sensitized channel and he kept slamming against her G-spot.

"Fuck," he muttered, his voice strangled. "Oh, fuck, baby. Come now."

She came—her climax spiraling out with the sound of his voice. She cried out in broken exclamations, her body convulsing and her inner walls clamping down around his cock.

He kept thrusting into her clenching muscles, extending her pleasure. And then, just as she was coming down from one of the hardest orgasms of her life, he wrapped one of his arms around her middle and pulled her upper body up toward his chest.

Completely off-balance, she reached up to cling to his neck, digging her fingernails into his skin.

Panting, sweating and even drooling a little, she babbled through the lingering pleasure.

Then his other hand moved down between her legs, stroking open her intimate folds and finding her still-throbbing clit.

She screamed as he pressed into it, another climax surging up on the heels of the first. His cock was still buried inside her, now at a different angle and he was jerking into her clumsily as he panted and grunted wetly against her ear.

As her second orgasm ripped through her, Kate clawed at the back of Mason's neck. The pain must have been what finally pushed him over the edge.

He roared out a rough, wordless exclamation and froze inside her for a moment. Then she felt him twitching and shuddering behind her as he came, felt his cock pulsing inside her, heard him muttering, "I love you. I love you. I love you."

She might have come again at the words.

They remained entwined for another minute, writhing and clinging to each other. Then Kate toppled forward onto her hands and Mason fell with her, his cock slipping out of her and his weight falling heavily onto her back.

Her eyes were burning with tears and her nose was running a little. Her pussy was raw and her lungs ached with her attempts to take a full breath. But she was flooded with visceral satisfaction. And with something deeper than that.

With absolute love and security.

Mason had adjusted their bodies so that he was spooning her from behind, their damp skin sticking wherever they connected. Occasionally, he would breathe a kiss into her hair, making Kate melt a little more.

"I love you," he said one more time, nuzzling the side of her head.

Kate grabbed one of his hands and hugged it to her chest. "I love you too."

She'd loved him for most of her life. Planned to love him for the rest of it.

"At least this time you didn't say thank you," Kate murmured wryly, after another minute of silence. Her ironic nature always presented itself whenever she threatened to lapse into pure sentiment.

"What?" Mason propped himself up on his elbow and turned her over so she was looking up at him. "What do you mean?"

"Last time. Last night. We made love and all you said was thank you. It made me feel... I thought... Why did you thank me like that?"

His brow was furrowed. "Why shouldn't I thank you? I thought you'd known how turned on I was by your chase after the button and had decided to help me out with it, even though you weren't in the mood for sex. Saying thank you was only polite."

Gasping in outrage, she said, "What? I wasn't doing it for you! You hadn't made a move on me in weeks. I was horny and needy and I wanted to make love to you. It was hard enough to make all the moves myself when I thought you weren't interested. But then I thought you needed it too. But then you said thank you and I got all confused again."

As explanations went, hers wasn't very coherent. But Mason seemed to follow what she meant. He cringed slightly. "I guess I read it wrong. Why didn't you tell me you were feeling insecure or that you wanted sex?"

Kate huffed at him. "Right. That's just what I wanted. A pity fuck." She paused. Then, "Is that what you thought I was giving you?"

Mason nodded reluctantly. "I've been dying to fuck you for weeks. But you were acting so prickly and all the hints I made fell flat."

"What hints? I never heard any hints!"

"What did you think it meant when I was appreciating the sexy show you gave me on the floor with that damned button?"

"You never said it was sexy! I thought you were laughing at me!"

Mason chuckled and stroked the hair back from her face. "Try to pay more attention next time. I was suffering from a painful hard-on. But then you told me to get back to work and you went to bed alone. What was I supposed to think?"

Kate considered this and decided she could understand where he'd gotten such a wrong impression. She *had* been awfully sensitive and cranky lately. "Well, you pay



more attention next time too. I've been horny as hell and starting to think... I thought you wanted to go back to just being friends, that you didn't want to get married."

"Not want to get married! Are you insane? I was just trying to be patient and sensitive—letting you work through your jitters." He glanced away, as if he were struggling to say what came next. "And I guess I was afraid to push you too hard, for fear you'd decide you'd made a mistake. I didn't want to blow it now that my dreams were coming true, after being in love with you for twenty years."

Kate's heart thudded in her chest. She sat up straight on the bed and grabbed Mason by the shoulders. "What? What did you say? You weren't in love with me all that time."

"Of course I was. I've loved you all my life."

"No. No! We were friends. That's all."

"That's all *you* felt for me. But I always felt more. Don't you ever worry about us going back to just being friends. I've never thought about you as just a friend."

It was almost more than Kate could process. Mason was looking very Mason-like again, with rumpled hair, intelligent eyes and a dry smile. The dominant, primitive man he'd shown her before had retreated behind the surface but she could sense it still there. Always there. Ready to claim her whenever his possession of her was threatened.

He'd loved her the whole time. Through high school, college and the years that followed. And she'd never realized it. She'd always thought about him as just Mason.

He'd been waiting for her all along. And now that he had her, he wasn't going to let her go.

Kate had never felt so safe, so loved, so happy in all her life.

She wasn't sure if she wanted to cry or giggle hysterically. So she settled for a compromise.

She snorted. "Yeah, well, don't expect me to let you go all caveman on me very often. I don't respond well to taking orders."

Mason chuckled and pulled her into a hug. "I've noticed that. But don't expect me to ever let my wife entertain the attentions of another man."

He'd never called her his wife before. And right now Kate wanted nothing more than to be that. But all she said was, "Bryce's attentions were rather entertaining. You should have seen him give me a sultry look."

Mason growled, the noise vibrating in his chest.

"It was the funniest thing ever," Kate continued, patting him on the chest. "Not nearly as effective as yours. Plus, he's annoying and selfish. I hope his truck gets crapped on."

"It will." When Kate looked at Mason questioningly, he explained, "I switched the cars before I came in. His is now parked under the tree."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Did I tell you how irresistible you look in that dress?"

Kate was wearing her wedding dress—this time on her wedding day. She couldn't believe the wedding was almost over. The ceremony had gone smoothly, only marred when Bryce had broken into a coughing fit as they'd been exchanging vows.

The reception took place in an old plantation house and gardens. The food was set up inside but most of the guests were mingling outside.

Kate pressed up shamelessly against her new husband. They were dancing on the parquet floor that had been set up beneath the tent in the middle of the formal gardens. They'd gone through all the traditional first dances and had made the rounds, greeting everyone. Now they were just enjoying themselves, since the reception was drawing to a close.

Kate was feeling rather giddy—an effect of her joyful excitement, the culmination of months of work and anxiety about the wedding and too much champagne. And Mason was looking as adorably sexy as he'd ever looked. He'd tried to tame his hair into order

but by now it was hopelessly rumpled again, falling over his forehead. And his tux was a sleekly sophisticated contrast to his wry expression and lean, virile strength.

"No," she drawled, rubbing against him more provocatively than she should be doing in such a crowd. "You failed to mention it."

"I figured my speechless awe as you walked down the aisle should have covered it."

Despite misreading Mason in the past, Kate had recognized the look on his face in that moment as awe.

She'd felt rather awed herself. That he would feel that way about her. That he'd felt that way about her for so long.

She wound her arms around his neck and pressed a kiss on his throat. "It wouldn't hurt you to tell me occasionally instead of expecting me to read your expressions." She paused a beat. Then, "You didn't mention my dress the first time you saw it either."

Mason chuckled, his hands on her back tender and possessive. "I certainly noticed it. But I had other things to discuss at the time."

Kate couldn't resist pressing against his groin and was thrilled when she realized he'd grown slightly hard. "You certainly did." She blew into his ear, dug her fingernails into his neck and pushed her pelvis harder into his.

Flushed in delight when she felt him harden even more.

"I can't believe my husband has an erection at his own wedding," she teased him in a husky murmur. People were looking at the happy couple fondly, evidently unaware of the physical condition of one of them.

Both of them, actually—if Kate was honest with herself. She was getting a little turned on herself, no matter how inappropriate it might be.

"I can't believe my wife is such a tease," Mason replied, in a growl that both excited and amused her. "Someone needs to put you in your place."

“What place is that?” There was an obvious bulge at the front of his pants now and Kate rubbed against it relentlessly. “And who do you suppose is man enough to put me there?”

Mason’s gray eyes flared deliciously. “Just wait until I get you alone.”

Her intimate muscles tightened. But she taunted, “Empty words. That’s hours from now. In the meantime, what will you do with that hard-on?”

“Don’t push me, woman.”

Kate snickered. “What exactly are you going to do in the midst of our gathered guests?”

She’d truly believed there was nothing he could do. But she’d once again underestimated her husband.

With a guttural sound, he released her. Then he hoisted her up—in her wedding dress, with everyone looking on—over his shoulder in the caveman carry he’d used on her before.

She squealed. In surprise. And embarrassment. And delight.

The wedding guests burst into laughter and applause, calling out teasing encouragement for what they saw as lighthearted fun.

Kate might have been the only one who realized her husband was carrying her off somewhere to fuck her.

She flailed her legs and pounded on his back with her fists, putting up an appropriate show of resistance to his presumptuous, primitive behavior.

She made sure he knew she wasn’t truly resisting.

When they were alone and he put her down, she told him exactly what she thought about him.

Mason told her he loved her too.

## About the Author

Zannie Adams writes, reads, and caters to her chocolate-brown cocker spaniel, and watches cooking shows on television. She has lived in eight different states, had far too much graduate-level education, and generally done her best not to settle down. She has been writing novels all her life, but only recently did she begin to write erotic romances—a genre that has allowed her to explore her love of both passion and commitment.

Zannie prefers to spend most of her time writing, but she has to stop occasionally to teach writing and literature at a liberal arts college and to walk her dog. She lives in the Midwest.

Zannie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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