

ELLORA'S CAVE TABOO

WHEN
IN
Rio

DELPHINE
DRYDEN



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When in Rio

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WHEN IN RIO

Delphine Dryden

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Chapter One

Call me crazy, but I had never wanted to visit Rio de Janeiro.

Not that I have anything against the place. It's beautiful by anybody's standards. But I'm not big on beaches, I don't like crowds, I can't dance the samba and, while I do recall a smattering of my high school Spanish, I don't know a word of Portuguese.

Why couldn't it have been a business trip to Megève, Switzerland? Lake Louise, Canada? Even just a quick hop to Seattle, where I could drink Starbucks in the home of Starbucks, and my pasty-pale skin wouldn't be at risk of sunburn, and my light-shunning eyes wouldn't have to squint and don sunglasses against the glare. But no. None of those trips were on offer.

Instead, my boss was calmly explaining what my functions would be when I accompanied him to a weeklong global climate change conference to be held in beautiful, sunny Rio. Starting ten days from that very day.

If I'd known this was the price I'd pay for my recent unsought promotion, I would have taken more care to seem mediocre at my job.

But let me back up just a little, provide a little more context. My name is Katie Snow—Katherine, really, and please *don't* call me Kathy—and I'm an ecologist with Globe Oil. Until recently, this meant I went to a lot of places where my company did business, gathering data and writing reports for the EPA on how well the company was complying with various environmental regulations. Clean air and water, impact statements, proposed countermeasures...exciting stuff like that. My mistake, I realized too late, was that people found out I could write. And organize.

And that meant that pretty soon, I caught the attention of the Senior Vice President and Global Director of Environmental Studies, John Benedict. The Big Boss.

Jack, to his closer colleagues. And presumably to his friends. None of us actually knew if he had any though. Jack was mainly just something the yes-men throughout the company called him when he wasn't around, as in, "Jack is behind this project one hundred percent", or "We'd need Jack's approval before even considering that". Or even, occasionally, "Jackass". But almost all the top company brass came in for that sort of name calling occasionally. My friend Callie was more inclined to say "Jack...off" because she thought he was smoking hot.

"He's the senior vice president in charge of what's in my pants," she would whisper to me with a goofy grin, whenever she was with me and we had occasion to see him at a meeting or in the company cafeteria. But then, Callie was a geologist and they could be an odd bunch at times.

I tried very hard to take a more cautious view myself because, after all, I worked for the man. So sure, I thought he was good looking enough in a clean-cut, boy-next-door-all-grown-up sort of way. Early forties, in very good shape from what I could see. Crisp haircut, with just a smidgen of premature gray peppered through the dark brown at the temples, giving him a hint of distinction. Conservative clothes, nothing flashy, but they looked expensive and fit him too well for it to be accidental. And even on casual Fridays he had starch in the pleats of his khakis, and his polo shirts looked professionally laundered and pressed.

He was well groomed, not like a metrosexual but like someone with good, steady habits. He looked extremely relaxed and self-contained, always, and maybe just a little bit smug. Like nothing any of us corporate nerds could ever do would be a big enough deal to ruffle his feathers. Which made sense. For him to be as high up in management as he was at his age, he would have to have the ability to at least give the impression he could take anything in stride, handle it and move on. The gray hairs, maybe, were proof that it wasn't all as easy as he made it look. Or maybe they were just genetic.

Not that I had spent a lot of time staring at, thinking about or analyzing every detail of my boss's physique and personality, of course. Not that I had spent two years gulping and stammering every time he so much as spoke to me, because he raised my heartbeat so much it was hard to breathe around him. Not that I had pretty much stopped dating because nobody I met seemed to compare even remotely to Jack. Nothing like that.

I just always admire people who have that ability to seem like they know what they're doing at all times. I'm aware it's all about attitude—it's just not an attitude I've ever been able to pull off.

Me? I'm usually a mess, for one thing. I throw on whatever's clean and just head out the door—and it shows. My mother despairs. On one recent casual Friday I didn't even realize until two in the afternoon that my favorite jeans were starting to sport a hole in the butt. Which, of course, my shirt didn't come down quite far enough to cover. The hole grew larger as the hours passed, as such holes have a way of doing. Still, I don't think anybody noticed, except for Callie who's obsessed with clothes. And that guy from the mailroom, but he really had no business looking at my butt anyway.

But back to "Jack" Benedict, who had been the Big Boss for over two years, but to whom I had only started reporting directly about a month before the trip to Rio was proposed. He had been hinting for months about restructuring, about working to "determine the unique strengths and weaknesses" of those in the department and then "building a team around people's abilities, not their job titles".

I should have realized right away that the writing thing would come to the fore. From the rank and file, I was fast-tracked to become the senior data compilation expert and the departmental liaison to public relations. All of which was a fancy way of saying that I would be in the office next to Jack's, putting together results from others' time in the field, writing reports, writing meta-reports about what all the reports said, writing proposals and other similar joys, sending it all along to various governmental agencies

and then summarizing it all so that Jack would always have a handy statement to pass along to the PR people for press releases and shareholder newsletters.

I started to wonder almost right away if the phenomenal raise was worth it. Jack was not, it turned out, a jackass to work for. He just had very high standards, a very dry sense of humor and could be a bit brusque with his requests, which was probably why he'd earned that reputation. High standards were a good thing as far as I was concerned, one more thing to add to the long list of qualities I admired about Jack. But I missed being out in the field more than I'd anticipated. Missed the information gathering, the problem solving. Ecology was like a mystery and I loved delving into that mystery, collecting all the clues.

It had already been disappointing to move from working on original impact statements to simply collecting and reporting on clean air and water data, which had happened after nearly all the new domestic oil drilling dried up. I had wanted to work with plants and animals, so air and water were a bit of a letdown. Being an environmentalist at heart though, I was happy on some level even with the changes, because they meant there was less new drilling in potentially fragile ecosystems. And at least I was still out doing things, looking for answers.

Now I was just gathering those answers from other people, and I didn't realize how different that would be until I was stuck doing it every day. On the other hand, the adorable new midnight blue BMW sitting in my reserved parking space was a powerful incentive to persevere.

But Rio, I thought, was just a bit too much to ask. For various reasons, not all of them having to do with the beachfront attractions, none of which attracted *me* whatsoever.

"Janet's just not up to it, Kate," Jack insisted. Jack called me Kate, which I somehow preferred to him calling me Katie like most people did. More professional. Katie would have seemed a bit too personal somehow, coming from him. "You know she's still puking three times a day."

Ah, that was a professional way to put it. It was true though. Janet Mayhew, one of the regional directors for ecological studies, had been slated to attend the conference along with Jack. Unfortunately for us all, she was in the throes of some of the worst morning sickness our office had ever seen. We were all impressed, though a little horrified, that she was able to come into the office at all. Most of us had taken to avoiding the ladies' restroom on the floor where she worked. There was no way she would be able to enjoy Rio or be expected to learn anything useful at the conference in her current pitiful state, even if her doctor did approve the trip.

"But I'm not an executive, Jack. Janet schmoozes, I really don't do schmoozing." I really didn't do Rio in March. For several days. With Jack. When you had the office next to his and reported directly to him, you got to call him Jack, I had discovered. He insisted, in fact. I had sort of preferred Mr. Benedict. Calling him Jack felt a little too personal somehow, coming from me.

"No, but I actually think this will work out better. I'll be presenting three times at the conference, and you can sit in on all that and let me know if anything needs tweaking. Janet's an MBA, not an ecologist. She's good on compliance but she's clueless about the science side. All the different sessions, the workshops, most of them would be wasted on Janet. You'd have an understanding of the topics that she just wouldn't bring."

He shifted tactics—and seemed to be bringing out bigger guns. "I realize it's a big trip on short notice, but it would be a very valuable opportunity for you. Adam Cromwell recommended I select a replacement I thought would provide the company the best chance of bringing good information back and putting it to use. This thing isn't cheap."

Of course it wasn't cheap. But it seemed even further from what I wanted to be doing. On the other hand, my boss had just dropped the name of the CEO while persuading a flunky to attend a conference in Rio. Obviously he really, *really* wanted me to go, which I couldn't help but find flattering.

I looked up from my scuffed brown suede pumps to see Jack watching me with an intensity I hadn't expected.

Blue...my God, how had I never noticed that his eyes were so *blue*? Were those contacts? They were astonishing. You could fall right into them. *But you aren't supposed to be noticing the boss's brilliant blue eyes, Katie. NOT good for business.*

"Of course I'll go, Jack, and I'm very flattered. I just wasn't expecting it but...of course."

"Great! That's my girl. I'll have Ted get you all the details and a copy of my presentation in case you have any suggestions, and here is..." He wrote a quick note on a sticky pad from the drawer of his immaculate desk and handed it to me. "Here's the URL for the conference website, so you can get some information about the sessions and decide what you want to attend. Ted will e-mail you the ones I've already earmarked to sit in on, and get you everything you'll need to fill out and sign to get a visa. Your passport's current, right? And I also hereby grant you from now until lunchtime to Google everything you ever wanted to know about Rio."

I laughed politely, thanked him cordially, disappeared into my office—no longer a cubicle now, I even had a window—closed the door and flopped into my chair with a little sigh of despair.

Rio alone was cause for concern. The despair was because I had no idea how I would ever survive an entire week in a romantic, tropical resort town with Jack Benedict without throwing myself at his feet, admitting to two years of secret adoration and begging him to let me be his sex slave.

Chapter Two

The real trouble didn't start until we got to the baggage claim at Galeão International on Saturday morning, after an overnight flight on which I surprised myself by sleeping for almost eight of the twelve hours.

After all the other bags had come and gone, and after Jack had engaged in several minutes of increasingly heated conversation with the uniformed gentleman who seemed to preside over the luggage conveyors, we had been sent to a little office off the baggage-claim area. There, a lovely young woman with a superior sneer that completely spoiled the effect of her loveliness informed us that our luggage had remained in São Paulo when the plane stopped there. No, she didn't know when our bags could be sent to the hotel. No, she had no helpful suggestions for what we could do in the meantime. Her attitude clearly said that if our bags were stranded, we had probably done something, somehow, to deserve it.

I was startled to see Jack as close to angry as I'd ever seen him over this exchange with the unpleasant airport employee. Instead of raising his voice when he got mad, he got quieter and quieter, which not coincidentally raised every tiny hair along my spine. If submissives had Spidey senses, he would certainly set mine tingling...but who was I kidding? He set *everything* tingling.

We had checked one bag apiece, carrying on smaller wheeled bags and laptop cases. A week, we had both clearly thought, called for more than one small carry-on wheelie's worth of wardrobe. So now, having given up at the airport, we ventured toward the famous Copacabana Palace Hotel with scarcely a change of clothes.

As it turned out, Jack didn't intend to wait for our bags to arrive, but meant to take matters firmly into his own hands. My favorite.

"We need lunch anyway. We don't have to check in for the conference until tomorrow morning, but tonight there's a cocktail party sort of thing one of the vendors is throwing. Heavy hors d'oeuvres. So what we need to do now is check out the terrain in here, get some food and then go get some clothes for tonight. We'll eat downstairs and then the concierge can give us some ideas to narrow down the shopping. What do you have with you? Details, Kate, let's figure this thing out."

"Sir, yes Sir!" I said perkily, resisting the urge to salute. Jack just grinned, a look I didn't remember ever seeing on him. Nearly as difficult to resist as his eyes. *So blue*. "I don't have much. Most of my clothes are in my other bag. The one here is just bath stuff, plus most of my jammies and undies...um...and some shorts and a t-shirt. You know, so just in case the big bag got lost, I would have something to change into."

Smooth, Katie. Sophisticated. Not only did you just talk about your lingerie with your boss, but you impressed the man with your intimate boudoir vocabulary by referring to it as jammies and undies. "Oh, and some of my shoes. They're in there too."

"That sounds pretty practical. And it's pretty close to what I have too." He was briskly removing things from his laptop case, setting up the computer on the large desk in his suite, which happened to be just down the hall from mine but was about three times the size and boasted an even more fantastic ocean view. "Bathing suit?"

"No, that was in the big suitcase. But I don't think I'll really be needing—"

"Kate. This is Rio. You *will* need a bathing suit."

* * * * *

Lunch, after the twelve-hour flight and the luggage fiasco, turned out to be utterly amazing. Not local cuisine. Jack wasn't interested in the buffet available in the hotel's less-formal restaurant. He said he wanted to be brought something, even if it was only a meal and not our missing bags. So instead, it was the "real" restaurant, which served some of the best Italian food I'd ever eaten.

While we sat afterward, bemoaning the amount we'd consumed, a waiter approached on little cat feet, bearing a list of store names and addresses from the concierge. A beautiful young waiter, tall and slender, with eyes only for Jack, which made me feel oddly jealous even though I knew Jack wasn't gay.

Jack, poor thing, was stuck in his trousers and polo until he bought some shorts, as he hadn't brought a change of just-in-case clothes. At least I was able to change into something more suited to wandering the beach town. It only took a few minutes to do so and then we were off down the street the hotel backed up to, the *Avenida Nossa Senhora de Copacabana*, following the map the concierge had thoughtfully marked for us.

From the pavement to the horizon, the scene was like something from an exotic postcard, although I was paying less attention to the spectacle of Rio than to the way Jack sort of guided me everywhere with his hand at the small of my back or at my elbow. It was all completely appropriate, taken moment by moment. But in addition to making me swoon at finding out that Jack had such courtly manners, the combined effect of all those appropriate little touches was inappropriately devastating on my susceptible libido.

Still, the atmosphere was undeniable. Even here, a block off the *Avenida Atlantica* which fronted the world-famous Copacabana beach, we still caught brief glimpses of the mountains in the distance beyond the buildings. Amid layers of slate gray and green, Sugarloaf reared up starkly from its surroundings, the Christ the Redeemer statue blessing the whole scene from on high. Later in the week we were scheduled to take the cable car tour to the top of Sugarloaf and see the aerial view of it all. I found that prospect much more appealing than all the beach and water activities the Copacabana offered.

Although I'd suggested we just go our separate ways to shop, Jack wouldn't hear of it. He stressed the high rate of crime even in the nicer parts of town in broad daylight. A petite, lone female tourist would present far too tempting a target for muggers. I wanted to take offense, but even the small amount of research I'd done about Rio said he was absolutely right. And although feminism was all very good and well, I knew I was hardly in a position to argue. I was lightly built—five foot two—had no formal self-defense training and I didn't even speak the language. I finally conceded it would be foolish of me to insist and let Jack lead the way. He seemed perfectly comfortable doing so, even without the map.

In fairly short order I was able to find a cocktail dress that would go with some of my existing shoes. Jack steered me away from the little basic-black number I'd picked first. He pointed out, quite sensibly, that this would most likely be my one-time-only company-paid shopping spree in Rio, and it seemed a shame to waste it on a boring garment I could have easily bought back in Houston.

The dress I wound up with instead was a deep claret-colored, sleeveless-wrap style, not too heavy for the climate but with enough drape to swirl sleekly over my hips and thighs, ending in a flirt of a ruffle just above the knee. A good dress for dancing, if some madness ever possessed me one day and I decided that dancing was something I wanted to try.

"You don't think it's too..." I frowned at my reflection, fussing with the deep vee of the neckline. For a moment I'd actually forgotten who I was shopping with—not Callie or one of my other girlfriends or my sister, as usual, but my very male boss. Whom I had essentially just asked if I was showing too much cleavage.

When Jack responded, his voice calm as ever though amused and a little husky, I could feel the blush creeping over my face. Curse my pale skin! Curse the Irish ancestors whose inherited genes made it so easy for anyone to tell when I was embarrassed.

"I don't think it's too...whatever. It looks good. Very nice."

I avoided his eyes, looking back into the mirror. Slowly the blush subsided but I knew he'd seen it. I tried acting cool, playing in the mirror some more, gathering up my hair and twisting the long, unruly mahogany locks into a loose ponytail with one hand. I liked the look, the way it left my neck exposed...and I suddenly realized Jack was staring. At my neck or my neckline and possibly even the region I didn't like the mailroom guy to look at.

Dropping my hair like it was on fire, I dashed back into the dressing room and changed into my tame cargo shorts and little t-shirt, slipping my flip-flops back on. I half wished I'd kept on the businesslike slacks and blouse I'd flown in, rather than opting for my single change of just-in-case clothing.

I bought the dress and, as an impulse buy, added a hair clip with a frill of floral black-and-garnet-colored silk. I would wear my hair up tonight if I wanted to, I thought sulkily. Jack was waiting by the door after I finished paying for things and I thought I

saw a hint of a smirk on his lips, but he didn't say anything as he led me down the street. Hand once again pressed firmly to the small of my back, which I tried to think of as a sensible precaution against getting separated in the crowd.

I spotted one, two, three stores with bathing suits in the window, but wanted to avoid thinking of modeling suits the way I had just inadvertently modeled dresses in the boutique. So I stuck to the safe course of suggesting we get Jack something next, for the evening's festivities. He nodded in the direction of a shop a bit farther down the street, one that showed menswear in the window.

Jack took more time than I thought he'd need to decide on a pair of very crisp, flax-colored linen pants, a subtly striped cream-colored shirt and a navy sports coat, also in a linen blend. No tie, but the salesman tucked a pocket square of bright red into the breast pocket as the tailor was fussing about at Jack's ankles, pinning up cuffs.

I was floored when, after seeming to consider it for a moment, Jack frowned at the salesman, shook his head and said something that sounded like, "*A senhora desgasta o vermelho escuro hoje à noite.*"

No. No way. No fair. He spoke Portuguese? No wonder he was the senior exec selected to come to the very cool, very costly conference in Rio. But still—*no fair!* And what had he said, anyway? Because the salesman was looking at *me* now, appraisingly I thought. And appreciatively, I sincerely hoped, as he nodded and smiled and then spoke to Jack again. He spoke, then Jack spoke, then he spoke again and then both of them laughed, *ha ha!* Even the laugh sounded Portuguese. And then the salesman supplied a handkerchief in a lemony-creamy silk that picked up the sheen in the shirt, and Jack nodded and seemed to be making some sort of arrangement with the tailor. Presumably to have the whole thing altered and delivered to the hotel tonight, from the gestures. I wondered what sort of premium he'd have to pay for that. Probably considerably less than any premium he could have negotiated in English.

"Bathing suit for you next," Jack said breezily as we stepped out into the street. He had changed into more casual clothing in the dressing room at the store. He'd purchased and now wore the male equivalent of my own outfit, except that his multipocketed shorts and t-shirt hung loosely, whereas mine were just formfitting enough for fashion. He'd replaced loafers and socks with a pair of worn leather deck shoes he'd brought along, and I couldn't fail to notice that his legs were nicely shaped and he had a hint of tan.

I'd seen him wear casual clothes before of course, at company picnics and the like. But here, the change seemed to go deeper than just clothes. He seemed more relaxed all over all of a sudden, almost like a tourist.

"They'll be bringing all that to the hotel later," he explained.

"I gathered that," I said dryly. "So. Portuguese, huh? I'm assuming there's a story behind that?" We had already shared quite a few personal stories, actually, over the week and a half of working closely to prepare for this trip, and during those portions of the twelve-hour flight when we were both awake. None of those stories, however,

suggested fluent Portuguese would figure into his background. Granted, I had never specifically asked whether he spoke it, because it had never occurred to me that he might. But I was still a little surprised that he hadn't told me.

Jack just chuckled and had the grace to look a little sheepish. "My college roommate for about three years was Brazilian. We're still friends actually. He's from São Paulo."

"Does he still live there? Could he bring us our luggage?"

"What, aren't you having fun shopping? On the company dime?" He ducked under the awning of a little sidewalk café and snagged a table for us out of the sun, raising a hand to get the attention of the waiter inside. "I ended up spending quite a bit of time here in the summers, and after we both finished undergrad I stayed with Mario's family for a while and we just sort of hung out, really. Bumming around the country. Gave me a chance to network with some people Mario's dad knew, then there was an internship and eventually I started doing some field research down here. Actually, I did all the work for my thesis in the Amazon. I picked up a few things."

"A few things? Just a mineral water, please," I said to the waiter, who seemed to have no trouble with my English. Jack ordered a beer, to my surprise, and then looked back at me with a cocky, smug smile. He even raised one eyebrow, which he often did. It always drove me slightly nuts.

"So aren't you having fun shopping?"

"What? Oh, of course I am. I mean it's Rio, on the Copacabana, a company credit card. What's not to write home about?"

"Hmm. You're planning to write home?"

"No. I prefer to keep that air of mystery." For a split second I carried it off with a straight face, but then a giggle broke through. "I take digital pictures of *everything*, everywhere I go in the field—or whatever this counts as—and then I do a big photo essay, a scrapbook sort of thing, and e-mail it to all my family and friends. Just the first time I visit a place or if something unusual happens. Usually it's plants and animals, but this time I don't have much wildlife to show yet."

I pulled out my digital camera and showed an amused Jack the shots I'd already managed to get in the limited time we'd had. There was the view of the beach as we drove up to the hotel, Sugar Loaf in the distance. The one really good, unobstructed view we'd had so far of the Christ the Redeemer statue in the distance. A lone pigeon pecking at some sort of wrapper on the sidewalk near the base of a streetlight pole and a few shots of Jack's amazing hotel suite. *Oops*. I tried to flick past the shot of Jack, whom I'd snapped from the back as he leaned out over the balcony admiring the ocean view while I had been inside, also admiring the view.

"Hey, go back, go back. What's this?"

"Do you want me to send you a copy?" I tried to dissemble, as he took the camera from me and clicked around to find the shot again.

And then I realized he was looking at me with those eyes, with that smile creeping around the corners of his mouth. "You can make a special edition of your photo essay

just for me,” he finally said and advanced to the next shot, which was a broad view of the *avenida* we were sitting next to, featuring the sidewalks with their geometric-patterned tiles. The last photo in the series, I thought, taking the camera back...until I clicked the arrow one more time, thinking it would return me to the main menu, and saw a photo of myself trying on the red dress. In the picture, I had just come out of the dressing room and was turning and looking over my shoulder to find the mirror.

“We need to get moving. We still have some things to get done if we’re going to finish in time for a nap before the thing tonight,” he said.

He wasn’t looking, didn’t realize I’d seen the photo. It wasn’t a bad picture of my profile, actually, although I didn’t usually like photographs of myself. Resisting the urge to delete it, I turned the camera off and returned it to my tote bag.

“My friend Mario doesn’t still live in São Paulo, by the way,” Jack was saying. “He has a house about an hour and a half from here, up in the hills. I’m actually planning to spend next weekend there once the conference is over, see some sights, that sort of thing. You’re welcome to come too, he has plenty of room. Or you can just spend Saturday and Sunday at the hotel of course, either way. But you might even change your mind about Rio if you get away from the beach. Brazil is one of those places ecologists tend to like.”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “Rainforests. They’re pretty neat.” And my subsequent story about a two-week bird-tagging project in Costa Rica took us from the café back out onto the street, ignoring the charming sidewalk tiles and the colorful local flavor to chat about interesting creatures we had camped out to see and take notes on in our college days.

It wasn’t until Jack stopped at the swimsuit shop we’d been heading toward and looked across the street with a funny expression that I abandoned the conversation to follow his gaze. I nearly choked on suppressed laughter when I saw what he was looking at.

There, next to a formalwear rental place with tuxes in the window, was what by every indication appeared to be a kinky lingerie shop.

The window display featured torso mannequins sporting a range of apparel, from simple leather g-strings to fairly fetish-worthy bustier-and-garter sets. The crotchless black leather hipsters with little red hearts along the edges were my immediate favorite, possibly because I had a pair much like them only in satin, back at home.

If Jack hadn’t been there I would have been in that store like a speeding bullet, probably ignoring the panties and checking out what they had under the glass display counters I just knew were in there somewhere behind all the leather, lace and high-gloss latex. Would they carry lubes in interesting local flavors? Were Brazilian vibrators any different from American ones? Perhaps I owed it to myself to find out. Later. When I wasn’t shopping with my boss.

After a moment of awkward silence, Jack gave a little shrug and said a bit too innocently, "But you said you had undies in your carry-on bag, so you're already all set."

At my incredulous snicker he just grinned disarmingly and steered me back toward the swimsuit shop, where I tried not to act too shocked at the prices. Even with limited experience in converting the currency in my head, I could see this was going to be an expensive purchase. I was already deep into justifying that expense to myself. It was a special situation, after all—a girl doesn't get to buy a bathing suit in Rio every day, and the suits were absolutely gorgeous.

"This isn't on the company card *or* on you, by the way," Jack murmured, startling me as I pored over a rack of suits that looked like they would be almost painfully complicated to put on. "In fact, can I get about a twenty-second suspension on the company's very clear and excellent and appropriate sexual harassment policy to ask you something, Kate?"

He followed up quickly at my raised eyebrow. "It has absolutely no bearing on your work, which I wouldn't ever call into question because it's impeccable. You're here because you're good at what you do, and for no other reason. I don't want you to think I had any ulterior motive in asking you to come to this thing instead of, say...well, anybody else. And your reaction can be just as off-the-record as the question. No harm, no foul. Okay?"

He looked so earnest, I ignored the huge neon sign in my mind that was flashing *DANGER, Katie Snow, DANGER!* Instead I just nodded. My mouth was too dry for me to say much of anything anyway.

"The thing is, we could go to a tourist-trap swimsuit place anywhere on the strand," Jack explained, "and I'd hand you the company card and tell you to knock yourself out. I brought you here instead because I feel a little bad about the lost luggage. I mean, you didn't even want to come to Rio in the first place, and now your clothes may be lost forever. So I wanted to get you something, a souvenir. I thought I could buy you a really great bathing suit to wear in Rio, since you need one anyway. It's sort of the bathing suit capital of the world, so it seemed like a good memento. But I didn't know how that sort of gift would be received. By you. And my twenty seconds is probably up now."

He was offering to buy me a bikini worth a few hundred dollars, American, and he wondered how I would receive the gesture? I looked for my flashing neon sign but it was flickering out in a flood of hero-worship and rampaging hormones, egged on by travel fatigue. "I have absolutely no problem with that, Sir." *Oops.* The "Sir" was possibly a bit much. "If anything, the comment about the lingerie store was more inappropriate than that, when you think about it. Although since you weren't offering to buy them, I guess it didn't really have the same impact."

Jack smiled at me then, *really* smiled, and at that moment I would've gone along with him buying me a full kinky wardrobe of lingerie from the store across the road if he'd suggested it. My mother—who, fortunately for me, was not there—would

probably have assured me that there was absolutely no difference between accepting underwear as a gift and accepting a bathing suit as a gift. She would have insisted that I should in no way consider it socially permissible to accept a present of this nature from a man who wasn't my husband, in any case.

And I suspected Jack had a mother somewhere who would tell him the same thing about buying me such a thing, and would also have a thing or two to say about the type of woman who would receive that present and not fling it back in his face. But she wasn't here either, and we were both exhausted from the flight, and my own swimsuit was somewhere between São Paulo and here, and it was *Rio*...

Fifteen minutes later I was the proud owner of the slinkiest black bathing suit ever constructed. Surprisingly, though it looked complicated, it had proved easy enough to put on. After I brought it out to the register, the salesgirl—who spoke a surprising amount of English. Maybe Portuguese wasn't going to be needed here after all—started to get simpering and catty about Americans' grooming habits, and where I could go to get a bikini wax. I adored the expression on her face when I calmly explained that I found even the typical Brazilian-style wax simply left too much hair for my taste.

It was a delicious moment because it was nothing but the truth. I had actually gotten into the habit of keeping the whole area completely clean-shaven about a dozen years earlier, when I was seventeen and terrified somebody might see a scrap of hair at a pool party or peeking out of my drill team uniform trunks. It did mean traveling with some fairly extensive shaving equipment at all times, but at least I never had to worry about embarrassing pubic hair sighting when I picked a swimsuit. The occasional ingrown hair, yes. Having to go to a strange bikini-waxing parlor in a country where I didn't speak the language, no. It was a trade-off that seemed fair enough to me.

Jack, of course, was not privy to the bout of bitchiness over girly hair grooming practices. He had stepped up to the counter to pay for the suit only after all of that had transpired. More glee for me, because the snotty salesgirl clearly found him attractive but assumed he was mine since he was buying me a hot bathing suit, and his fluent Portuguese just messed with her anti-tourist mindset even more.

And then his hand was on my back again, and was it my imagination or did he wrap his fingers just a little bit farther around my waist? We wove our way through the pedestrian traffic and talked about possibly renting some scooters to check out some other sights the next day, since the actual conference sessions didn't start until Monday.

When the crowd moved across the street, we moved along with it automatically and were soon back at the Copacabana Palace, retiring politely to our separate suites for our separate, much-needed naps.

Chapter Three

I hated the alarm that woke me. It was an absolute son of a bitch. Only my inability to find the snooze button on the unfamiliar device kept me from hitting it repeatedly. Well, that and realizing I had no choice but to get up right away if I wanted to have time to shower before the cocktail party. And walking around in eighty-degree weather might be small potatoes compared to Houston in the summer, but I still felt grungy after half a day of that. Not to mention the overnight flight that had preceded it. A shower was a clear necessity.

The prospect of my new dress got me going and I pushed myself into the shower, finding the instant heat and endless water pressure to be a pleasant surprise. The whole bathroom itself was a surprise, really, inasmuch as it was clad from floor to ceiling in pink granite, with high-end fixtures and a tub that could probably fit three. The Brazilian notion of “business class” clearly outstripped the paltry American view of what people at a work-related conference required for comfort. I promised myself a long bath later, sticking to the glass shower enclosure for now and trying to hurry despite how fantastic the heavily thrumming water felt on my back and shoulders.

At last, with my hair tucked into a dampish, messy, silk-frilled bun and wearing the least makeup I thought I could get away with—which was still about twice as much as I ever wanted to wear—I presented myself at Jack’s door and knocked politely, heart suddenly pounding in my throat. Why was I nervous? I saw the man every day of the week at work. Of course, he didn’t buy me bathing suits every day of the week.

Oh. And he didn’t come to work looking or smelling anything like *this* either. He looked like he’d just strolled off a yacht, and he smelled...exotic. Spicy, heady...really almost edible. If he wore that scent to the office he’d never be able to walk around, the floor would just be covered with swooning women.

“What do you think?” he asked casually, rubbing his face and sniffing his hand, then smiling in a purely friendly way as he walked me to the elevator. “Too much? Too girly? I got it at the gift shop downstairs, mine was in my big suitcase.”

“Hmmm? Oh. No, not too girly.” *Heavenly, sexy, dizzying, complex, lust-inducing. Do you mind if I just bury my nose in your neck and smell you, maybe take a few tiny nibbles?* “It’s very nice.”

“Good. Hey, you look nice, by the way. I wouldn’t normally say anything, because of the whole sexual harassment thing, but I figure you’d want to know.”

“Thanks,” I chuckled. “That’s okay, you can feel free to reassure me that I look nice, and also please tell me if I have toilet paper dragging from my shoe or anything like that. I mean, you’re the only one I know here.”

That last part turned out to be not quite true, as it happened. When we got down to the poolside bar area where the early arrivers were meeting for cocktails, I saw no less than three colleagues I knew slightly from previous conferences or through work. Two of the women I recognized swept me into their conversation immediately. Much to my relief, actually. I knew I couldn't spend the whole evening talking only to Jack, and I had never been good at mingling.

"Isn't that Jack Benedict? Your boss, right?" one of the ladies asked, trying not to eye him too obviously as the three of us walked toward the bar. "I heard about the re-org, by the way. Congratulations."

"I admit I'd rather still be in the field," I said, reaching for a fruity drink with an umbrella in it. "But I can't complain, and it isn't like I had any conferences in Rio in my old position."

"I just got lucky," our other colleague said. Jane, was that her name? I wasn't sure if I knew her too well for it to be embarrassing to ask at this point. "My boss was supposed to come, but his wife is about nine and a half months pregnant and evidently she pitched a huge fit about him leaving the country. So here I am."

I explained the amazing coincidence, that my own attendance here was pregnancy-related as well. "It's Jane, right? I'm sorry, I'm terrible with names. I think we sat next to each other at some session on cleanup at OTC."

Jane flicked her streaked blonde hair over her shoulder with a laugh. "That's okay, we should all do introductions. I admit I can't remember either of y'all's names. Sorry, sorry!" She giggled at the other girl, who wore a look of mock affront.

"Last time I save a place for you in the potty line. She's kidding, by the way. We have the advantage of working together though, so she'd *better* remember my name. I'm Kendra Patterson, and she is indeed Jane. Jane Nesmith."

"Jane. Jane Bond," said Jane, giggling again. I realized she must have already had at least one fruity umbrella drink before my arrival.

"Shhh. We're both with Biotech Consulting. And you're Chrissy or Kelly or something like that, and you're with Globe. That much I remember."

"Katie Snow. Pleased to meet you both, sort of, again."

"And you're lucky enough here to be with Jack, oh my God," Kendra said.

I blushed, hoping the low light by the pool would hide the evidence. "Well, not *with* him, of course. Just here at the conference. As for the 'oh my God' part, I try to ignore it. I mean, he *is* my boss." So much for "Jackass". Apparently his reputation outside our own company was a bit more flattering.

"Yowza," Jane remarked quietly, following Kendra's discreet nod in Jack's direction. "He looks like a freaking magazine cover. How are you gonna ignore *that*?" She sounded a little sarcastic though, and she gave Kendra a smirk I couldn't quite interpret.

"Jane, chill out," said Kendra mildly, swirling her drink—a glass of wine, not a silly *Fantasy Island* rum drink like the rest of us had. "Shouldn't we be networking or something, ladies?" She looked cool and crisp, and I realized she had managed to get a navy linen cocktail suit from Houston to Brazil without wrinkling it. Or perhaps she was the type who carried a travel steamer. Or knew enough to get one from the hotel right away, upon arrival. She had clearly not lost *her* luggage. And her hair, sleek and black, wasn't threatening to tumble from her bun, nor was the smooth mocha of her skin beginning to bead with sweat in the humidity, as mine was.

"Network, schnetwork," Jane replied. "I'd rather gossip about Katie's boss some more. But what the hell. Um, how's the EPA treating y'all these days, Katie?"

And from that rather awkward segue, we did actually spend some time discussing work. By the time I'd moved on to another group I felt a little more comfortable with mingling, although I couldn't help but follow Jack's easy progress around the party with some envy. Everyone seemed to know him, and everyone seemed to greet him like a long-lost friend. Kendra Patterson included, I noticed, and was slightly ashamed of myself for immediately checking to see if she was wearing a wedding ring.

She was not. Nor was Jane.

The drinks were seductive, the food tangy and spicy, and by the time true dark had fallen the conversation and laughter were flowing freely, echoing oddly over the gleaming turquoise water of the enormous pool. Time passed more quickly than I thought it would. It must have been close to two hours later that I felt a hand at the small of my back, and knew whose it was before he spoke.

"A bunch of us are going swimming, we're heading upstairs to change. You want in?"

As if I might say no. Daunted as I was by the prospect of appearing in my new bathing suit in public, I was only too eager to play hooky from the schmoozing. And since it was the boss asking, it wasn't as though my choice would be frowned upon.

The anxiety about the suit grew much sharper when, upstairs and staring at myself in front of the bathroom mirror, I started to panic. True, it covered everything it should. Technically. But there was something about the positioning of the fabric, or maybe the fact that it looked more like a collection of narrow black straps than an actual swimsuit. Even if it wasn't exposing much more skin than any other bathing suit might, I felt like I was revealing parts of myself I normally didn't.

Jack's tap on the door made me jump, and I only remembered at the last minute to snatch up the fluffy white hotel robe and throw it over myself before answering.

"Ready?" he asked, and I nodded—but stood there as though the doorway were a force field I couldn't pass through. "Kate? Is something wrong?"

"Um. I'm just wondering if this is really a work-appropriate swimsuit after all. Maybe I should just—"

"Kate, you're probably being ridiculous. I didn't see it on you, but I saw the suit on the counter when I paid for it and it looked fine." But he looked more amused than

annoyed, fortunately. "I'm your boss, and if I say it's work-appropriate, it is." He came into the room, closing the door behind him after peering down the hall, presumably checking to see if the others were waiting by the elevators yet.

"If you're that concerned," he offered, "do you want me to go get Kendra or her friend to check it out for you? You know them, right? They're just a few doors down."

"No! No, that's okay." Kendra had probably brought a range of fully appropriate suits which were already unpacked and all lined up neatly on hangers for her to choose from. I couldn't imagine her in this sort of dilemma. And Jack, of course, looked supremely comfortable in his swimming trunks and t-shirt, which made sense as the trunks were longer than the shorts he'd had on earlier. They were also a royal blue Hawaiian floral print, which I wouldn't have guessed. But then, I wasn't supposed to be speculating about my boss's swimwear, was I?

It was a weird area and we were clearly both stepping into it, because when I looked up from my accidental perusal of Jack's shorts, I caught him looking up from his own perusal of my legs, revealed from foot to mid-thigh by the hastily and rather loosely tied robe.

"Do you want *me* to check it out for you?" he asked in a low voice that walked like soft fingers down my spine. *Danger, Katie Snow...* But I nodded without thinking twice, because of course that was exactly what I wanted, whether I wanted to admit it to myself or not.

It's a bathing suit, I told myself, everyone's going to see it anyway. It's even a one-piece. Sort of.

But I wasn't doing a good job of kidding myself. I was crossing a line, and I would almost certainly regret it. My hands were shaking a little bit as I untied the loose knot and slipped the terrycloth robe from my shoulders, slinging it over one arm because I needed something to do with my hands. Something to keep them from betraying my nerves at the idea that Jack's blue, blue gaze was dipping into uncharted territory, shoulders to waist to hips. But I had to smile when he looked back up at me expectantly and made a little spinning motion with his finger. Obediently, I turned around and completed the three-sixty to find him looking extremely appreciative.

It was an expression I found quite gratifying, on one hand – but which on the other did nothing to convince me the suit was something to wear in public.

"I say it looks great, and it's more than appropriate for this particular function, but of course it's really up to you," he said at last, turning back toward the door as if to go. "Is that enough reassurance for you?"

"Not really," I said, laughing. "Although you *are* the boss, Sir." Oops again.

Jack turned with his hand on the door handle, raising one eyebrow and giving me a *look*. If I'd thought he was a bit intense before, I'd been sorely mistaken. But there was humor there too, which somehow made it even more devastating. He seemed to be debating something with himself, and losing. When he spoke, it was in that low, low voice again, thrilling me down to my toes.

"I may really regret asking this. I didn't come here planning to ask this. But out of curiosity, little Katie, what would you do if I just said, 'You *will* be wearing the suit, so get out in that hallway, *now*'?"

Did he mean aside from letting my jaw drop like an inebriated codfish and blinking at him like I was slightly deranged? Because I know that was my first reaction. My second—because I figured I had been thinking about how much I disliked my new job anyway, so I might as well just go out with a bang, not a whimper—was to stammer out, "I would...I would say 'Yes Sir' and go out in the hallway, right now."

"I see. Good to know." Our eyes met in a moment of complete understanding, and if he had held my gaze much longer I would've been on my knees. Instead, he opened the door and held it for me, giving a slight wave down the hall to who I assumed were some of the others standing by the elevator. "It's really up to you," he repeated with a thoughtful, slightly distracted expression.

But of course it no longer *was* really up to me. The damage was done. I had to stop myself from asking permission to put the robe back on before following him out into the hall like an obedient pup. And then his hand was at my back again, a searing pressure even through the heavy terrycloth, and we headed downstairs for what seemed like the longest moonlight swim of my life. Well, true, it was the only moonlight swim of my life thus far. But still, it seemed very long.

I considered sneaking away after about forty-five minutes, but Jack noticed and called to me to wait for him. When he hauled himself from the pool, dripping and glorious in the combined gleam of the moon and the poolside lights, I busied myself with my towel and robe, retying the sash a little tighter around me and carefully folding the towel lengthwise before draping it over my arm just so.

The top half of Jack was even more distracting than his legs had been earlier. There wasn't an ounce of fat on him, but he looked more like an athlete than a gym rat. His muscles didn't look so much large as *authentic*. As though he just had very vigorous hobbies—another thought I tried to squash firmly.

"Do you want to see some Atlantic rainforest tomorrow, by the way?" he asked as he pulled his t-shirt back on, much to my mingled relief and dismay, and we set off for the elevators.

"Tomorrow? Really?"

"Yeah. I meant to tell you sooner, but I forgot when the swimming thing came up. Someone from the parks department was there tonight, and we knew some people in common. Anyway, he offered to take anyone who's interested from the conference on a private hike up the *Pico de Tijuca*. It's over two thousand feet up, in the middle of the national forest. You have your jungle stuff, right? Hiking shoes and all that?"

"Of course," I said immediately—then realized it was all in the missing bags. "Assuming a miracle occurs and our luggage gets here," I added. I didn't really care about the shoes. The enormous Tijuca National Forest, which abutted the city, was

another of those sights I considered compensation for having to spend a week at the beach. If I had to, I'd hike there in my loafers.

"It's already here. Mine is, anyway. I almost tripped over it when I got to my room to change. Wasn't yours?"

I hadn't even noticed at the time, but to my delight the bag was indeed in my room when we arrived back there. Jack had stopped by my door while I checked, and then insisted I go ahead and make sure everything was in my case. When I triumphantly turned with one hiking shoe in my hand, he was standing just inside the now-closed door with an indulgent smile on his face.

"So you'll be all set for *Tijuca* tomorrow," he said approvingly. "Which is a relief, because I had no idea where to go to get you some hiking boots in this town at eight on a Sunday morning."

"I couldn't have worn something that wasn't broken in anyway," I pointed out, picking up the shoe and its mate and placing them neatly together at the foot of the bed, where I had placed my suitcase to check that everything was still in it. I had made only a very brief check. I had no intention of letting my employer see everything that was in my suitcase, by any means. "This seems fine, by the way. All present and accounted for." I bit my tongue on the "Sir" that nearly followed, and smiled what I hoped was a polite smile up at Jack.

"Okay. Well, I'm going to go get some rest then. Um..."

The moment had suddenly turned strangely awkward, as though Jack wasn't quite sure of what exit line he needed. We'd been in and out of one another's suites earlier in the day with no trouble, chatting and laughing lightly about the luggage predicament. Now, however, things felt different. Not like a date, which wouldn't have been possible, but certainly that same hint of will-he-or-won't-he that happens in the car just after the new couple pulls up to the curb at the evening's end, or perhaps on the girl's front porch just before the door is unlocked.

"Thanks for helping me shop and everything," I said finally. "And for the bathing suit. So...I guess I'll see you at breakfast tomorrow?"

"Right...right." Jack seemed to come to himself and, with a shake of his head and another roguish little smile, he waved and turned around, heading out of the suite. "You're welcome. See you tomorrow, Kate," he said as he disappeared and the door closed after him.

I told myself I was only imagining the hint of regret in his eyes and voice.

Telling myself that, however, didn't keep me from falling asleep to an unbidden fantasy about what would have happened if I had given him a different and much more specific answer earlier when he'd asked me what my response would be to his ordering me out to the hall in my bathing suit. Because since that time, I'd had time to formulate several different possible responses far better than the one I had actually given.

None of them would have resulted in my keeping the swimsuit on long enough to actually make it out to the hallway, of course, much less down to the pool.

Chapter Four

Aside from speaking Portuguese, it seemed Jack was nearly as expert on the local flora and fauna as the guide from the parks department. It made sense, I supposed, since he had done fairly extensive field research here over something like a two-year period, and had been visiting here for years with an ecologist's eye for detail.

His thesis research had involved the effects of rainfall temperature and acidity changes on reptiles and amphibians with permeable skins, so he was well versed on local frogs and lizards. He was also fairly knowledgeable about snakes, which impressed me because my information about South American herpetology extended no further than knowing that the old adage "red meets black, friend to Jack; red meets yellow, kill a fellow" did not necessarily apply outside the United States. Several of the coral snake varieties of the rainforest we were hiking in, as a matter of fact, had red and black stripes adjacent but could kill even a grown human victim quite quickly if antivenin were not available.

I was relieved when Paolo, our guide, assured me it was not only available but in his first-aid pack as we spoke.

It was a stunning morning, clear and cloudless, and we set off early in a group of ten plus two guides. Jane and Kendra were there, and several others I didn't know. But by the time our short convoy of Jeeps had arrived at the parking lot where we would leave the vehicles and start hiking, we had all seen enough fabulous panoramic views and breathtaking waterfalls to give us more than enough to talk about together. Jack and Paolo were making hiking plans in brisk Portuguese throughout our early lunch, which consisted of snacks from one of the little cafés near the national park's center.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the long table where the girls were eating, Jane was worrying about her shoes and Kendra was trying to change the subject rather than confirm her friend's suspicions that she would be miserable by the end of the day. Leather huaraches were great for the beach, but I had to concur with Jane, whiny though she was starting to seem—she would, indeed, regret her choice of footwear before very much longer. Poor thing. She was wearing the same little ankle bracelet she'd had on the previous night too, with a tiny dangling charm shaped like a heart with a keyhole. It was another poor choice for hiking, as it could so easily get snagged on something, but I wasn't going to comment on it.

Kendra, I noted, was wearing very high-quality light hikers, and they looked well worn. We started talking about our shoes, and then the hikes we'd worn them on. Jane, an MBA with only a passing interest in the field side of things, shook her carefully bleached head in disbelief at some of our stories.

"You mean you stayed out in the jungle for a week just to make hash marks on a page every time some monkey ate a bug off some other monkey?" With her Southern belle accent, the line was just priceless.

"Gorilla," Kendra corrected, rolling her eyes. It sounded as though this wasn't the first time they'd discussed the topic. "And make that three weeks, in my case. I had bug bites in places I don't even want to remember. Oh, those were good times."

"At least on today's hike we can enjoy the wonders of insecticide without worrying about it throwing off our results if the animals catch wind of us," I pointed out.

"Y'all are nuts," Jane insisted, getting up to take her tray back to the café.

It was then that I finally relaxed around Kendra—because from the corner of my eye, I caught her not only ogling Jane's admittedly toned butt as she walked away, but saw a telltale smile of tenderness that indicated she didn't actually mind Jane's appalling ignorance regarding the differences between monkeys and gorillas.

Kendra, it seemed, had her own workplace relationship to be concerned with. I couldn't really credit her taste, but I could certainly feel some empathy for the circumstances.

"Is it just, you know...blaming it on Rio?" I asked tentatively, nodding in Jane's direction, hoping that Kendra wouldn't immediately slap me down for suggesting such a thing. Instead, she gave a weary little chuckle.

"God, no. Blame it on...I don't know. We've been together for two years. I don't think we can really blame Houston, can we? Dykes happen despite Houston, not because of it."

"No, you can't blame Houston. I mean, I wish. Sort of. But no." There I went, being all articulate again. Good thing all that graduate school hadn't gone to waste.

"What about you?"

"I don't know what you mean," I said quickly, and a bit archly.

"Oh, don't worry, you're both being very discreet. Do you leave the collar at home?" I blushed, surely, as red as the bromeliads lining the pavement near us, and Kendra immediately backed off. "I'm so sorry, I just thought... Oh really, I'm so, so sorry! I didn't mean to imply—"

"That's okay, really, that's okay," I reassured her. "You're not completely wrong. Um, right lifestyle, wrong relationship. We're not...I don't even know for sure if *he* is. And it's not a full-time lifestyle anyway. Collars would just be for fun. For me. I have no idea about Jack and...and any of that."

"Oh. Oh! Well, still, *that's* a relief. I thought my radar was busted or something. Jack doesn't really scream Dom, he just gives off that quiet something. But you have sub written all over— There I go again," she sighed. "See, once I start, I just can't stop." She was openly teasing me now, it had just taken me a second to catch on. "Sorry. I'm sure it's only obvious to people who know what they're looking at."

I looked down at the table, realizing only then that Jane had cleared not just her own place but Kendra's too, without a word passing between them. And Jane's pretty-yet-impractical anklet with the heart-shaped lock... Kendra followed my gaze with a look of smug self-assurance that I couldn't believe I hadn't recognized earlier.

"Oh," I said, probably stupidly.

"We leave the collar at home," she said with a casual shrug, having obviously followed not only my line of sight but my train of thought.

"Given the statistics we're always hearing," I said, deliberately changing the subject, "does it ever surprise you just how often you end up in conversations like this with relative strangers?"

"Constantly," she agreed. "Just more proof that statistics lie like dogs. There is no such thing as deviance."

My reply, which would have been something witty about Alfred Kinsey, was interrupted by Paolo cautioning us all to make our last preparations for the hike. Jack was already purchasing water bottles and there was a general shuffle toward the restrooms. Within a few minutes we were all trailing like ducklings along the shaded path, with Paolo in the lead and another guide trailing the end of the line.

Jack explained, from his position behind me, that this double posting of guides was as much a precaution against bandits as against losing members of the party. Evidently muggings were quite common in the park, as in the rest of Rio. This news sort of depressed me, but I soon cheered up again in the face of the scenery. Even if I wasn't a huge fan of the tropics, I couldn't deny the Atlantic rainforest was breathtaking.

As the climb grew steeper and we navigated some rough patches, Jack automatically reached up to brace my leg at one particularly tricky point. I didn't really even realize he'd done it until some time later when, having scrambled up another incline and grabbed a dangling root to brace myself, I reached down just as automatically to offer him a hand up. We'd never hiked together, it was just natural teamwork. And it felt good, really good, like we'd been doing it for years.

I had just paused to consider this development when he drew up next to me at a widening of the trail and nudged me with some urgency, pointing silently. There, peeking out at us through the sparse underbrush, was a coati, his long and fuzzy snout poking inquisitively toward the human intruders. We watched him awhile, he watched us, and then he waddled quietly off into the bushes. The whole thing lasted perhaps ten seconds and after the little creature had disappeared, Jack and I looked at one another and shared a huge grin.

"I don't care how many times I've seen it, that is always so cool," he whispered adorably.

And as he continued up the rough path, I realized I was perilously close to falling head-over-heels in love with my boss.

* * * * *

The summit, *Pico de Tijuca*, was everything I could have expected—the panoramic vista of the city and bay beneath, the surrounding world-famous peaks, the sky that was still improbably blue since we weren't quite into the rainy season yet. I took photo after photo, and for a few moments I even managed to forget what a bad idea it would be to fall madly in love with Jack, because he came and stood behind me with his hands resting lightly on my shoulders. He looked at the view over my head, pointing out landmarks that of course were already familiar to him. It was informative but hard for me to attend to, melting under his hands as I was.

Paolo asked him a few questions in Portuguese before shifting gears and translating for my benefit.

"I was asking, have you and Jack stayed before with *Senhor Coelho*...Mario? He has a view that nearly compares with this one."

"Oh," I said, a bit flustered. "No, I haven't, but Jack has."

"Kate hasn't met Mario yet," Jack explained, squeezing my shoulders a little more firmly, causing a riot in the portion of my brain that tried to keep my work and personal life separate. "In fact, this is her first visit to Brazil."

"Ah! I never would have guessed. You seem to know the rainforest very well. You are also an ecologist?" I could see his enthusiasm about "his" park, the eagerness to relate its secrets to others who cared about such things. He was a stoutly built, bespectacled, middle-aged man, but he was beaming like a boy here, surveying the view with evident pride.

"Yes, although I don't get to do much fieldwork these days," I replied. More sadly than I realized, perhaps, because Jack gave me a curious look.

"You really do miss it, don't you?"

I shouldn't have looked up into his eyes just then. Any look from him was too intimate right now. I felt like he could see right through me. Just meeting one another's gaze, I felt as though we were doing something inappropriate—which perhaps wasn't entirely untrue, because Paolo coughed politely after a moment and looked away.

"Yes, I do," I said at last, looking away and taking another picture to occupy myself. "Who wouldn't?"

It was a rhetorical question, and I wasn't quite sure why I felt a little annoyed that he didn't respond. To fill the silence, I complimented Paolo on the park and the view, and with a proprietary air, he began describing the various features of Tijuca National Forest in loving detail. I listened with only half my attention. The other half was focused on pretending to take photos while really watching Jack. He had wandered away after a few minutes of listening, and was walking around the top of the rocky peak, looking at the views from every direction, occasionally bending to examine different types of rocks or vegetation.

His goal for the day, he had mentioned, was to spot at least three different kinds of snakes. He had already spied a huge boa lounging in a tree just off the trail in as stereotypical a pose as one might hope for, great mottled loops of muscle that nearly

blended into the surrounding branches and vines. I had taken a picture for my scrapbook. We had seen a second smaller boa a few minutes later, but he insisted it didn't count, as it was substantially the same as the first snake. Then there had been a tiny flash of red and tan in the shadowy undergrowth near one of the waterfalls that Jack had assured me was a swiftly departing coral snake or, perhaps, a nonvenomous false coral.

As I watched now, Jack tensed and stared into a small clump of grass growing up from some rocks a few feet away from him. For some reason I couldn't name, I could feel the hair on my neck and arms prickling despite the heat as he backed away with excruciating care, his eyes locked on the rocks until he was quite some distance away, until he finally turned and walked back to join us, looking a little pale.

"It's just a baby," he murmured. "It must really like the sun on that rock, or it would have either struck or run away when I got that close. I didn't even see it until I was almost on top of it."

I realized he was breathing fast, sweating, and knew why when he pointed and said quietly to Paolo, "*Jararaca*."

A pit viper. He had evidently spotted his third snake, but likely not one he had envisioned getting so close to unexpectedly. And he said he'd been almost on top of it.

"I see," Paolo said calmly, although he too turned a little pale under his deep tan. He began circulating through the group, quietly suggesting it was time to start the hike back down to the vehicles and wordlessly shepherding everyone away from the area where the potentially deadly snake was lurking.

"Are you all right?" I asked, not sure whether he would prefer to be left alone or whether I was even willing to leave him alone just then.

"Yeah," Jack said, but then wiped his hands over his face with a self-deprecating chuckle. "I did want to see some different snakes today. But that sure as hell wasn't one of them. Not like that, anyway. Caught me off guard. Which isn't a good way to get caught by a *jararaca*." He tried to shake it off, grimacing, and then smiled again bravely. "Let's go," he said after a minute, sliding one hand just beneath my shoulder as we rejoined the group on the odd stairs carved into the rock face at the top of the trail.

I headed down the steep stairway, arms out for balance, trying not to reach for the old iron guide chain that had long since rusted past the point of usefulness. Jack let his hand trail down my arm and catch my own, steadying me, seemingly unaware that my wobbly moment had almost nothing to do with the terrain and everything to do with his hand against my skin. It was almost as though he was pretending for that brief time, letting himself play at the idea of a different relationship between us. It was too easy to imagine—because my imagination had been going there for days now anyway—that we were actually here "together". Lovers. In Rio for a week.

It was contagious. I had to try it. On the way down the mountain, I let myself reach for his hand to help slow my descent down a shifting patch of rock. He let it stay there until he needed it again to balance himself on the next steep track. At one point he

looked back and caught my eye, held it a minute and gave me a slow, lazy smile that turned me into a puddle of mush poorly suited for hiking. He also showed no surprise when I tugged shyly at his arm a few hundred yards later to point out a vivid purple *cattleya* orchid perching high in a tree overhead.

Laughing, he pointed farther along the way, where a woolly monkey was leaping one-handed through the trees near the trail, the other hand full of a piece of some yellow fruit. We watched it disappear from view and then Jack pulled me along for a few steps behind him, giving my hand a distinct squeeze before letting it go.

Astonishing. I was engaging in mutual public displays of affection with Jack Benedict.

Jack Benedict was treating me like his *girlfriend*.

This was going to take some careful thinking over.

Chapter Five

The monkey that greeted us later in the parking lot more than balanced out the scary snake, at least in my opinion. It was one of the few we had seen close up that day for any length of time, and it seemed disinclined to leave its chosen tree directly adjacent to the slots our guides had parked in. A beautiful, cocky emperor tamarin. It jeered at us from an overhanging branch as we flopped back into the Jeeps in exhaustion. It was so clearly unimpressed with us, with our touristy ways and our lack of treats.

Jane, whose feet were indeed in a bad way, cracked us all up by giving the monkey the finger. I made a mental note to buy her a drink when next we all assembled for cocktails. The girl had spunk, I had to give her that, and she hadn't complained about the shoes during the hike itself, although I knew it must have been miserable for her.

"Paolo's wrong, you know," Jack commented when we were on the road back down to the shore. "Mario's view is actually better, I think. You don't have the view of the city, just mountains, and the ocean in the distance if it's clear. And from his place there's some older rainforest to hike through if you want to, while we're there." He had stretched his legs out as far as they would go in front of him and flung his head back against the seat. I'd thought he was asleep until he spoke.

"So I'm definitely going with you then?"

He turned his head and pulled his glasses down his nose a bit, examining my expression from over the top of the frames. An enigmatic smile curved the corners of his mouth and he said nothing, just replaced the glasses and turned his face back up to the sky — portrait of the modern ecotourist at rest after a hard day's hike.

Was it the contrast between Houston and Rio, I wondered, making my head spin like this? The way that working in completely professional accord for two years and then suddenly holding hands like shy teenagers all seemed to make perfect sense, for some reason? Was it inevitable after two years of trying to keep from thinking about him that way? Or was it just too much sun and heat?

After a minute or so Jack really did seem to go to sleep. And by the time we got back to the hotel, I had almost managed to convince myself that the heat really must be to blame.

* * * * *

Swimming again, this time at the beach, actually sounded good after our hike. The lot of us planned to venture out on the town for dinner, but not until after eight o'clock, as dinner any earlier than that simply wasn't done in Rio. So we had just enough time

for a quick sunset swim, a solid forty-five minutes or so with plenty of time to change afterward.

I almost fell asleep in the elevator on the way back up to the suites but once I had changed into swim togs again, the prospect of wearing my bathing suit on the public beach, in the full light that prevailed since the sun was still well above the horizon, quickly woke me right back up.

I nearly chickened out. From the bathing suit, from the flirting that I knew was such a bad idea, from the whole thing. But it was already too seductive to resist, and even putting on the suit again, damp and clingy though it was after last night's swim, made me slightly turned-on with the keen awareness that Jack would be seeing me in it and clearly enjoying what he saw.

I considered trading it for my safe lime green one-piece, now recovered in my luggage, but it wasn't a very lengthy consideration. I threw on a gauzy, black knee-length cover-up and flip-flops and was out the door and back down to the lobby with my purloined hotel towel before Jack arrived at the spot where we'd all agreed to rendezvous.

Kendra and Jane were already there, loitering in the rather elegant lobby chairs by the door nearest the beach, Jane wiggling uncomfortably on her seat.

I asked Jane politely about the state of her feet and she answered noncommittally, though since she was also wearing flip-flops, I could see the blisters on her heels and the nearly raw red marks where the leather of her sandals had abused the flesh over the course of the hike. But the way she was shifting in her chair didn't really look like it had anything to do with her feet. It really looked more like...

Oh. Again, *oh*.

Kendra's especially smug smile, the way she was studiously avoiding Jane's glare. Jane's murderous glances at Kendra each time she shifted her weight from one side to the other—murderous but also tinged with another, just-as-powerful emotion I now recognized as lust. I put two and two together just about the time the next wave of people came down in the elevator, Jack included.

In fact, I was glad for the distraction that Jack's arrival provided, because I was a bit embarrassed to be alone with Kendra and Jane after my epiphany about what seemed to have transpired between them in their shared suite. Although I was strongly considering a word with Jane, if I could get her by herself...

"Hang on," I said to Jack finally, when we were all trooping out the door. Lagging back a bit in the crowd, I let Jane catch up to me, seeing that Kendra had walked on ahead. Hoping she wouldn't be offended, I leaned close and mentioned that I had some Tiger Balm in my bag upstairs if she needed it later to help make it through a sit-down dinner.

"For...for my feet?" she asked in confusion. "Oh no, honey, I don't think—"

"I didn't mean for your *feet*, honey," I replied coyly, putting much more Texan into my voice than usual, matching Jane's own drawn-out vowels.

Jane was silent for a few seconds and then nodded, looking only a little bit embarrassed. Tiger Balm was almost a code word. The lethally fiery balm was well known among those of us who tended to be on the receiving end of things when it came to our chosen expression of love. That is, as long as the skin is only bruised, not broken. On broken or abraded skin, Tiger Balm is a punishment – one I'd only experienced once and hoped never to go through again.

"Toss it to me in the hall when we come back up, but *puh-lease* try not to let Kendra see or she'll shit a brick." A few seconds later she paled and asked, "Did she *tell* you?" Her steel magnolia façade was near crumbling, and I rushed to reassure her.

"No, no, she didn't have to. I figured it out on my own. I mean, I figured out the two of you were...together...earlier. And figured out some other things. You know. And the way you were moving around on your seat earlier...well, I've been there enough times that I recognized that wiggle. The balm will burn like hell at first but –"

"She did tell me again and again to pack those stupid, ugly fucking hiking boots," Jane admitted, "but I threw them out at the last minute when I was making room for a new dress. She hasn't even seen it on me yet. Damn, this hurts!"

"We'll do a sneaky ointment handoff later. You can keep it. It's not like I'm going to need Tiger Balm this trip for anything but a pulled muscle if we go hiking again."

"You're not?" Jane said, her initial confusion replaced by a dawning awareness. "Oh honey, that's just sad. But maybe y'all will make up. Rio's pretty romantic, after all." And breaking into a painful little jog, she left my side and rejoined Kendra, leaving me a bit puzzled and slightly concerned.

Just what impression *had* Jack and I been giving everyone?

The question was driven from my mind instantly when I felt a grip like a vise clamp around my wrist – and Jack's very quiet voice not asking, but telling, "Later on you *will* be explaining some things, little Katie."

Oops.

Jack clearly deduced part of his explanation for himself at the beach. Jane tore her shorts and t-shirt off and dashed into the water with no regard for the effects of the hot sand or saltwater on her feet, but I could see his eyes widen as he spotted the patches of pink still clearly visible on either side of her butt where her bikini bottom wasn't quite covering all the evidence. And without realizing it, Kendra gave an even clearer sign, watching Jane's little dance across the sand with a very satisfied smirk and unconsciously shaking her hand from the wrist. Well, it made sense her hand was probably a little sore too, if she'd done that much damage in that short of time.

Jack turned away from this scene with a little "huh" and a look on his face that was comical enough to force a nervous giggle from me. He looked my way, puzzled, and helped me spread out the towels while mulling things over.

"So I guess I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place. I was going to say you should see if Jane will do the sunscreen on your back, but apparently that would be

pretty inappropriate. And obviously I'm not going to suggest you ask Kendra to go anywhere *near* your back."

After a second of trying not to laugh, I couldn't keep it in. And to my relief, Jack joined in as we sat down, puzzling all those around us as we purposefully didn't share the joke.

"I don't need help with sunscreen, I can reach everything back there," I said, opening the tube and demonstrating. Only the spots just below my shoulder blades were tough to rub in, but I managed. Even the last few sunbeams of the day were more than capable of frying my skin if I wasn't slathered with the stuff.

"So what else do I need to explain, Sir?" I asked saucily as I worked, forgetting my caution for just a moment. The others, four other mid-to-upper-management types, had already spread their towels and headed for the water. Kendra was sitting a little too far away to hear us over the noise of the crowded beach, and seemed already lost in the book she'd brought with her. She'd kindly offered to watch everyone else's stuff while they swam. "Do I need to explain about the Tiger Balm?"

"No. I know what that's for. It works for the normal kinds of sore muscles too, you know."

"True, it isn't *just* for us perverts," I said, moving to stretch luxuriously in the sun's lingering heat and then stopping short with a horrified gasp, realizing what I'd just said and to whom. "Oh my god, Sir, I am so sorry! I didn't, I can't *believe* I just said —"

"Kate."

"It was totally inappropriate, I must be just...it's the sun or something, it's —"

"Kate. Stop talking."

"Yes Sir. Oh. I mean —"

"Shhh. *Stop.*"

I just nodded this time, too terrified to go on. Flirting was one thing, brief hiking-related handholding was one thing, but *this*? Were there any odds I was *not* about to receive the firing of a lifetime?

"So," said Jack. "So. Our shy, reserved little Katie not only knows all the signs and symptoms of a lesbian bottom having had her butt thoroughly smacked — it was about the shoes, did I hear that right? — she also has the nerve to sneak her new friend some Tiger Balm, plotting right under the top's nose, to help her with her boo-boo. What do you think Kendra is going to do to Jane when she finds out, little Katie? She may not see it but you know she'll smell it, that stuff's impossible to miss."

I couldn't answer right away, because my entire worldview had just been given a forcible quarter turn and I was still trying to regain my footing in this new, strange universe in which Jack asked me questions about the relationship between a Dominant and a submissive, and was expecting me to answer.

And was looking at me as though I'd better answer right.

And, *oh my God*, I wanted him.

My brain kicked into overdrive and I experienced a moment of deep empathy for what animals must feel like when they're caught in oncoming headlights. *I do not have office romances. Never, never, never. And especially not with the boss. I can't. Can't. There could not possibly be a worse idea. Never in history has that ever worked out well for anyone. At least nobody that I can think of right now. But...he's not just a coworker or a boss, he's...Jack.*

"I didn't think about that, Sir," I admitted at last, my mouth dry and my pulse racing as I fell into a form of address that was all too familiar, but not one I thought I'd ever be using deliberately with this man. I was looking down studiously at my towel, at the hotel crest on the corner where sand was already infiltrating the gold embroidery.

So I heard, rather than saw, Jack's frustrated sigh at my answer, and his next few words which he seemed to be whispering to himself as much as to me.

"I didn't come here *planning* to do this," he said, repeating what he'd said the previous day. "I should have known this was a bad idea, Kate. It's Rio. I mean, I know that. But I thought I'd be fine with it, even here, and there was no way you hadn't earned this trip. Nobody else was remotely qualified. I couldn't rationalize a way *not* to pick you that didn't just reek of discrimination. But getting here and finding out that you're actually...*damn*. I mean, it's just too much. I'm only human."

"I...I don't..." I couldn't finish it, wasn't even sure I knew what I'd intended to say.

"Yes, you *do*. That's the problem. When I could tell myself that you didn't, that there was no way I was right...little Katie Snow who always blushed if anyone said anything remotely out of line. I won't pretend I hadn't figured you out on some level, Kate, but I could at least pretend it was only in my mind. That it had to be wishful thinking. But now this? I mean...*damn!*" he said again, punching a fist into the forgiving white sand beside his hip. He sat with one arm around his knees, staring out over the water, his eyes far bluer than the ocean. I noticed, because I had peeked up at him now and found I couldn't look away.

This was unfortunate. It meant that when he finally turned his gaze on me I was caught out, completely open, the longing in my eyes as transparent as it had ever been. The only way out was straight through, and I only knew I couldn't keep sitting on that beach next to him, feeling like an idiot and not saying anything. I had to take some sort of action, contrary to my nature as it might be, to get myself away from the situation before I did something even more stupid.

I almost couldn't believe what I heard myself saying, however, when I finally did talk.

"I guess there isn't much point in acting like I don't know what you're talking about. There would only be one reason to do that, which would be to indicate I wasn't interested." I took a minute to look out over the waves myself before going on. "Last night you asked what I'd do if you just ordered me out into the hall, and I told you I'd say 'yes Sir' and go out to the hall right away. And you said it was really up to me." I risked a little look at him. He was watching me expressionlessly.

"The thing is, Jack, I'm starting to realize I actually made my choice quite some time ago. And now, apparently, the issue of mismatched preferences isn't an issue, is it? It's just back to the question of how willing we are to risk it. So I think now...it's actually up to *you*."

Before he could answer, I hopped up from the towel and almost sprinted to the water, not stopping at the tide line but diving straight in and swimming against the waves until my body had cooled in the soothing Atlantic water and my head felt slightly clearer. Flicking my hair out of my face and treading water, I looked back at the beach but saw only Kendra by the towels, not Jack.

Bodysurfing back in toward shore until I could just touch down, I bobbed a little on my toes and looked around in growing distress. Jack also wasn't with the group of conference guys—Steve, Andre, Kevin and Other Kevin—who had stopped splashing each other and were now standing in waist-deep water and chatting with some blonde. It was Jane, I saw, after paddling a little closer. Perhaps none of them realized they had little hope of getting anywhere with her, and it was probable none of them realized the reason was that Kendra was already getting there with her regularly.

"I could have been a shark," said a low voice too near my ear, making me jump. I splashed around to face Jack, who had approached me silently and spoken from directly behind me. His greater height enabled him to stand much more firmly on the shifting sand, more easily handling the tidal motion. "Or a jellyfish. Or even just some guy with bad intentions. You weren't paying any attention at all, little Katie. Not very safe."

"I'm...sorry, Sir?" *Please let this be what I think it is...*

"We both would have been, if something had happened. Don't go out that far again, please. Or you'll hear about it from me later. And Katie?" He had started to swim back toward shore but turned back as if what he were about to say was just an afterthought, instead of being the whole point.

"Y-yes Sir?" He stroked back to me, close enough that his face was just inches away from mine, so close I could feel his motions transmitted through the water as he paddled his hands lightly to stay upright.

"I have no idea why Jane had that impression about us. I can only guess it's an assumption she or Kendra made, not something you said."

"It is, Sir, I would never have—"

"Shhh. Either way, I'm sure she'll be very happy for you when you tell her you may well need your Tiger Balm back when she's through with it, after all. Although if you don't want to need it too badly tomorrow, you should be a good girl for me and skip the undies when you're dressing for dinner tonight."

And he swam away with a wicked grin, leaving me treading water that felt infinitely less dangerous, and a great deal less interesting, once he was gone.

Chapter Six

Dinner seemed to take place in some scientifically impossible stretch of time that could expand and contract at will. At some moments, the whole thing seemed to be lasting for hours as idle small talk between the ten of us there dragged on and on, failing to quite pull my interest away from wondering what Jack had planned for after we got back to the suite. We had known each other too long, and this trip was too short, for the night to culminate in anything other than sex, so that much was a given. But the details, particularly those related to what happened *before* the sex...there were too many variables, and my mind reeled a bit at the possibilities.

Another few conference attendees, not interested in the beach earlier, had latched on for dinner—Elizabeth, an environmental specialist with a very, very large oil company, and Georges, a somewhat dapper little French engineer who, it turned out, also spoke Portuguese. When Georges and Jack dropped into their second language to chat, about what I had no idea, time seemed to actually come to a halt.

But then, as I sipped rather wearily at the *caipirinha* I had been nursing since before dinner, I felt Jack's hand shift from the back of my chair, where it had been resting casually, to my shoulder. He traced lazy patterns with his fingertips while regaling Georges with what sounded like a tale of our hike up the *Pica de Tijuca*, and suddenly my heart was pounding and I considered ordering dessert just to have something else to do with my hands before we left the restaurant and returned to the hotel. That event now seemed to loom up all too soon in my future. I was ready, almost painfully so, and had been for almost two years if I was being honest with myself. But I still wasn't quite sure I was *ready*.

Kendra and Jane, glancing furtively around, seemed to be plotting a break for the restroom. I considered joining them, though I hesitated to accidentally horn in on anything. But then Kendra caught my eye as she rose and gave a little nod my way, jerking her head toward the restroom sign.

I murmured a barely audible excuse to Jack and slipped away after the pair, cringing slightly as Elizabeth saw us and tagged along as well in the age-old accepted custom of all the women in the party adjourning to the restroom in a pack.

Just before reaching the door I had a sudden twinge of fear, wondering if Kendra planned to take me to task about the Tiger Balm. She didn't, as it turned out. Instead she just gave me an appraising look when I walked in and then returned to repairing her lipstick, her regal face close to the mirror.

"So. 'No, no, we're not, right lifestyle, wrong relationship...' What was all that again, sugarbuns?"

"Oh," I sighed, shrugging. "It was true at the time. Things have gotten, um, weirder. Since then."

We both smiled sweetly at Elizabeth, who looked a little puzzled and borderline uncomfortable as she leaned toward the mirror too, making minute and unnecessary fixes to her hair while she waited for an empty stall.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing, Kate?" Kendra asked softly, obviously concerned. "Because you don't really seem all that sure, and I don't know you very well but I hate to see anyone just heading blindly for a crash."

I gave it some thought. My first instinct, to lash out and contradict her, died quickly. I knew she was right in part. I *wasn't* sure what I was doing, but I also wasn't sure about whether there was a crash in store at the end of all this. That, of course, was always the dangerous part, the blind curve that might send you straight off a cliff if you were going too fast...

"So you know Jack? From before this week?" I asked, stalling for time, knowing she'd recognized him and they'd seemed familiar with one another at cocktails the night before.

"A little," she said. "I used to be with—" She glanced toward Elizabeth, who was starting to look as though she wished she'd never entered the bathroom. "He's a friend of a friend. And he's a good guy, I think. Some issues. We all have issues, you know. But I guess I should be more concerned about *you*. Because I don't know you. Except to know you're wired like Jane — and just as sneaky."

"Sneaky? I'm sure I don't know what you mean, ma'am." I batted my eyes, not actually flirting but doing something like it that we both understood. Elizabeth, with evident relief, took her turn in a stall and a middle-aged Brazilian matron took her place at the sink, peering into the mirror with a frown.

"Look, I'll just say this. Jack looks happy, I'll give you that. I haven't ever seen him look this good, in fact. He looks sorta relieved. I don't know what that's about, but I *will* tell you that he hasn't been seeing anyone seriously in a long time, that I know of. Pretty much not since before he left for London, and sure as hell not since he's been living back here again. And you're..." She glanced at the local matriarch, who looked as though she didn't understand a word, and almost whispered the next few things she had to say.

"You're this very soft, juicy little sub girl who looks like she's about due to get her butt and her heart broken, in that order. You look like you've already fallen, *hard*. Like, so hard I'm surprised you don't need some kneepads about now. But Jack doesn't look much better off, which is not the Jack I know. So whoever you are to him, just...I don't know, just be careful. He's nice, and you seem nice, but it also seems like you have huge potential to hurt each other if you're just suddenly doing this on a business trip. Neither of you seems like the type to do that. I know *he's* not. This conference ends in a week but when you go back home he'll still be your boss, I'll remind you. Unless I'm missing

something big here, you're fixing to go back to that hotel suite tonight and have all kinds of kinky sex *with your boss*."

"Well!" sniffed the matronly woman, snapping her lipstick case closed with a furious little snort. "I never!" Her accent, what little we heard of it, was clearly English. The door swung shut behind her in a wave of silence that descended on the powder room.

Kendra and I heard Jane from the stall asking, "What? Ken, what just happened?" We tried not to meet each other's eyes but when we did, we nearly hurt ourselves laughing.

"Some poor little tourist just got an earful of the kinky sex talk, is all. Nothing for you to worry your pretty little head about, sweet thang. Although I'm sure it will be worrying *her* pretty little head for quite a while."

I had to put my own head against the cool tile wall of the bathroom until my renewed laughing fit passed, though Kendra regained control much more easily. It didn't surprise me—she was obviously a "control" sort of gal.

"Kendra, who was it you went out with anyway?" I asked, not bothering to whisper. I had forgotten about poor Elizabeth for the moment, who must have been even more confused than Jane.

Kendra gave me an appraising look before murmuring, too low for Jane or Elizabeth to hear, "I was with Jack's sister for five years. And if you tell Jane that he's Anne's brother, you're not getting that Tiger Balm back anytime this trip, li'l subby girl. I don't want her obsessing about my ex for the rest of the week, which is exactly what will happen if she finds out who Jack is. So please."

"Jack has a sister who's a lesbian?"

"No, Jack has a bisexual sister, who is now a blissfully married woman with two precious little kids and a husband who worships her. We're still very good friends and I wish her all the happiness in the world, but I also don't want to screw with my current happiness. So please, Kate."

I nodded, a little stunned but not wanting her to feel anxious that any of this would get back to Jane. Or Jack. Although presumably, he already knew.

It really was such a small world.

Chapter Seven

The elevator ride back up to the suite was torture. We stood at the rear, smiling politely and nodding at the other guests getting on and off the lift, and all I could feel was Jack's hand on my back, sliding under the straps of the blue cotton dress I'd worn to dinner, trying to get just that fraction closer. Sneaking around my ribs so that I had to suppress a giggle. And then stroking so, so softly at the side of my breast through the lightweight fabric, under my arm where nobody else in the elevator could possibly see.

He didn't even ask when we got to the door of my suite, just kept moving to his own door, opened it up and pulled me in after him. A split second later he pinned me to the foyer wall and *finally* kissed me, and I was glad he was holding me up or my knees might have buckled at the bolt of sheer need that shot through me.

We didn't pause for first-date kisses, went straight for the heavy stuff. He was licking and sucking, exploring my mouth with his tongue in a way that made me ache to have him repeat the action between my legs. It seemed as though I had been waiting years for his kiss. Well, possibly I had. He acted as though *he* had been waiting for years too, which raised some interesting possibilities. But at the moment, all that seemed important was that he was kissing me, and it was making me want him more keenly than in my most explicit fantasy.

"I wish you'd worn that new dress again," Jack said at last, pulling just far enough away that I couldn't recapture his mouth with mine. "You looked so good in the store, do you know what I wanted to do right then? All I could think about, actually?"

"N-no?" My higher brain functions were clearly taking a dive in direct proportion to the proximity of Jack's mouth to my ear as he whispered naughty, delicious things.

"I wanted to follow you back into the dressing room, put you up against the wall just like this and hold both your hands with one of mine..." He shifted his grip as he spoke, pulling my arms up over my head and restraining my wrists one-handedly with surprising ease. "Then put my other hand right up your skirt to play with you. Would you have liked that, little Katie?" His hand had dipped under my hem and stroked up along the bare skin of my leg but paused just at the top of my thigh, and I whimpered and squirmed, trying to get closer but unable to.

"Oh God, yes," I whispered, already trembling with desire. I could hardly imagine what it would feel like when Jack actually touched me. I didn't have to imagine for long.

"You had panties on then. I would have had to push them over to the side so I could touch you, slide my fingers inside you. What about now, little one? Did you leave them off like I told you to, or did you think it was just talk? If I move my hand, what will my fingers touch?"

"Just...just me...aaah..." His fingers had moved at last but on encountering more smooth skin, he stopped again and lifted his eyebrows sharply.

"What have we *here*? Not hair, obviously. Oh God. Do you keep it like this all the time?" Jack slid his hand that crucial inch to the side at last and cupped my mound, his sensitive fingers tracing the delicate, clean-shaven lips.

"Yeah..."

"Yeah?" he repeated in clear disapproval, but not of my shaving practices. My eyes flicked open to see him looking at me expectantly. *Blue*. "Answer again, and answer right, Katie."

"Yes Sir," I offered, and sank into his responding smile.

"Good girl," he whispered, kissing my mouth now as gently as his hand was fondling my pussy. "I like it like this. I wish I'd known this the other day when your jeans tore—it would've provided me a whole new level of visualization."

"You *saw* that?" I was horrified, although I wasn't quite sure why. At least the mailroom guy hadn't been the only one, and the idea of Jack sneaking peeks at my butt without my knowledge...

"Of course I did," he said matter-of-factly. "You had bare butt showing at the office, you didn't think I'd notice? I had to close my door to get any work done, and even then..." His fingers slipped around the side of my thigh to caress the spot that had been displayed through the hole in my jeans, just at the crease between my ass and the top of my leg. "Very distracting. You're very distracting to have around the office, Miss Snow. You always have been."

"Is that really why you brought me here?" I could have kicked myself for asking, but something drove me to find out now, *before*. "To see if this would take the edge off? Known quantity's less distracting, that sort of thing?" It was easy to think more clearly when he pulled his hand away from my ass, but I still felt the loss pretty keenly. Kendra's cautions seemed so far away, so irrelevant, although they still nagged at the back of my mind where common sense was trying to keep me from diving off into the deep end.

Jack backed away a little, scowling, his fingers still pressing into my wrists fiercely. "Would you be here right now if you believed that?"

I realized the answer even as I responded. "No, of course not. Well...I knew I was qualified to be here in any case. Not *here*, here. I mean at the conference. I don't think you would've made advances you weren't pretty sure were going to be accepted, and I didn't think my job was in jeopardy if I wasn't interested."

When he remained silent, I kept going, a bad habit I had of trying to fill any conversational void. "I'd been throwing off vibes too, I know that, it's just that up until this weekend I really didn't think...I mean, there was the whole office, working-together thing. And I didn't think you'd be interested. I didn't think you were, um, inclined a certain way? Or that you wouldn't think *I* was? Or—"

"Katie, stop talking."

"Yes Sir."

Smile.

Melt.

"Listen. First of all, if anything, it's the opposite of what you think. You're not here because of this. I meant it before, I almost didn't pick you because of this. Hell, I almost didn't promote you because I was worried about this. Even though you were clearly the best candidate. I *did* promote you, but I worried. And I was obviously right to worry.

"But about the other part, the vibes. Look, when we're working together in the office, we work well together. You're professional, you're very passionate about your work. You clearly have a great deal of knowledge about the field and if you feel you need to argue a position, you do that. In your own way, you get right in my face and you always have, even when you weren't reporting directly to me. And I give your opinion the respect it deserves. Right?"

I nodded, not sure where he was going.

"Your last supervisor didn't actually like that about you. She told me you had an attitude problem. But I *do* like it. I know where you stand on things, you're very honest and you don't hide your agenda, which is unusual. And I know you're working harder than I'd ever ask you to work already, so I'm not likely to barge in and demand you drop what you're doing to work on some other project of mine because I assume my project is more important. That really hasn't come up, even before you were promoted. That isn't really my management style. So it's not an area where we'd tend to have any conflict anyway."

He pulled a face at the idea of having to have a management style at all. Like me, I suspected, there were times he wished he were still doing fieldwork every day.

"But—and I don't know if you realize this—if I walk into your office and, say, tell you to give me what I know is your favorite pen because my last one's out of ink, and Ted's gone home already and his desk is locked so I can't get the key to the supply closet, like last week? Do you know what you do? You drop your eyes, blush, hand over your pen and say, 'yes Sir', just like you did a minute ago."

I opened my mouth to protest, to explain, but he held a finger over my lips, effectively silencing me.

"If I tell you I'm ordering lunch," he continued, "and you say you aren't hungry, and I say, 'Kate, I know you didn't eat any breakfast, I am ordering you a sandwich which you *will* eat and your only choice in the matter is whether it's roast beef or ham', do you get pissed off? No. Do you say you just want a salad? No. You look right at your toes and say, 'roast beef, Sir'. And then you eat the sandwich and thank me in an extremely charming way that, frankly, leaves me in absolutely no doubt what your...*orientation* is. Work is not at issue in any of those cases. Am I off track in any way here?"

"No Sir." He had moved his finger just long enough for me to answer then carefully placed it over my lips again.

"Good. That's a relief. This would be a terrible time to find out I'd been guessing wrong for over a year."

Over a year?

"So just to be clear, little Katie, although I don't think anybody else in the office really picks up on it, I *do* pick up on it. And the only way you could have sent a stronger submissive vibe would have been to start off each visit to my office by dropping to your knees to await my bidding. Which, by the way, I do *not* want you doing when we get back to town. I've fantasized about it plenty but if I actually saw that in my office, I would never get another minute of work done in there."

My head was reeling, my knees trembling and my arms were about to fall asleep. Jack must have realized this, because he released my wrists as he bent to kiss me again before leading me through the entrance hall and into the living room of his suite. I'd been fairly impressed by my own suite, but it looked like a hovel compared to this one, which was billed as a penthouse. I couldn't really appreciate the details again in the semi-dark, however. Fortunately, Jack seemed to know his way around well enough already.

"That's in the office, of course. *Here*, however..." He sat on the elegant art deco sofa and tugged me over to stand between him and the breathtaking nighttime panorama of the beach and ocean. "Here, I *do* want to see you on your knees, but only after you take off that dress and let me get a look at everything your bathing suit and those damn jeans and all your other clothes have been hiding from me all this time."

"Yes Sir," I said automatically, although at the moment all I wanted to do was fling off the dress and jump him.

"And while you do that, I'll tell you exactly what that rip in your jeans made me think about." The tone in his voice set my hands shaking and I could barely fumble open the two buttons and short zipper at the waist of the dress, slipping it off my shoulders to stand in front of him in only the thin film of salt-tinted damp the ocean had left on me earlier.

As Jack spoke, his fingers were traveling from my shoulders downward, patiently learning every inch of me, more sweet torture. "Mmm. *Very* nice, little Katie. I think this is really a good look on you. Even better than the jeans, although those were good too. Once they tore—and I'd been watching all that morning, wondering if they would—what I wanted more than anything was to pull you into my office and give you a *very* stern talking-to about appropriate office attire for casual Fridays. What would your response have been, I wonder?"

"Being very quiet and hoping you wouldn't notice I was about to come on the spot, Sir?" It was true.

Jack laughed and grinned broadly enough to see in the gloom, and then wrapped his fingers around my hips to tug me a little closer. The motion set me off balance and I threw my hands to his shoulders to catch myself. He didn't seem to mind, let me leave

them there as he started to nuzzle my belly, tracing soft kisses across and down each hip in turn.

"You would have been in pretty big trouble if that were the case, because I'm sure I would've noticed *that*. No, I think once I'd gotten you in there, I would have told you to go to my desk and lean over it. And then slipped my fingers into the hole in your jeans, so you would know *exactly* what transgression you were there for. I would have shown you just how much access that little rip could provide, playing with everything I could reach through it. And then what do you suppose I would have done, little one? To make sure you remembered not to do it again?"

God, he was good at this. I was aching and wet and his hands hadn't even ventured into anything like an erogenous zone yet. "You would have whipped me, Sir?"

"Spanked you," he corrected. "With my bare hand. I find it's every bit as effective as I need it to be. Turn around." He was already turning me, trailing more kisses over my hips and around to my lower back, cupping my ass with both hands and squeezing firmly. "Are you a whip-and-paddle kind of girl, little Katie? What idiot taught you that, when he could've been using his own hand on this gorgeous ass?"

"I'm whatever kind of girl you think I need to be, Sir," I replied, trying not to gasp as his hands stroked and lifted, exploring sensitive territory that I already knew he planned to work over in more ways than one very soon. I would be whatever kind of girl he wanted me to be. Hell, I would be any kind of *anything* he wanted me to be, if he would just keep doing...*that*.

"Hmmm. What a good little sub you are. We'll see, though. You have to be pretty naughty to earn a whipping or a paddling from me, and this would have been a first offense. A bare hand doesn't work too well over jeans. I think I would have told you to unbutton them and pull them down just far enough. And the little pink-leopard-print panties too."

Well, damn, that hole must've been bigger than I realized. Those jeans are going straight in the trash when I get home.

"And then once you were bent over my desk again, with your bare ass in the air waiting for punishment, that's when I would've seen that your pussy was shaved as smooth as silk." His fingers marked his words, finally finding their way inside me then out again, running the slickness over my pussy and circling teasingly forward and around my already-sensitized clit. "And that's really pretty naughty too. I would've started spanking you, just testing at first, but then harder and harder, making sure you learned your lesson."

When he drew one hand away, I had just time to anticipate the first slap striking my butt sharply, *not* just testing. Warmth spread from the spot and I felt myself growing wetter still. Jack could feel the same thing when, after delivering another three swift spansks, he dipped a finger down between my cheeks and felt my pussy again. There was no hiding my arousal, and I couldn't restrain a groan at the feel of his touch as he stroked and pinched and then spanked another few times, harder still.

"Get on the couch. Kneel on the seat, grab the back and bend over, spread your legs," Jack said suddenly, quietly, and I could hear a little hitch in his breath. It excited me even more to know that he was starting to lose his own control, and I nearly jumped on the couch in an effort to position myself to his satisfaction as quickly as possible. His "good girl" when I was in place sent another thrill from my nipples straight down to my sex, and I know he saw the shiver that ran through me.

"Nice, little Katie. Very, *very* nice." He stood just behind me and ran his hands under my body, stroking my breasts gently and then pinching my nipples until I squirmed. Then his touch wandered again, ranging down to my clit for only the briefest of teasing rubs before heading up again, over my ribs to my shoulders, then straight down my spine to fondle my ass again. "I don't want you to move again until I say so, all right, little one?"

For a moment I panicked, because I wasn't quite ready to give up that level of control, but already I couldn't find the words to say so. "Yes Sir..."

He must have heard the anxious note in my voice, because he bent and whispered his next words in my ear very gently.

"I'm just stopping to take my clothes off, all right? Kate, listen a minute. I don't do breath play or any edge stuff, I don't have any diseases and I do have condoms. But you still need to tell me a safe word in case you need me to stop or just back off in any way, okay? Now, before you get too far down."

Taking a deep breath and tightening my grip on the back of the sofa, I tried to ground myself in the moment and think of a safe word. Stoplights were boring, overdone, but easy to remember. "I don't have any diseases either and I'm on the Pill. And just...red light, yellow light," I whispered, then cleared my throat and repeated the safe words a bit louder with an embarrassed smile.

"Red light, yellow light. I like the classics. I was worried you were about to give me something like 'rutabaga' or 'fluffy purple unicorn'. I'd never remember all that," Jack said with a smile that I could hear.

He had taken off his clothes—I could see them landing on the floor, trousers and shirt and boxers—but I couldn't see him from my current angle. Only feel him, his hips and cock brushing against the backs of my thighs, his fingers running gently up my spine and playing with my hair. He wove some loose strands back up into the messy bun I'd worn at dinner, a thoughtful gesture and one that showed he was mindful of safety as well, even though we were obviously not employing any devices where loose hair might become an issue. Tonight, it was clear, was just about boundaries and clarification.

About being sensible and responsible, I thought, but I blanked out completely when Jack leaned around, tipped my chin to the side and kissed me slowly and thoroughly, a big high-school-prom-date kiss. As he released me, he slipped his hand around the back of my neck and angled my head down into its previous position.

"Back down you go, little one," he said fondly. "Now don't move until I say you can."

"Yes Sir," I consented, more easily this time, and then consented again when he also told me not to come until he said I could. I felt strangely comfortable, so much more so than I usually did at this stage of things, because I already knew Jack so well. There was none of that lingering background fear. Will this person really stop, am I really safe? I realized my barriers had come down with him a long time ago, as he'd also clearly realized when he recognized my proclivities even in what were meant to be innocent, professional interactions.

And he'd realized too that I had already started to fall just a bit into the slight daze of subspace, and he'd known to bring me back up to make sure I was attending to what was important. Perversely, this meant that when he told me to go back down, I went almost immediately because I trusted him so readily.

I had only a fleeting thought that I was giving him an unprecedented amount of control over me, showing an unprecedented amount of trust, taking an unprecedented risk. He was my *boss*...but I had wanted this for *so long*. The fact that it was happening in real life was so surreal, I half believed I was dreaming it all.

"Have I mentioned you have a gorgeous ass? You don't have to answer that. And there's just one thing it always makes me want to do."

Smack!

I was actually startled at the weight he put behind it, yelped a little, and heard him chuckle at my reaction before he landed a matching strike on the other side and then raked his nails lightly over both stinging cheeks. "Yep. Every bit as good as I imagined." He aimed several more calculated swats at the very tops of my thighs, stroking in between smacks, fingers drifting closer and closer to my pussy, which was burning for his attention every bit as much as my rear end was burning from the spanking.

He had spoken only the truth about his ability to accomplish as much as he needed with his bare hand. In fact, I tensed a little at the idea of what he would do if he were actually trying to discipline me, not just playing. But I was hardly able to think that far ahead. Things were taking on a hazy warmth as the pain started to melt and dissipate into a rosy glow of need.

Without warning, Jack switched tactics, plunging a finger into my wet channel and then quickly adding a second, pumping slowly until I couldn't help but push back against the blissful intrusion, moaning in desire.

Smack!

"No moving, little one. Remember?" He sounded calm, his fingers resuming their gentle in-and-out, and I may have begun whimpering in time with his thrusts with the need for stimulation on my clit that I had no way to obtain, with the one spike of pain marring the warm tingling that felt so good over the rest of my rear. He had meant that one to sting, and it had, a *lot*.

I could feel, every so often, the hot length of his cock against me or the stray brush of the tip as he moved, and I wanted it more badly than I had ever wanted anything in my life. I couldn't remember ever being brought to that point so quickly, if indeed I'd ever been at quite that point. But angling ever-so slightly toward it when next it approached only brought another few sharp swats, just as the last had begun to fade.

Tears sprang to my eyes and my grip on the back of the couch tightened to the point of pain, grounding me, distracting me. I tried to distance myself from the sensations Jack's hand was stirring, but it seemed my entire world was constructed of those sensations.

"I can see we're going to need some restraints for you," Jack said smugly, the third time he'd had to redirect me to remain still. "If I start leaving marks right now it's just a waste of a really great and extremely expensive bathing suit. And I would really like to see you in it again, so..." He lifted me up by the shoulders gently, almost tenderly, until I was kneeling up on the couch, and then knelt behind me and pulled me back against his chest, reaching around to toy with my breasts as he nibbled at the sensitive skin just below my ear. Torture, more torture...

"Some restraints, and at some point possibly some jewelry for these." He gave my nipples a sharp tweak before letting me go. "If I recall, I mentioned wanting to see you kneeling on the floor. This seems like a good time."

The change in position wasn't quite enough to ease my trembling muscles, but then most of the shaking had little to do with muscle fatigue in any case. When he sat down in front of me and I could finally see his cock, half-erect and bobbing slightly as he moved, I started trembling all over again. I licked my lips and Jack laughed and chucked his finger under my chin to encourage me to look at him. When I did look up, his eyes were sparkling, even in the dim light of the room—and he looked *wonderful*, happier and more relaxed than I'd ever seen him.

I could too easily get lost in this man, I realized, lost in wanting to be the reason he looked that way. But I couldn't see my flashing neon danger sign anywhere, only a fuzzy glow of well-being and unsatisfied lust. Which, in itself, was unusual and therefore a bit worrisome. I was used to basking in the constant glow of that neon sign.

"Eager little thing, aren't you? Do you want something?"

"Yes Sir," I said, nodding like an idiot. I was already *so* far gone.

"Cock? In your pussy? Something like that, little Katie?"

I had just enough reason left to neatly sidestep the potential trap of saying yes to that, which I knew was almost certainly the wrong answer. Sometime I would do that, just to test the limits, learn how he would respond—what type of Dominant he really was—but at the moment, I chose the answer I thought would be the path of least resistance. "I want you to use me in the way that will please you best, Sir." *Good answer, Kate, good answer.*

"Good answer, little Katie."

Yes!

"Did you learn that by heart from the Big Book of Submission?"

Shit.

"Sir?"

"I like to hear you say it—if you want it," he clarified. "A lot of the rules everyone seems to have, I just think are stupid. You won't get in trouble, you're allowed to want. Even want parts of me. Doesn't mean I'll always give it to you, of course."

"Oh."

"So ask away. I'm feeling pretty generous right now, I gotta admit."

Trying to think fast with extremely limited mental resources, I finally squeaked out, "I want...to suck your cock? Sir? Please?"

"Of course," he said, stroking my cheek. "I will hardly *ever* say no to that, little one...aaaahhh..."

I couldn't say it wasn't a marketable skill, because of course there were people who marketed it. Hookers, porn stars, trophy wives. But *I* had never marketed it. It was just something I was very, very good at, or so I'd been told. And it was something that I enjoyed tremendously, probably because I was good at it.

One delicate scratch of my nails over Jack's testicles—biggish, not unpleasantly hairy, not much division between the two sides—and a well-coordinated sweep of the tongue over the plump head of his penis, ending with a deliberate rub on his long, pronounced and apparently supersensitive frenulum, and he was gasping in surprised pleasure. By the time I had licked and sucked his length from base to tip thoroughly, then shifted to a more leisurely exploration of his balls while my hand kept up a steady rhythm on his shaft, he had thrown his head back against the couch cushion and was groaning in time with my motions.

"God...! God, stop. Stop, *stop!*" he demanded at last, when the pressure was building so high he felt tight as a drum under my hands and mouth. "Come up here." And he pulled me into his lap, squeezing me almost painfully close. "You are far too good at that—and you know it, I can tell."

"Thank you, Sir," I said a little saucily, giggling. His erection was pressing firmly into my thigh and I couldn't resist grinding against it a little, increasing the pressure.

For my trouble, I swiftly found myself flipped over Jack's knee, rump in the air, the wind nearly knocked out of me with the speed of the move. The whacks on my bottom were much less a surprise, and I could tell they were more for entertainment than anything else. He really must have been pleased—and by the feel of him against my belly, he still was. And the lightly stinging smacks, alternating with deft caresses, soon had me panting with greedy, nearly mindless lust again.

"I can't tell you how many times I've thought about putting you over my knee, by the way," Jack said almost conversationally, only his obvious arousal giving lie to his calm. Petting, stroking, letting me slip nearly into pure bliss before inflicting another rain of stinging blows. He would have to stop soon or risk bruising me, I thought. He

might have already left marks, in fact. It had been a very long time since I'd received treatment like this, and I bruised all too easily. Was too easily marked...

Which he had probably already realized, because what he did next was deliberate marking – and it aroused me almost more than anything else he had done so far.

Sliding me off his lap onto the couch on my stomach, parting my legs and selecting a spot high on one buttock – a spot he knew the bathing suit would cover – he suckled a tiny nip of soft skin slowly into his mouth at first, then more aggressively, roughing it with his tongue, growling a bit when I cried out softly at the change in sensation. Finally he released me, soothing the pain with soft licks and kisses, and turning me slowly over with his hands, guiding me to lie back as he coaxed my legs over his shoulders and started kissing his way up my inner thigh.

The first sweep of his tongue over my pussy was delicious, and ended just short of doing me any real good. He teased and laved my nether lips with his tongue until I was near tears with frustration, and the feel of his fingers sliding into me again was agonizing, so close to what I needed but not quite enough. And he knew it too, was gauging my reactions expertly and drawing back just enough to drive me crazy with wanting that little bit more.

And then, just as his lips were poised, his breath so hot on my clit I could have almost come from that one sensation alone, just before he reached his tongue out to taste, he said, "Remember, you don't come until I say so, little one."

When his tongue finally flicked against my clit with lethal accuracy the shock was galvanic, and I bucked toward his incredible mouth before I could stop myself.

The slow motion of his fingers fucking my pussy never stopped and he pressed my hips back down to the couch with his free hand before moving in again, sucking the little nub of nerves between his lips and flicking harder with his tongue this time. I whined, tried to breathe out, not just wanting to come but *needing* to, but knowing full well that this was a test I would do better to pass.

"Good girl," he said softly, and the rush of pride that swept over me was nearly as good, as hot and fulfilling, as the orgasm I was trying so desperately not to have. "Not much longer, little one. Soon I'm planning to fuck you like my life depended on it, and once my cock's inside you, you can come whenever you want to."

He brushed his lips against my clit again, pressing soft little kisses there, keeping the sensitivity high, so high it was nearly painful now. I breathed in, breathed out. I waited...my whole world had been reduced to that simple equation of waiting for Jack to slide inside me so I could come...for him. Just for him.

"Just for you," I murmured, and he lifted his head and looked at me sternly.

"Damn straight," he replied, and then he was covering my body, spreading my thighs with his and angling his hips, his feverish cock poised at my entrance. I could no more have dropped my eyes from his than stopped my heart beating at that moment, and when he slid inside me it felt like the world had flipped on its axis.

Perhaps I cried out, I don't remember, but my body flew apart around his, slowly reassembled itself while he stroked harder and faster and I gasped and pleaded for something I couldn't name, and then flew apart again when I felt him thrusting all the way to the bottom of me and coming, hot and inexorably and impossibly deep, pulse after pulse of pure bliss that was some new flavor of unbelievable I couldn't recall ever tasting before.

* * * * *

At some point we made it to the bathtub, which was even larger than the one in my suite and had a view of the sea every bit as good as the one from the balcony. Jack held me cradled against his chest, first soothing away the trembling that overtook me when I came down and then softly talking me back from wherever it was I went in my head during those delectable moments. Talking about anything and nothing, he stroked my hair and held me close until I started stroking him back and was able to laugh at his jokes again.

It struck me that he was very practiced, but I didn't want to know about the specifics yet, the details of how he had acquired those skills. At some point it would probably come out. It usually did, at least in my relatively limited experience. But for the moment I just basked in it. His expertise made me feel safe. *He* made me feel safe, cared for, looked after.

I kept expecting red flags, but then remembered that this...was *Jack*. The man I'd worked for, more or less, for over two years. To whose house in the quietly classy Memorial area the entire department had been invited on at least two occasions for cocktails. It was not the home of a madman, no skeletons buried under the floorboards that anyone could see. His house had been airy, attractive, expensive. It was decorated in a style I believe they refer to as "organic modern", a pleasing mix of clean-lined wood and stone with hints of textures like sisal and palm here and there. Gorgeous cork floors, I recalled from out of nowhere. We had conversed briefly in his kitchen about their durability, because of course I had spilled a glass of wine all over the cork floor in question and gone hunting for supplies to clean it up.

"Did you have your house professionally decorated?" I asked now, half turning to look at him with a splash.

"What?" He looked amused again, not annoyed, at the non sequitur.

"Sorry, I was just remembering that Christmas party last year."

"When you spilled the wine?"

"You're like a mind reader. Yes, exactly. Your house—did you have it done or did you do it yourself?" I no longer had any idea why I felt it necessary to know this, and tried very hard to look cute and small and harmless while he screwed up his handsome face and thought about his house. At least I sincerely hoped he was thinking about his house, and not starting to think I was a freaky little chick he found annoying after all.

"My sister did it, when I moved back to Houston from London. My whole family is there mostly. In Houston, not in London, I mean. I didn't have much in the way of furniture or anything yet when I went over there, and coming home I didn't want to do a major move overseas, so I sold most of my furniture in England before I left. I pretty much started with an empty house. My sister's into all that. Well, it's her job. She's an architect and a designer. She made me look at magazines for weeks and cut out things I thought looked interesting, and then for the next year she just dragged me all over town making me approve and pay for stuff. She mostly dealt with all the contractors, but my house was still torn up for months. I hated it at the time, but I like the result I guess." He pulled me in again. I had been drifting away as he spoke, buoyant in the deep water. "Why, don't you like it? Anne said it needed to look...like understated, but expensive. Successful."

"It does," I reassured him, remembering that I'd already heard his sister's name from Kendra, and trying very hard to forget the context in which I'd heard it. "And I do like it, very much. I have no idea why I asked. I'm sorry, I think I just have a tendency to, um..."

"Babble after sex, just a little? It's okay, I talk too much too. Besides, I think it's cute," he said mildly, reaching up stealthily to pull out the last few pins and ponytail holder that had secured the remains of my updo. My hair tumbled down, the ends sinking quickly under water. I watched the strands trail out in lazy patterns, dark against the water with its white frost of suds.

"Conference starts tomorrow," Jack mused. "Remember that whole conference thing?" We grinned at each other and kissed in an unhurried, slightly sleepy way that I thought I could rapidly become addicted to. He went on when we separated, as if he had never stopped talking in the first place, as if such kisses were now to be an expected part of a conversational lull. "It's pretty late, if you've noticed. We probably ought to be thinking about sleep."

I blushed yet again and admitted I hadn't noticed at all. Which, in turn, made Jack smile and snuggle me closer still. I sighed happily into his chest, trying to stifle the anxieties that tried to resurface now that the endorphin levels were returning to normal again. Office romances, sleeping with one's boss, initiating a physical relationship on a trip away from home...all Very Bad Ideas, as was well known to everybody who was still single and self-supporting by the time they passed their early twenties. All ideas I had tried to keep staunchly in mind, until that fateful conversation on the beach earlier.

But somehow I just couldn't muster the energy to worry. Not when Jack stroked my hair and kissed the top of my head while drying me off with a towel. Not when he pulled me into bed next to him and spooned up behind me, ignoring my out-loud musing about whether it was time for me to go back to my room.

And certainly not when he whispered a drowsy, "Good night, little one," in my ear before kissing it softly and falling straight to sleep.

Chapter Eight

“And clearly, the relative cost of this type of in-house training and documentation pales in comparison to even a relatively minor fine, particularly if the problem isn’t corrected and the fines mount up. Compared to the cost of litigation,” Jack continued as he switched screens to the next in a series of graphs, “the cost-benefit analysis...”

I was trying very hard not to nod off, because I was supposed to be taking notes and helping Jack refine his presentation. Besides, it looked extremely bad if the personification of all that in-house documentation was snoozing in the back of the lecture room.

“Examining the year-to-year increase in damage awards in the Fifth Circuit cases alone, it’s pretty easy to see that...”

When I woke up this morning, he had already showered and he must have reset the alarm before leaving the room. I found my suitcases at the foot of the bed, with a note.

K –

Thought you might want your stuff when you got up. Have gone to breakfast. Am extremely sore and cranky. Had a bad dream about that fucking snake. On the other hand, you look like pre-Raphaelite art when you’re sleeping. See you downstairs.

J –

If he was going to be writing notes of that sort, it was going to be nigh impossible to fall back out of love with him, which would surely be the wise thing to do by the end of the week.

“At its broadest, training should be prepared for *all* personnel, because even those in roles we don’t traditionally view as having contact with the environment are, of course...”

The note had smelled a bit like him. Not as if he had scented it deliberately, of course, but as if he had possibly dashed it off while still damp from showering and having just splashed on some aftershave.

I shifted uncomfortably in the thinly padded chair. I had found a seat next to Jack at the start of the presentation that officially opened the conference, and had just time for a croissant and a cup of coffee beforehand. Now I wondered where I would ever find another cup to see me through to lunch. It was great coffee, just like all the coffee in Brazil, even the stuff being served to the conference attendees. One more cup would be plenty...

“And as always, regardless of your country’s individual requirements, the key to good reporting is having quality data in the first place, overseen and compiled with an almost obsessive eye for discrepancies. Hiring people who can actually turn a phrase well on paper, as well as having enough background in the scientific aspects, is another important consideration. For that, of course, I have to give the nod to one of our senior staff members who’s here this week, the lovely and talented Ms. Katherine Snow, there in the back. We’ll probably lose her to academia someday, but until then she’s one of the main reasons our company doesn’t get its...rear end...fined regularly.”

I looked up, nonplused. Jack gave me a jaunty little salute and then went on with his talk while people smiled and nodded politely my way. I tried hard to look like the type of person who gets flattering mentions during speeches all the time, until everyone’s attention finally drifted back to Jack, after the requisite spate of delayed chuckles as two translators finished quietly relaying the “rear end” remark in Portuguese and French.

“Again, the importance of the presentation is critical. Good data are the foundation, but it must be reported accurately and coherently. And so that type of staffing is also key when considering...”

He was facing the screen a little too much. He should face the audience, I thought. Engage them more. But overall he gave a good speech and people were clearly interested, leaning forward, laughing at the right spots. Taking notes. He looked like what he was—successful, knowledgeable, a master of his chosen field.

Who knew how to spell “pre-Raphaelite” and had moved my luggage into his suite.

Lose her to academia? So he was astute about people, as well. I didn’t recall ever revealing that “someday” plan to him. True, I’d thought about it almost constantly. Especially now, when it seemed as though my chosen career was taking a course I’d never anticipated. It was lodging me ever more firmly in the office instead of out in the world where habitats still involved things like plants and animals, and not just the fluorescent-loving, spider-inhabited peace lilies that seemed to be taking over every office building in Houston these days. True, cockroaches swarming in a mildewy kitchen could be considered to constitute a thriving ecosystem, but...

My mind drifted from the rainforest we’d tromped through yesterday to the Costa Rican jungle and my bird-tagging trip, one of my earliest ventures into the wild. I’d known from the end of my very first sweaty, wretched day, even while dabbing antibiotic ointment on my many scratches and hydrocortisone on my countless insect bites, that I had found what I wanted to do. And later, in graduate school, when my thesis work had taken me to the North Slope of Alaska and into the Arctic Ocean, I saw the oil companies as things that were just in the way, saw only the potential harm they could do.

All the way from Houston, my BMW prodded at my overdeveloped sense of guilt.

* * * * *

"It was very good," I whispered again, for what must have been the fifth time that afternoon. Jack and I were sitting side by side in another conference session but he was paying very little attention to the presentation, instead reliving his own talk in a series of seemingly random whispered questions to me about how it had gone. Fortunately we were sitting in the back. It was a fairly small meeting room, however. In a desperate bid to avoid drawing another glare from the lecturer, I pulled out the notepad I'd been using off and on, flipped to a clean page and wrote...

It was very good. You did a great job. The audience loved you.

The next time Jack leaned toward me with a question I tapped my pen on the page, drawing his attention to the words without looking away from the speaker. After a moment of puzzlement, Jack gave me what I could swear was a pout. Snatching the pen from my fingers, he scribbled furiously for a moment and then slid the pad back to me, slouching grumpily if elegantly down in his chair.

Your token reassurance is far from satisfactory. I hate public speaking. Later you will be forced to pay for your disloyalty.

Considering for a moment, I tapped the pen against my mouth and then jotted my reply.

I never for one minute dreamed you had an actual insecurity. Couldn't you just picture the crowd in their underwear, as that's supposed to help with nerves?

Skimming my answer, he pursed his lips and then raised a cool eyebrow at me.

Was only picturing one crowd member in underwear. Did not help with nerves. Next time will try picturing her nude instead.

For your nerves?

Only for some of them.

The speaker caught my giggle, I think, but I copped an innocent look and a little fake cough. I doubt he was fooled.

I was only thankful this was no longer school, as I suspected these notes were rapidly heading in a direction that would spell disaster were they to be taken up and read aloud to the class.

Sorry to have disturbed Sir's nerves. Perhaps Sir would feel better after a few drinks and a nice hot bath? I think I know a few other remedies Sir might enjoy.

You sound like a butler. Not a good visual, little K.

Try a French maid's outfit. Better?

On my butler? Yuck.

What visual would you prefer?

Jack tapped the pad thoughtfully with the pen then gave me an equally thoughtful look before writing a fairly long answer and handing me the pad, whispering, "I mean it. Go now."

Visual I'd prefer. You, already in the bed when I get to the room after the session is over, naked and playing with yourself so you're wet and ready for whatever I care to do with you. You

should have your legs spread very wide, so I can see every inch of your pussy as you work a finger in and out of it. Only one finger. You may not come until I say you can.

I read it twice, blinking and blushing, glancing automatically around as if anybody else might be reading before I penned my response. Jack paid no mind, just shot his cuff to check his watch. The session would be over fairly soon, I saw.

When you quit the flirty banter, you just quit cold turkey, don't you? I thought you were all sore from the hike yesterday. Besides, there's still one more session this afternoon, remember?

Jack looked at me, wearing that maddening hint of a smile, and leaned over to whisper in my ear again, handing me back the notepad firmly as he did so. "If you think I'm joking, little one, you might want to make sure there's enough ice in the freezer for ice packs once you get to the room. You're likely to need them later if you don't learn to follow instructions any better than this. And don't think you can just go get your Tiger Balm back if you're sore afterward either. Kendra has already given that to me."

Well, of course I *had* to go then. I was so instantly wet that I actually thought I might embarrass myself if I stayed.

* * * * *

Curiouser and curiouser. In the middle of the very large bed, weighed down by one of Jack's hiking shoes, was a note. I had nearly sprinted to get to the room and had to read the note a few times before I realized what was going on. When on earth had he found the time to do this? And when had he made it back up here to leave the note?

K –

Now that I have your attention, I noticed you broke about half your nails yesterday and I know you're probably as sore as I am, so I made you an appointment for a manicure and pedicure. Downstairs, hotel salon, starting at two thirty – hurry! Then a massage back up in the room at four.

I'll take very good notes for you at the afternoon session. Expect me back at five-thirty. I'll expect you to be relaxed, properly grateful, wearing nothing but the results of your manicure and pedicure. Arranged and occupying yourself as I described downstairs, of course. We'll be dining in the room.

Have a pleasant afternoon, little one.

J –

I traded my pumps for flats and headed back downstairs, eager to check out the salon and spa I'd been eyeing since our arrival. But I did make a brief detour to the bar before I left the suite, just to make sure there was ice. Either way, it never hurt to be prepared. In fact, it usually hurt much less.

Chapter Nine

It was fortunate that Jack arrived when he said he would, and that room service was not due until six. I had met two of his requirements, as I was nude and in bed when he got to the room.

However, I was also sound asleep under a sheet and only woke up when Jack sat on the edge of the bed and shook me a few times.

"Katie...you'll miss dinner, little one."

I was too drowsy even to be startled. It took me a minute just to remember how I'd gotten there.

"That must have been one hell of a massage."

"I think there were roofies in the massage oil," I said when I stopped yawning. Jack had taken off his jacket and loosened his tie. He looked just a little rumpled and almost magnetically attractive. Feeling too relaxed to move just yet, I smiled up at him in what I hoped was evident admiration and delight. "I had the best afternoon ever. Thank you so much."

"Hmm. You're welcome. I just thought my new pet needed some grooming. I like my things to look and feel their best." He tugged the sheet from my shoulders, flinging it down toward the foot of the bed and running a possessive eye over me while I was still trying to interpret just what he meant when he'd said "my" pet, "my" things. I shifted my legs at his touch, parting them a little and feeling a lazy flicker of arousal at his open appreciation.

"Was the last session good?" I asked dutifully.

"About what you might expect," he said. "Compliance workshop. There were some good ideas though. Let's not talk shop, you're gonna get all tense again. I wanted you limp and susceptible to my every whim."

"I'm your rag doll, Sir," I teased, but he shook his head and leaned in over me, guiding my hands away gently when I started to slip them around his neck.

"Don't be a rag doll just yet. There's still dinner to get through. And then afterward you can show your gratitude in a more appropriate way. Right now you're just acting spoiled." But he kissed me anyway, so perhaps he didn't mind my being spoiled so very much. Although I realized there would be a price paid later for it, I found I was not dreading that prospect at all.

"Mmm. Sweet little Katie," Jack murmured, trailing his hand under my neck and wrapping his fingers in my disastrously messy hair. "You really aren't following directions very well at *all*, little one. First you don't get up to the room as soon as you're

told. And now I wasn't supposed to walk in and find you asleep under the covers, was I?"

"No Sir. I'm sorry, Sir," I said, heart beating a little faster. It was a tricky moment. Did I wait for further orders, did I just start doing what I should've been doing in the first place...what?

"After dinner, I think some consequences will help you remember better next time. For right now, however – how was I *supposed* to find you, little one?"

Distracted by the thought of consequences, feeling myself begin to phase out a bit, I struggled to concentrate and remember just what he'd said and written. It didn't help that although I loved hearing it from him, I hated repeating this sort of thing out loud. "Um. On the bed, naked and...playing with myself, Sir?"

"That's right, little one. Show me please. Now."

The "please" was filler, a courteous habit. It was clear he was telling, not asking. I moved my hands hesitantly...all the lights were on, the sun was still up. Yet this was hardly unexpected or a new situation for me. It was sort of a standard request, frankly. So why did I feel so nervous doing this for Jack?

It was the gleam in his eye as he watched my hand move downward that made me realize, that appreciative gleam, the smug little smile—I was nervous because I'd never wanted so badly to please anybody as I did Jack. It had nothing to do with him as a Dominant, I wanted his approval as a *person*. A person I respected, whose good opinion I craved even out of bed, and had for two years. I wanted to show I was good at this, this thing he valued, this odd hobby we shared...so he would be proud of me.

"Legs spread very wide, little Katie. Don't make me tell you again," he said gently, the threat almost disappearing in the effect of his voice on my body. He had moved off the bed and walked to the foot of it, arms crossed, eyeing me straight up and down. I could not have felt more exposed but it was starting to feel good now, and I knew I was wet before my fingers discovered the evidence.

"Yes Sir," I whispered hoarsely, and slid my legs still farther apart, reveling in his hiss of approval when I used the fingers of one hand to spread my labia, blatantly displaying myself for his inspection.

"That's very nice, pet. I do like looking at my toys. Thinking about how to play with them later..."

It was reflex that made me grab for the sheet at the knock on the door. Only because I was looking right at Jack just then did I catch the flash of displeasure that marred his features. Hoping against hope that he was annoyed at the timing of room service's arrival, and not at my instinct to cover myself, I froze and waited for him to tell me what to do. I was too fuzzy just then to do much else.

"Damn them for being on time," Jack said with a sigh, to my vast relief. "Go wait in the bathroom, little one. I'll come get you when it's safe to come out."

Waiting in the bathroom was no chore. The one in Jack's suite was huge and insanely well appointed, and had that fantastic view. After he'd sent the room service

waiter away, he opened the door without knocking to find me perched on the back wall of the tub, watching the sunset over the beach.

"Olly olly oxen free," he said in a singsong, standing in the open doorway and leaning in, just his fingers on the doorjamb keeping him from falling. When I clambered over the tub's side and walked to join him, he grinned at my multiple reflections in the several angled mirrors around the room. "Hey, it's a room full of Katies. You really are gorgeous, you know. Come and eat, pet."

He levered himself back out of the doorway with an athletic springiness and I was left with the room full of myself, momentarily stopping to see the effect I hadn't noticed before. I didn't see anything gorgeous, only my usual self. *Cute*, maybe, at the most. Not quite as rounded as I would like on top, a bit more rounded than I'd prefer on the bottom, although at least I was at my low weight right now which meant my waist was pretty slim. I considered it my best feature. But Jack, judging by the look in his eyes, evidently saw something else entirely when he looked at me. Shrugging, I padded into the bedroom to see him at the sofa in front of the wide window, removing covers from plates and arranging utensils.

"Tonight we're having local cuisine, which means there will be meat and more meat. Come and sit." He pointed his finger at the couch next to him and I sat with my legs curled under me, feeling a bit odd about eating dinner in the nude. Especially as Jack was still fully clothed, although obviously that was the point. "We have *picandinho de porco*, which is minced pork and *chourico*. That's the same as *chorizo* in Mexican food. It's pretty hot, so we also have a *bisteca* here, just a pork chop, if you'd prefer. You seemed to like the one you ordered last night and I didn't know how you felt about spicy."

"Spicy is wonderful, Sir."

"Try this too." He broke off a piece of a little brown, crumbling fried dumpling. "*Bolinhos de arroz*, just little fried rice balls. Wouldn't normally have them with this particular dish, but I ordered some of everything for you to try." He held the piece out and, when I started to reach for it, pulled it back with a tsk. "Open up, little one."

I think I only opened my mouth to say something bratty, but once he popped the morsel between my lips I realized how hungry I was and no longer cared about anything but the incredible taste. It was heavenly, some savory concoction of onions and scallions and other things I couldn't pinpoint, and calling it "just little fried rice balls" was slander.

"Now this," Jack said, and offered me a piece of what appeared to be pork. Again I tried to grab it, but he scowled and withheld it until I opened my mouth obediently for him to feed it to me. And again, once I'd tasted it, I forgot to be annoyed, because it was just as delicious as the last thing.

It was all delicious, although I lost track of what everything was called and knew I'd have to do some research when I got back home if I ever hoped to remember what I'd eaten. After the third or fourth bite I just gave up and let Jack feed me by hand, as he

seemed to enjoy doing, watching my face intently to see my reaction to each new piece of his adopted cuisine. He let me have just a few sips of the fairly decent red wine he'd ordered—a Portuguese red from Extremadura, not one I was familiar with but that complemented the spicy pork perfectly—but all the water I wanted. A bit less to eat overall than I would have taken on my own, especially less of the flan-like dessert that was just the right amount of bland to soothe my overspiced taste buds.

"I don't want you too full, pet," he said sternly when I begged for more. He was already covering the dishes back up and carrying them into the bar, where they fit neatly in the small refrigerator. "You wouldn't thank me for it. Now, I need a shower. And I don't know that I trust you to refrain from gorging yourself while I'm in there, so come and sit where I can see you." He walked confidently toward the bathroom, obviously certain that I would follow, which I did.

"I have to do this with Rufus sometimes, if I don't want to put him in the garage and I don't have time to clean the kitchen. I just remembered...you've met Rufus, haven't you?"

"Yes Sir. He's wonderful." Indeed I had met him, and hoped to meet him again. Rufus was the giant, goofy Golden Retriever I'd played with at Jack's Christmas party. I'd found him in the garage, where I went in search of a place to hide and regroup after humiliating myself with the Wine and Cork Floor Incident. He was an all-American sort of dog, barely more than an overgrown pup, all waggy tail and doggy smiles. After taking care to pin me to the wall with his enormous paws, sniff me thoroughly and slobber all over the parts he liked best, he had brought me a quite disgusting squeaky plush toy. Jack's three-car garage had only one car in it, so we had plenty of room for a fun ten minutes of fetch before Jack himself had come in to get something from the garage refrigerator and found us out.

"He liked you quite a lot, little one. Of course, he likes just about everyone, it's true. That dog's a total slut. But most people freak out when he stands up and licks them in the face. And he doesn't bring just everyone the bun-bun to play with."

Bun-bun?

"Now..." Jack was positioning a thick bathmat in the center of the bathroom with a great deal of earnest care, which I found amusing and endearing. With a mock expression of great somberness, he squared the mat to the tiles precisely and then pointed me toward it, angling me gently by the shoulders. "Now sit and stay. Find a position you can live with for a while, because I don't want you moving around while I'm busy."

He punctuated his last few words with a gentle tap on the top of my head and then proceeded to undress, spend a few minutes doing what seemed to be a half-assed cleaning job on his electric shaver and finally duck into the shower, largely ignoring me the entire time. He petted my head a few times in passing and I couldn't resist arching a little bit into his hand, but each time he just chuckled and moved on.

The odd thing about a time like that is, it's not as boring as one might suppose. A subby friend once told me that the mindset of a submissive was a form of meditation, and that the act of giving oneself over was just part of the routine required to drop into the meditative state. No different, really, than folding one's legs and repeating a mantra over and over, except that the presence of a Dominant person was required to complete the process. The Dominant was just a sort of facilitator or catalyst. I wasn't sure how far I believed much of this philosophical justification for it all—for me, after all, the main thing was that I enjoyed it, and didn't always want to analyze it too much—but the thing about meditation made sense to me.

There could be times of great tension, of course. When you were in the wrong kind of pain, when the Dom didn't make his expectations clear, when you felt the "discipline" this sort of relationship necessarily involved was being handled ineptly or unjustly, but you felt unable to express that in the given situation. Or when the Dom was simply not very good or not very suited to you, which had fortunately only happened to me in a big way once. Once was enough. I had decided to become even more scrupulously picky after that, and it had actually been over a year now since that last encounter. *Well* over a year, I realized. More like two years. I wondered how long it had been for Jack. Kendra had mentioned him not being "seriously involved" for years, but what, exactly, did that mean?

We would have to have that talk, of course, at some point. Really, we should have already had it, tiresome though it always was. But we already knew each other so well. It was throwing me off and, I suspected, throwing Jack off as well. *Because* we knew each other, we felt almost shy about asking for information we would have long since demanded from anyone else before getting this far. On the other hand, we knew just enough of one another's histories to know that nothing wildly unsavory lay in the past.

For now, however, I could hear Jack splashing in the shower, could feel the slight sheen of moisture forming on my body from the humidity and felt the surreal calm that came with knowing my only job at the moment was to wait for Jack to come out and tell me what to do next. That was all. So simple. Like heaven, really.

I'd heard that one common subtype of submissive was comprised of people who were intelligent but thought too much, who relied too much on their brains in their day-to-day lives, who over-thought everything. They needed a way to escape from all that thinking. To reduce things to the point of manageable simplicity. And *that* I knew to be the absolute truth, at least for me.

Jack came out of the shower whistling cheerfully and I smiled beatifically as I watched him dry himself off, the heavy cream color of the hotel towel making a nice contrast against his steam-flushed skin.

"Would you like me to do that for you, Sir?" I asked, although I frankly wished I could *be* that towel, more so than just using it. He looked scrumptious.

Jack favored me with a lopsided smile and held the towel out for me. I was surprised that my knees didn't protest more when I stood up to take it and started running it carefully, methodically over his body, trying very hard to resist the

temptation to linger overlong when I dried off the more interesting portions of him. He wasn't quite erect, about half hard from the warmth of the shower and, no doubt, the stimulation being provided by a naked towel girl.

"That's enough, little one," he said, before I felt I'd done a truly thorough job. He tucked my hair behind my ear on one side and then slipped his hand down to pluck at my nipple until it hardened. Then the other one—few men cared for the asymmetry of lopsided nipple arousal—before touching my hair again with a sad little smile.

"We need to get some things out of the way, pet. I did warn you about consequences earlier."

"Yes Sir. I remember." Damn. I thought I might be about to find out just what else he could accomplish with that bare hand of his.

"Put your hair up. Make it tight, you don't want pieces hanging loose. Then go in the bedroom, I'll be there in a minute."

And again...damn.

Chapter Ten

It hadn't been that bad, not really, I rationalized to myself as I sat there, waiting, trying not to let myself get worked up. But it was more the idea, the look of disappointment on Jack's face that was sending creeping fingers of anxiety along my spine, over my stomach, making me glad, indeed, I hadn't eaten more.

Hoping it was the right gesture, I knelt by the foot of the bed to wait, one hand clasped in the other behind my back, eyes down, a classic posture of submission. I saw only Jack's feet when he walked in, walking past me to the closet where our suitcases were stored, pulling out not his case but what sounding like a paper bag, from the crumpling noises. He had turned a few lights out along the way, enough so that the darkening view was visible. Still more light in the room than I would have preferred though, not that my preferences mattered at this point.

He came back and stood directly in front of me, feet at my knees, and dropped something soft on my thighs. Black, heavy silk lining buttery-smooth leather...a mask. At least I would feel like the room was dark.

"Put it on," he said abruptly. "And I shouldn't have to tell you to spread your knees. I didn't require you to sit in that pose, but if you're going to do it, do it right."

His voice sounded different when I couldn't see him – darker, sterner. A tiny hint of fear flavored my tension, although somehow it was less than I expected. Because I still trusted him implicitly, I found. Even blindfolded, kneeling at his feet and waiting for whatever came next. I knew that within the context of this strange game we felt compelled to play, whatever came next would be fair, only what was necessary, and that afterward we would both feel better.

"Now. About your luggage. What toys did you bring? I know there must be something. Tell me."

"Sir? Oh...there's a little cordless vibrator with a bunny thing on it. And a silver bullet. And then just a regular vibe, a smooth metal one. That's all."

"That's *all*? One wasn't going to be enough or you just couldn't make up your mind?" I held the note of amusement in his voice to me like a cuddly animal, it was such a relief to hear it still there. I could also hear a long zipper being undone and the soft, scratchy sounds of things being moved around in a suitcase.

My suitcase.

"Well, you know. They do different things, Sir. And not all of them are waterproof, Sir." *Please don't confiscate my toys...*

"I'll just be keeping these for a while. Wow, you really were well stocked, weren't you? And these are all very nice, good stuff. No wonder you freaked about the bag

getting lost. There must be a good two hundred bucks' worth of vibrating fun in here. That anodized metal number is a piece of art."

"Yes Sir."

"Huh. Well, they're mine for now. The bed's directly behind you, little one. Climb up on it and lie facedown."

"Yes Sir." It was probably an awkward scramble to watch. The mask was a good one, I really couldn't see a thing. Once I was lying where he wanted me, remembering only at the last to spread my legs, I heard him zipping and unzipping some more things, rustling the paper bag again...

"Unlike you," Jack went on as he worked, "I came here woefully unprepared for anything like this. But fortunately," *rustle, rustle, rustle*, "that place down the road really does carry a lot more than just lingerie. So when I went there, I didn't buy any lingerie."

I started at the noisy rip of hook-and-loop being opened, and knew what was coming a split second before I felt the cuff go around my wrist. He tightened it just to the point of snugness, not to discomfort, which told me I might be wearing it awhile. And then the other wrist. I wondered where he planned to anchor things, as it was a padded headboard, but all became clear when more cuffs followed. Ankles, thighs—and then the cuffs on each side were snugly clipped together, trussing me in a position that left my rear end both exposed and neatly framed by straps. As if he needed any help in aiming.

"I'm usually more of an improviser when it comes to bondage," Jack commented as he tied me up. "Because I already have a lot of rock-climbing equipment and I'm good with knots. But these just seemed very practical. Lightweight, versatile, good for traveling. Sometimes it's nice to have just the right tool for the job, you know?"

"Yes Sir," I agreed a little despondently. The longer the delay, the more I was dreading the punishment itself, which was probably his goal. His cheerfulness was not helping.

"There. All tied up. You could probably get loose if you really needed to, but you're not going to try to do that, are you, little one?"

"No Sir. It's for my own good, to help me stay still." Besides, I wasn't sure if I actually *could* get loose. I tugged at one wrist restraint lightly and then a bit harder, suddenly feeling the need to try.

"Shhh...settle down, little one." Jack ran a hand down my spine, his other holding the back of one of my thighs firmly, squeezing just a little. "Time to get this done. Tell me why I have to discipline you."

My least favorite thing in the world. "I...acted like I didn't believe you, when you wrote that note earlier. I was just a smartass about it instead of doing what you told me to do, Sir."

"That's right, Katie girl. Just so you know, most of the time it's fine that you're a smartass. I don't expect you to change who you are, but I do expect you to follow

directions when I'm being *that* specific. I decide when the mood changes. Do you understand?"

"Yes Sir. I'm sorry, Sir."

And the odd thing was, suddenly I *was* sorry, painfully so.

Usually at this stage of things, I felt I was playing a game in order to get into the right mindset for a paddling. But right now I was only sorry that I'd disappointed Jack. I never wanted to do it again. I *wanted* him to teach me this lesson. It amazed me, the way my value system had done this dramatic change at the bedroom door. Or, as in the current case, at the *figurative* bedroom door.

"What else, pet?"

"I was supposed to be waiting for you just like you said, to thank you for this afternoon, but I fell asleep, Sir. Covered up. I'm sorry, Sir, I *was* grateful, it was so sweet of you to arrange all that. It was such a wonderful afternoon, *please...*" I was babbling, had no idea what I was asking for, was pulling on the cuffs again, already almost in tears. He didn't seem all that angry, more disappointed. And I hadn't done anything all that bad. But I felt so frantic. What was wrong with me?

"Katie...pet, shhh. That part bothered me much less than you not taking my orders seriously. All right? You weren't waiting like I wanted you to be and I'd been looking forward to it but," he chuckled dryly, stroking my thigh, "you had an hour-long massage. You fell asleep. It happens. The other thing is more...I said I meant it, and you ignored that. You have to learn when to be a smartass and when to take me seriously about all this. Or we won't get very far, will we?" He sounded sad again, and I would have done anything to put the light, teasing tone back in his voice.

"No Sir. I didn't mean to be bratty." He had taken his hands away and I could hear the bag rustling again. The dark felt heavy, oppressive. I wanted to see his face more than anything, to know what he was thinking. "Sir?"

"Yes, little one?"

"I want you to teach me..."

"I know." His hand was back on my leg, fingers reaching higher, tracing all the way up to the little mark he'd left there earlier. It was still sore and he stroked it with a tenderness that tugged at my heart. "I know, little Katie. We both know. Now count for me. I need you to pay attention. Five for falling asleep, ten for being a brat earlier when you should have run straight up to the room, does that sound fair?"

"Fif-fifteen? Yes Sir. More than fair."

It sounded too much more than fair, in fact. Until I heard the slight whistle through the air and felt the stinging crack—not of Jack's hand but of a leather paddle, smacking my buttock just below Jack's love bite.

I was so startled I forgot to count until Jack growled a reminder to do so and I yelped out "One!" just before the second stroke hit. At least I didn't also have to thank him for each one.

"Two!" I gasped, thinking that fifteen suddenly seemed a long way off, thinking that I was glad I had picked safe words I could remember easily.

He knew what he was doing, pulling each stroke so that just the tip of the paddle connected, making it sting more, with a punch behind it but leaving no stripes. Keeping to the area that my bathing suit would cover, although at least one stroke went slightly astray. I would have welts, possibly bruises, but nobody else would see them.

I counted, struggling to keep track even though fifteen wasn't very many after all. But the humiliation of knowing he had purchased a paddle *for this purpose*, of knowing he preferred to use his hand on me but *not for this*...it was far worse than the pain of the leather against my skin, even though I hadn't been expecting that. I knew I'd taken more than this over the course of the previous night, but this hurt more than that, more than I had ever dreamed it could.

Smack.

"Thirteen..." Or was it twelve? Had I miscounted? The last blow was so sharp I couldn't even cry out, just gasp, and I fought against the bonds, trying desperately to get away, unable to do so and feeling tears soak the mask that covered my eyes.

"Katie?" I heard the frown as Jack lost his rhythm. "Kate, that was supposed to be fourteen. Tell me what the safe word is, Kate. Right now!" He sounded sharp, so displeased. "*Kate!*"

Safe word? Oh!

"Red light," I said, hearing myself as if from a long way away. "I'm so sorry, Sir, don't be upset with me, I didn't mean to lose count!"

And then I couldn't help it. I burst into sobs. And when I felt him unhooking my wrists and ankles from my thighs, I thought he was going to send me away and it was too much, I would never survive that...

"Sit up," he said softly, pulling me up just enough to sit with my back against his chest, pinning me there with one arm which I clung to like a lifeline. "Silly thing. You had me scared for a minute there. Here, take this off..." I squinted in anticipation of the brightness as the mask was pulled off, but Jack had turned off more lights and it was comfortably dark in the suite. "And drink this." He pressed a glass of water into my hands and I sipped cautiously between efforts to gulp back tears, waiting all the time for the other shoe to drop. I'd failed, miserably, and I had no idea how to make it right.

"I'm so sorry, Sir, I was trying so hard to please you, I didn't mean to disappoint you," I whispered. And to my astonishment, I felt the rumble of Jack's chuckle against my back, felt his breath warm against my ear as he tugged me even closer.

"You *do* please me, little Katie. You have no idea how much."

"But...but I lost count. You couldn't finish. And I should have safe-worded. I thought I was all right, it shouldn't have been that bad, it was only fifteen, I don't know why —"

"Katie. Stop talking."

I stopped only because he told me to, not because I had run out of things to say.

"Yes, you should have safe-worded, but I also should have seen you weren't going to. I didn't think, because you did so well last night, but it's different when you're not having fun. You really wanted to get through that for me and I can't fault you for that, it's flattering. I think we need to talk about some safety issues if you're going to get so far down you can't speak up, but we won't talk about it right this second, all right? You'll just have to owe me that last one." He stroked my hair, pulling it gently out of the scrunchie I'd used to pull it up with.

"You please me very, very much, little one," he repeated, kissing my temple and forehead, turning me just a little in his arms.

"I've never had that happen before," I admitted. "Where I couldn't...get myself out." Probably because I'd never actually felt remorse while being whipped and reminded I was a bad girl. I'd never actually *felt* it was discipline, just more excuses to play. Even when it hurt physically, much more than the pain Jack had been inflicting with the paddle.

"Really?" He sounded, if anything, even more pleased. I wondered if I should have revealed so much. He was pretty smug already. But the smugness, I was starting to realize, was a turn-on. "What does 'never' mean for you anyway, pet? Entertain me, tell me your sordid history," he requested with dramatic irony.

I giggled, not quite at ease yet but willing to get there if he really meant everything he said. "I don't have much of one. I don't do parties or BDSM gatherings or anything like that. Just friends, word of mouth. I'd dated in high school and college, just the usual sort of thing I guess everyone does. Then I had one boyfriend in grad school who turned out to be into a little bit of everything. We started out pretty normal, whatever that is. Then he started suggesting things and reading me things and...well. You know."

"He corrupted your innocent vanilla heart with his evil ways?"

"Sir," I said coyly, "I don't think I was *ever* vanilla. Just under-informed."

Jack laughed aloud, a wonderful sound ringing through the marble-floored suite, and I smiled and snuggled in closer.

"You look extremely good in a full set of cuffs, by the way," he said, picking up one of my wrists by the restraint still attached and wagging it before dropping it again. "The thigh cuffs are especially nice. You'd look great in a harness. You ever done any rock climbing?"

"No, but I've always wanted to learn." It was the truth. It looked like a blast and was a good skill for a naturalist to have, as it increased the number of remote places one could access to observe rare wildlife.

"If you're serious, I'll teach you. It's a great workout. And then there's the fun equipment. But you were telling me about your evil past. I suspect there's been more than just that one guy in grad school?"

"Not all that much more. We were only together about six months. The next guy I dated wasn't into any of that and..." I paused, not sure how to express it.

"It left you cold?"

"Big time. Um, Sir. Sorry."

"That's okay. I really only need to hear that when I'm in a certain mood anyway. Just go on."

"I liked him. He was nice, we had a lot in common. I tried. For about a year, actually. I don't think he ever figured out why I actually broke up with him. But I couldn't bring myself to tell him what I felt was lacking. So. Anyway. A while later—this was about five years ago, right after I moved back to Houston after my masters was done—I was in this place in the Montrose and I saw someone I knew from grad school. Buying stuff. Very, very naughty stuff."

"Oops."

"Right. And of course, so was I. So we did the whole, 'oh my gosh, you too?' number. It had never happened to me before. I was so mortified I thought I was going to die. Now of course it's just funny, but that first time? Yikes."

"I was renting my first and only bondage porn the first time it happened to me," Jack reminisced.

"Really? I never rent porn. Hmm. So I finished buying, um...something not all that naughty, come to think of it. It was actually that silver bullet you just took away. One of my very first toys. But at the time it seemed so daring to just walk into a store and buy it. Then my friend asked if I wanted to come out that night, meet some people, and so I went with her. Hoping like hell that I wouldn't see any of my friends from high school or anybody my parents knew. Because I hadn't made that magical leap of logic, of course—"

"If you're seeing them *there*, they're sure as hell not going to mention it, because they're there for the same reason you are."

"My friend was subby too. And she was with a Dom who was interested in...well, he convinced her to talk me into hanging out with them a lot over the next few weeks, and it turned out he really just wanted... I suddenly feel incredibly awkward telling you this, Jack."

Jack grinned, pushing me back onto the bed and pinning my legs with one of his, playfully pinning my wrists down as well. "Tell me," he said forcefully, but still obviously playing. "Tell me about the threesome. I can just *hear* the threesome about to happen."

"It is the most boring threesome story in the history of sex. No, really."

"Boring...threesome. See, those two words just don't go together."

"No, no, really. Because listen. I was the guest star, you know?"

"Yes, I know the concept of the guest star in a threesome. Keep talking."

"Well. So I'm at their apartment one night, *the* night. We've finally agreed to do this, things are proceeding and Kelly, that's my friend's Dom – ex-Dom, actually – isn't quite sure what he wants us to do. We don't even have all our clothes off, and he's changing his mind about who goes where and who kisses who.

"Well, Annabelle has her clothes off already, of course. She stripped down to her collar as soon as we walked into the apartment that night. Which pretty much set the tone. Anyway, so once her clothes are off she starts calling Kelly – who's this weenie little guy with about eighty tattoos – 'Master'. Which I can't handle because, for me, it always just makes me think of Igor. 'Yeeees, Maaaaasterrr'"

Jack actually fell over laughing and I landed on top of him, going on with the story more as a form of gleeful torture now.

"So I keep trying not to snicker at that, and then Kelly takes off his pants and he actually has a giant tattoo of *Frankenstein's monster* on his thigh! Are you with me? On his *thigh*. With a background of scary monster-lab electricity bolts and stuff. It's not like I could just ignore that. How could Annabelle not make this connection? Yeeees, Maaaaasterrrr.

"But at this point I was sort of committed to the deal, and I figured he wasn't *my* master, so I just wouldn't call him anything and I'd try like hell not to look at his leg. But as it turned out, it didn't matter. Just then they got a phone call, and Kelly had to go and bail his little brother out of jail."

"You are joking."

"I'm totally serious. Saved by the bell. I think he was suspicious that Annabelle and I were going to get busy in his absence, even though I'm not really into girls and she wasn't either at the time. We're still friends, by the way. She's into girls now, of course, just not me. So he makes her put on – wait for it – a *chastity belt*. Locks it up, three little padlocks, and takes the keys with him.

"Okay, I'm hip, whatever works for them, right? But what is truly awesome is that after he leaves, she peeks out the window to make sure he's gone, goes into the bedroom, gets a spare set of keys and just unlocks the damn thing and takes it right off."

"He let her have spare keys to the chastity belt?"

"No. She stole them from him one day and had the spares made before he had a clue they were missing. She thought the belt was ridiculous, she just wore it to humor him. But she always took it off as soon as possible. He thought she wore it, like, all the time."

Jack shook his head at the many layers of stupidity obvious in the relationship.

"I know, but she's better now. Really. So since she was obviously not all that impressed with this guy anyway, I thought the time was ripe to explain my 'yeeees, maaaaasterrr' problem. And point out how much worse this was made by the tattoo. They broke up the next day."

"You were a home wrecker!"

"As threesomes went, boring as hell. As a fascinating study in human behavior, however, that story never gets old."

"Wow." Jack flopped his head back on the pillow, patting my sore butt thoughtfully and considering this. "Weren't you glad you didn't have sex with him? You don't really strike me as the type anyway, to just do that with someone you didn't really know or at least like."

I nodded in agreement. "I was so glad. But I wasn't actually planning to have sex with him. I was the guest star, remember? I had some hard limits. He was going to have sex with Annabelle and both of them were just going to fool around with me. If all went according to plan."

He looked a little glassy eyed. Perhaps envisioning the fooling around.

"Mostly I was just confused about what it meant to be a little freaky. But I got over the idea that I was going to have to go to bondage parties and whatnot pretty quickly, once I actually met some of those people. Mostly those lifestyle people are just...I don't know, it's boring after a while. I mean, it's fun in a way, but with some of them, it's like they don't have any other hobbies. They never talk about anything else. And they can be sort of oddly competitive about the whole thing. Like who can be the most serious about it." I had my arms folded across his chest and was resting my chin on my forearm, so I was close enough to see his eyes crinkle up even in the dark.

"I don't do the whole 'scene' thing either," he said. "I think I'm mainly a spanker with pretensions anyway. Actually..."

"What?"

"I don't know. I'll tell you later. Keep telling me about your exploits, little Katie. I want to hear more about Katie in the Montrose, fearless slayer of threesomes."

"No more threesomes, I'm afraid. I had a few other times. Not boyfriends. Just...whatever. Partners, whatever. When I was trying to figure out the party thing. Very 'safe, sane and consensual', very educational. Lots of parameters. Mostly just boring though. I felt like it wasn't enough. I kept trying to stop and just go out with guys who weren't into that, but I couldn't keep away. Annabelle kept telling me that what I really wanted was somebody full time, somebody who would be in total control. Not just for sex or scenes. She kept trying to hook me up with people. And I guess it had a certain appeal in theory. Although she didn't really seem all that happy when *she* was doing it.

"Then I actually met someone. At a regular party, not a party with my friends who were into all that. Just a friend of a friend from school. It was a coincidence. Or maybe not. He approached me and I guess I'm pretty easy to read in that regard. We started out chatting and ended up sitting there talking until about two in the morning, about movies, travel, books we both liked. About nothing, really. He was a history professor. *Is*. Still is a history professor. We left the party together and we were together for almost two years."

"So what happened?" He was holding me lightly, carefully. Even his voice sounded careful.

"Not much at first. Nothing scary, anyway. He did have some pretty interesting equipment, a whole dungeon full of stuff. But more for flash, I think. He's sort of a collector. I just thought it was a bit over the top, but it wasn't like he had flesh hooks or anything. Just more and better floggers, a spanking bench, that kind of stuff. It really didn't impact me much. I mean, I was usually either working or at home, we just got together on the weekends and played. And he did talk about other subjects. We went on normal dates too, so it seemed more balanced somehow than what I'd been doing. He met my family and everything. I don't think they loved him, but they thought he was okay. They didn't really get what I saw in him, I think. And obviously I wasn't telling them what I *did* see in him.

"But over time he wanted...more. Really, he wanted a slave. Not like a figurative love slave, or even just a slave for scenes or for a D/s lifestyle. I mean a *slave* slave. No safe words, no limits. He had just started reading the Gor books, and he thought being a Gorean was a great idea. You know the whole Gorean thing?"

"Oh yes." His distaste was evident, which was a relief. They weren't in quite the same category as people one met at bondage parties, but Goreans were considered extreme even by many hardcore BDSM enthusiasts, and you never knew when you were going to run into one.

"Well, I didn't get it. And it started to just suck all the fun out of it for me in pretty short order. He didn't even want to have sex much anymore. Just make me learn a bunch of different ways to kneel on command, cook his dinner and wash his clothes naked or wearing stupid little silk toga things. Wanted to whip me for not ironing his shirts and stuff. I mean, *please*, I work full time. I don't even iron my *own* shirts. I take them to the cleaners for that. I don't have time for domestic discipline. Or...I don't know, it just isn't my thing. When he started using words from the novels all the time and making real-life Gorean friends, I was out of there. I'd just lost all respect for him. It all seemed so silly. But he took it all so very seriously."

Jack nodded, studying my face. "You don't take most of this very seriously, do you? Tell the truth."

Trick question?

"I don't. Not usually. Not like *that* kind of seriously, anyway. Tonight, just now, that was..." *Why do I find it so hard sometimes to complete a sentence around this man?*

"Yeah, that was pretty different. Later. We'll talk about it later, little one." He combed his fingers through my hair, twisting it up, bundling it first over one shoulder then the other as he spoke. "Talk about it out of here somewhere, where I'm thinking clearly. Unlike now, when I'm distracted by having a beautiful, naked girl draped over me."

His kiss was languid, patient, sweet. He didn't seem distracted to me, although I knew I was. Pushing me by the shoulders until I sat up astride his waist, Jack started

taking the cuffs off me slowly—wrists, ankles and thighs, the rip of the closures sounding too loud and harsh in the still of the room. He tossed them carelessly off the bed to one side and gently stroked the skin they'd chafed, finding it by touch, feeling for the heat.

Sensing that the rules had been cast aside for now along with the restraints, I reached down and placed my palms on Jack's chest, cautiously moving my fingers in exploration of the smooth planes of muscles there, the changes in texture from soft skin to hair, from smooth pectorals to tight-tipped nipples. He was sensitive there, and made that throaty sound between a groan and a grunt that never failed to thrill me. I bent to suckle at each one in turn, and was rewarded with more delightfully inarticulate sounds of enjoyment. The freedom to play with him felt wanton, indulgent.

Jack indulged too, mapping every inch of my body that he could reach, finally bracing one hand at my hip and rocking me slowly back against his erection, which now rested firmly against my bottom as I straddled him. The tickle of his crisp hair against my aching skin, the stealthy foray of his other hand to rest just in front of my clit, so that each rocking motion forward brought me into brief contact with it...

I realized I was wet again just as he silently urged me up to take his engorged tip inside myself. Watching him reach down and stroke himself first, then work himself to just the right position beneath me, was as erotic a sight as I could ever remember seeing. It made me moan from wanting him, wanting more, and I moaned louder still when I sank down onto his erection in one slow fall, taking him to the hilt.

We shuddered at the same time and then laughed, both amused by how easy we were. Jack had already slid his hand closer, angling it so it brushed against my clit each time I stroked down on his length and ground myself closer, never feeling quite close enough. Although the slow pace was agonizing for me, the look on Jack's face was worth it. He had thrown his head back and closed his eyes, and with each move I made I could see the tension and need wash over him, transforming his face, flexing across the tight muscles of his chest and belly.

"So good," he murmured, and I felt a slow spark and catch of heat low in my belly, bit my lip to keep from crying out, from letting it take me over.

Then I remembered that the rules were suspended, and just as I hit the point of no return, the orgasm toppling me slowly and sweetly into brief oblivion, Jack opened his eyes...and smiled. He watched me, one hand lifting to cup my face, brush over my parted and panting lips, with a look of utmost awed astonishment and pleasure. Each shiver, each contraction along his length was transmitted back to me in his expression. When I finally started to calm again he pushed up, deeper still, to stir another series of tremors that caught me off guard, tugging a groan from me I hadn't planned.

While I was thus distracted, Jack took over the pace, guiding my hips faster with both hands for surprisingly few thrusts before shuddering to a halting, jerky climax with a soft curse, pushing his head back against the pillow as he strained to empty himself inside me. The sudden heat, the bursting pressure and release surprised me. I had forgotten what it was like to be lucid enough to notice that.

It made me feel exposed, raw. I had never thought of my sexual practices as something that shielded me, but what Jack and I had just done felt almost indecent, more intimate than I was prepared for. No props to hide behind, no rules. I wasn't even quite sure what it had been, or why I had unaccountably enjoyed it as much as I had.

"Shhh..." Jack said, pulling me down to rest on his chest when I would have gotten up, unwound myself from him and disappeared into the bathroom. "Shhh..."

"I didn't say anything," I whispered against his sternum, tracing my fingers through the light dusting of almost-black hairs that formed a T across and down his chest.

"You didn't have to," he explained lightly, playing with my hair in idle, soft strokes. "You were thinking so loudly I could hear you."

"Was I?"

"Mm-hmm. Shhh..."

The air-conditioning came on with a click and a soft chugging sound, startlingly loud in the quiet darkness. Jack felt around on the bed and snagged the corner of the bedspread, pulling it over my back to cover us both just as the air from the vent would have hit us with uncomfortable cold.

It was warm under the covers and I could hear Jack's heart beating, safe and reassuring, feel him softening but still buried inside me, and I told myself it was time to get up, because it would never do to fall asleep this way...

* * * * *

The clock claimed it was eleven p.m., but it felt like I had only fallen asleep for a split second. Disoriented, I sat up and had a few moments of panic before I remembered where I was, and with whom. Jack was still sleeping peacefully on his back, and at some point I must have rolled off his chest because I had awakened lying next to him.

At eleven in the evening on the Copacabana, people were just finishing dinner and thinking about heading out to nightclubs. If the balcony door were open, I knew, a lively noise would be rising from the beach and streets now. It reminded me of New Orleans a little, a town that also had a dark side and was also busiest after sundown.

I wondered if here, as there, my favorite time to walk through town would actually be the early morning, just at dawn, just before the deliveries started or the garbage trucks came through. That was when it was quiet...the *only* time it was quiet, really. But it put me in mind of the quiet one felt after a night of rough play when, waking a little early, one realized there were still several hours left to sleep. The city, like a tired lover, stretched, yawned and rolled back over for another few hours of well-earned rest, while her denizens went about their business more quietly than usual out of respect for the worn-out lady they had spent the night loving so well...

I stifled a laugh at my own silly analogy and rose from the bed carefully, so as not to wake Jack. I tiptoed to the ludicrously well-appointed bathroom in anticipation of the

heat, the pressure, the multidirectional spray of the shower. I might not be in love with Rio yet, and I might be in doubt as to the state of my feelings for Jack. But my adoration for the bathrooms in the suites at the Copacabana Palace was already established, deep and true and abiding.

Chapter Eleven

The second day of the conference dragged on forever. Jack wasn't presenting again until Wednesday and we were in separate sessions all day long, two each in the morning and afternoon. We hadn't really made a plan to meet for lunch and, after looking around awhile to see if Jack would surface in the lobby, I let myself be dragged along by Kendra, Jane, Elizabeth and another few attendees I didn't know, out onto the *Avenida Atlantica* for lunch at a café. There would be sand in my sandwich, I just knew it. I felt grouchy about the sun and the sea breeze and wished I had brought my hat.

But it was impossible to stay grumpy too long in Rio. The air was too balmy and the conversation too lively at the table. Knowing what I did about Kendra and Jane made it especially amusing to listen to them skirt around the topic as the other ladies, Elizabeth and Shauna and Some-B-name-I-couldn't-remember, all talked about their husbands or boyfriends back home.

I didn't have much to contribute either, of course. Although I tried to be noncommittal, Elizabeth predictably gave me several funny looks, which I met with as pleasant and innocent an air as I could. I was hardly going to bust out with, "I can't really sympathize with all your stories about husbands leaving socks on the living room floor, because in my current relationship the more pressing danger is that my boss will leave the paddle lying around after he spanks me with it. It's a genuine hazard. Somebody could trip and fall over it. But picking up after him isn't an option because, of course, I'm usually hogtied in the middle of the bed when he does it".

The thought of saying something like this grew increasingly tempting, just to see what sort of reaction I might get. And people wondered why I so often seemed quiet, reserved in social settings. I had an undeserved reputation for being shy and a little prudish, actually, because of my behavior in just such situations. If they only knew.

Kendra and Jane knew, of course. I was considering inviting them to a debriefing session in Houston after we got home, just so we could laugh ourselves sick over all the things we would have loved to say but couldn't at this lunch. Kendra beat me to it, catching up to me and giving me her card as we walked back to the hotel, insisting that we meet for margaritas no later than the weekend following our return home.

"It'll be my treat, but you have to bring Jack," she said. "I'll come clean to Jane after we get back. I don't think he'd mind, and I'd like to catch up."

"It's a date," I said automatically, then grinned and agreed when she pointedly said that it was *not* a date.

I was still smiling in anticipation minutes later when I walked to the conference room of my next session and saw Jack there, leaning nonchalantly against the wall, clearly waiting for me. And I realized I had just agreed to bring him on a non-date

margarita-drinking spree back in Houston, with his sister's ex-girlfriend no less, when I really still had no idea if we would even continue doing any of this once we left Rio.

I was cheered enormously by the way Jack greeted me—taking both my hands in his and kissing me lightly, obviously not minding who saw, boding quite well for the relationship continuing after the conference I thought—and by the fact that he skipped the afternoon session he'd planned to attend to sit in on the one I'd chosen. He had missed me, he said, during lunch.

* * * * *

I carried that little morsel of affection with me all afternoon and into dinner, which followed more swimming on the beach. I was starting to warm to the beach scene, I had to admit, possibly because everyone was doing it. With dinner customarily served so late, there had to be some way to kill the time between the end of the conference sessions at four-thirty or five, and the start of the evening meal at eight or nine.

A light snack from a vendor or the hotel lobby, and then down to the beach for some rest and a quick swim. Afterward we rinsed off at the open shower at the beach edge before reentering the stream of pedestrian traffic on *Avenida Atlantica*, browsing in shop windows, strolling until we found a suitable place to sit and sip a *caipirinha* or beer or lethally strong coffee, and watch the ocean and all the people still playing on the beach.

"You're starting to see the appeal, aren't you, little Katie?" Jack asked, as I held my face up to the last rays of the sun and wiggled my bare feet comfortably on his lap where I'd placed them, the better to stretch out and relax on my café chair. "Rio's getting to you."

"It has its moments," I confessed, watching the sun setting in quiet splendor over the bay. "May have something to do with the company though."

"Speaking of the company, I'm afraid I have some work to do after dinner. I should be doing it right now actually. Sorry, I checked e-mail while I was up in the room changing for the beach. My mistake. I never should have looked."

"I guess I should actually check *my* e-mail," I said thoughtfully. "Although I assume the boss would let me know in person if there's anything important."

"The boss is satisfied with your current work. Although he'd like it even more if you'd move your foot a few inches to the left...yeah, just like that."

Snickering, I burrowed my foot suggestively in his lap. "You do realize we're in the middle of a public walkway here?"

"Oh yeah."

"I see." So Jack was a bit of an exhibitionist. Good to know. I tipped my straw hat back a little, playing with the beads on the string and taking another sip of my drink, looking anywhere but at my foot and what it was accomplishing. "This is probably a bad idea if you have to work later."

With a sigh, Jack patted my foot and gently moved it away, back to the safety of his thigh with its mate. He rubbed my instep with obvious regret. "True, true. Another time though. So what are you going to do while I'm stuck working?"

I remembered the book I'd picked up in the airport, a murder mystery. I had fallen asleep on the plane before getting a chance to read more than the first chapter and hadn't opened it again since. "Read, I guess. Maybe take a bath. Help you do the work, if it's something I can do."

Jack smiled, almost shyly. "You're just going to hang out with me then?"

"Well, I was. Is that a problem? I don't want to be in the way."

"No. No problem. And you won't be in the way. A little distracting maybe. But I'm used to working with that all the time. It'll make me feel like I'm back at the office."

I grimaced. "I don't even want to think about the office right now."

"We're going to have to talk about it sometime, Kate," Jack pointed out softly.

"I know," I replied, hoping I didn't sound as snappish as I felt. "Just later, okay?"

"Later," Jack agreed with a sigh, looking down to the ocean, where the last shreds of reflected pink were slowly fading into darkness.

Chapter Twelve

Later, Jack worked and I read my slightly trashy book in a hot bubble bath. “Chewing gum for the eyes”, my eighth-grade English teacher had called this sort of reading, disdainfully. I tended to think of it as chewing gum for the brain, myself.

Either way, it certainly passed the time nicely, much better than real literature would have, I thought. I read literature too, Mrs. Mortimer would have been happy to know. I read everything. I was a literary gourmand in the eighth grade, and I still was. But for a lazy night in Rio, sitting first in the tub and then on the balcony, when the air was breezy and the wine was making me sleepy...this was clearly a night not for great literature, but for a fun and easy read.

We had picked up the wine—along with some bread, cheese and fruit—as we took a somewhat meandering route back to the hotel. Neither of us was particularly hungry. Jack knew where to get everything and was able to deal with the vendors in the noisy street market, the *feira*, in a rapid, none-too-formal Portuguese that ensured we never got stuck with the higher tourist prices for anything. Even in the small liquor store close to the hotel, where we purchased the wine, he pulled the native act off beautifully. I kept my mouth shut and the merchant bade us good evening casually, clearly not pegging us for tourists.

The unintentional subterfuge thrilled me for some reason and Jack admitted that he loved being able to blend in when he wanted to. Carrying our purchases in a straw bag we’d picked up for that purpose, feeling and looking like locals, we walked slowly hand in hand through the darkening streets, which were really just coming alive for the evening.

The bath had been steaming hot, the balcony just a little too cool as the evening drew on. The living room, where Jack sat typing on his laptop surrounded by files, was just right. I wandered in with my book and wineglass, leaving the balcony doors open to catch the breezes, and settled as quietly as I could on the far end of the couch with my feet pulled up under the fluffy hotel robe. I was already contemplating actually breaking down and purchasing one of the robes before I left. I couldn’t quite bring myself to justify stealing one. But it was close. The robe was a hedonistic delight.

“How’s the book?” Jack asked companionably, not looking up.

“About like you’d expect. It’s fun though. How’s the work?”

“Probably exactly like you’d expect. Is there any of the *queijo coalho* left?”

“What thing is that again?” I eyed the dwindling food supplies, trying to recall the names Jack had conscientiously tried to teach me while we were purchasing things.

"The roasted cheese we got from the vendor by the beach," he reminded me. He peered over his laptop at the coffee table. "That." His reach threatened to topple several folders onto the floor, and I waved him back and handed him the remaining lump, still on its skewer, and a hunk of bread to go with it.

"Thanks. Wow, I miss street food," he said wistfully, taking a large bite of the cheese and staring at his laptop screen.

"Street food is about to drip sauce on your computer," I pointed out, proffering a napkin just in time. "What are these again?" The little dark purple fruits resembled grapes but were eaten by splitting the skin, eating the pulp and spitting out the seeds. Jack did this neatly, using his thumbnail and ending up with a few discreet and easily discarded seeds, completely freed from any remaining pulp. In contrast, I ended up with a lot of mashed pulp that didn't separate smoothly from its skin and several slimy bunches of seeds—the first batch of which I'd accidentally swallowed.

"*Jaboticaba*. Hey, you're getting better." This time, after some practice, I was able to get the pulp free in one piece, and into my mouth without too much mess. I spit the seeds rather neatly into a napkin, supposing that in time I might actually get the hang of it. "Don't eat too many of them at one time though, you'll regret it." He had speared a slice of mango on the skewer he had cleaned of cheese, and was catching the stray drops of juice from the fruit with his tongue in between bites. I tried not to watch, as watching could only lead to jumping his bones, thus distracting him further from work.

I retrieved a tiny, fat banana and a piece of sharp, veiny cheddar—hardly native, Jack pointed out, but it went well with all the fruit and passably with the chardonnay we'd selected—and nibbled on those, sipping my wine as I carefully ignored the antics of Jack and the fruit and slowly retreated back into my book.

I have no idea how long we sat before I nodded off. At some point, I woke to find that Jack had scooped me up and was quietly carrying me to bed. He shushed my sleepily murmured protest and tucked me in with a kiss on the forehead and another, far too brief, on the lips. I tasted wine and mango on his tongue as it slipped into my mouth just a little, and fell asleep almost instantly, dreaming of that flavor.

Chapter Thirteen

Strangely enough, possibly because I hadn't really had time to study up on the conference in the rush to get ready for it, I only realized on Wednesday that I actually *did* know somebody there other than Jack, Kendra and Jane.

My thesis advisor, with whom I still sometimes corresponded, was participating in a panel discussion that morning, and I made it a point to sit near the front row, giving him a tentative little wave before the questions started. Too late, I considered that I probably should have prepared some dazzling question for the panel. Instead I tried to simply take good notes, as the guests were drawn from both academic and corporate settings and were providing good information about both the science and the law relevant to our field.

Dr. Johnston had politely returned my wave but had no time for anything else before the session. I wasn't even quite sure he recognized me, and thought he might have just been returning my gesture to be cordial. Once the speakers were applauded and the session disbanded, however, he caught my eye with a beaming smile and called me over quite eagerly.

My former professor resembled nobody so much as Santa Claus, if Santa were at his fighting weight. And in a tropical suit of blue and white seersucker, Dr. Johnston also managed to look like the very picture of a South American patriarch. Although I knew him to be from Iowa originally, he was one of those people who blended in well in any setting, adapting to local customs with ease and enjoyment. And South America was a natural for him, as his wife, Lourdes, hailed from Argentina.

"Professor!" I greeted him automatically, and as always he corrected me instantly.

"Nonsense, Katherine, you know you should be calling me Arthur by now. What an unexpected delight, my dear!"

Part of the reason I loved Dr. Johnston was the way he could say things like that and sound absolutely genuine. The world would be a happier place if people still talked that way all the time, I often thought.

"It was unexpected for me too. I'm a last-minute replacement for somebody far more senior who had an unfortunate case of morning sickness, so here I am."

"And no doubt hating every minute of it, if I recall correctly. You never had a fondness for the sun. Our Irish rose, with the instant sunburn. You seem to be managing it well this trip, I see." The professor tucked my arm around his, another courtly gesture now almost lost to political correctness, and we walked together out to the lobby where coffee, sweet rolls and cookies were still on offer. "But you must have dinner with us. Lourdes is here and I know she'll insist. And are you going with the group to *Pao de Acucar* this afternoon?"

The cable car trip to the top of *Pao de Acucar*, Sugarloaf Mountain, was meant to be a highlight of the conference. I had indeed planned to go, although Jack was threatening to skip the cable car and go rock climbing there instead.

"Of course. Well, and we've already been exploring the park..."

Some ten minutes later, deep in a discussion with my old mentor of the sights I'd seen in Tijuca, I was startled to look up and see Jack over Dr. Johnston's shoulder, eyeing us quizzically.

"Jack! Have you met Dr. Arthur Johnston?" I asked enthusiastically. "My thesis advisor. We still keep in touch every so often, and he was just part of the global warming panel. Dr. Johnston, this is...ah..."

Fortunately for me, Jack was quicker on the uptake than I was. I had just realized I didn't know how to introduce him. As my boss? My friend? Boyfriend? Nothing quite seemed to fit.

"Jack Benedict," he cut in smoothly, shaking the professor's hand in that firm, ultra-professional, alpha-male way. "It's an honor to meet you, Dr. Johnston, I'm a big admirer of your early cross-disciplinary work on climate change in the North Atlantic. I drew pretty heavily on your baseline research when I was formulating *my* thesis."

Jack had struck the perfect note, and indeed he stole Dr. Johnston's attention almost completely away. It was several minutes before they paused long enough to finish the introductions.

"And you are Katherine's boss, now that she's moving up? I have that correct? You're a senior vice president with Globe, if I recall the conference literature correctly. I hope you realize what a resource you have here in Katherine."

"Oh, I do, sir," Jack said, smiling broadly. "Believe me, I do."

It was broad daylight, I was blushing, both men were smiling at me and I felt just plain stupid. Still, it was very flattering. At least, I recognized that the appropriate professional response would be to feel flattered, because the appropriate professional response would not include a sudden unbidden memory of being turned over the boss's knee.

"The professor's here with his wife and we were hoping to catch up over dinner," I said to Jack, hoping to strike a note that didn't sound like I was asking permission.

"Would you mind my tagging along?" he asked. "I'd love the chance to hear your perspective on some of the sessions, Arthur. And Kate's always spoken very highly of you."

It was quickly settled. We would ride together in the cable car to the top of Sugarloaf, and then upon our return we would all retire to our rooms—the professor confessed he was likely to want a *siesta* before eating—and then meet up again for dinner. I was looking forward to it, to the conversation and to catching up on what my old friends at school were doing, since so many of them had continued in academic pursuits while I'd defected to the corporate world. And although at first I had thought

Jack was simply schmoozing out of habit, he seemed genuinely interested in hearing the academic viewpoint on the climate change issues the conference was about.

All in all, it promised to be a very educational afternoon and evening. During which, I thought with resignation, I doubted I would be able to do so much as hold Jack's hand.

* * * * *

The ride up the mountain was truly spectacular. True, I had envisioned myself nestled in Jack's arms, enjoying the sights with him pointing out all the best parts. But even as it was, jostled platonically between Jack and Lourdes Johnston, it was a vista that could not be disregarded. Draped out over the bay, the long cables seemed to disappear straight into the side of the mountain, although of course instead of crashing into the granite wall we were eventually able to disembark and enjoy the view from the top of the giant rock before riding back down.

"I still want to climb it," Jack insisted, looking longingly back at the steep face.

"You look like a kid with your face all pressed up against a toy store window," I said with a giggle, forgetting I was trying to set a professional tone in front of our companions. "How come you haven't done it before now, anyway?"

"I just never get around to it," he said, frowning. "It's on the to-do list, but I'm usually staying with Mario when I'm down here and he doesn't climb anymore."

"Really? Did he have an accident or something?"

Jack laughed, a little unkindly. "Yeah, he accidentally keeps eating too much. He's put on quite a bit of weight since he got married. Marta, his wife, is almost as tiny as you but she can *cook*. Well, you'll see. But there's no way Mario could haul himself up a rock face these days. And it's never a good idea to climb alone."

"That doesn't look like a place for a beginner," I said, eyeing the rock face behind us skeptically. I was only a little regretful. It looked scary, to tell the truth. "Otherwise I'd offer."

"Are you kidding? I'm going to start you out at the rock gym, Katie, with so much safety gear you'll barely have room to move your arms and legs around enough for climbing. I'm not letting you out on something like *that* until I'm absolutely sure —"

His look of mild alarm was cut short by Dr. Johnston's pointed but polite throat clearing. The professor lifted his eyebrow at me but said nothing, only turned back to Lourdes and began discussing the sights once more.

"So," I asked into the awkward silence that fell between me and Jack. "There's a rock gym?"

"Yes," Jack said blandly, "there is a rock gym. We'll discuss it later." He pointed over my shoulder at the approaching tree line. "Oh, look, a monkey."

"Where?"

"Made you look."

He was a grown man—a more-than-grown, Very-Important-Person kind of man. He had two graduate degrees, a single one of his power suits cost more than my clothing budget for a year...and he had just pulled a “made you look”.

What was more, I couldn’t smack him on the shoulder for it, not in front of Dr. Johnston and his wife, who was a professor of Romance languages and therefore also a Dr. Johnston. The jig would have been entirely up if I had smacked him, and it was clearly just about up already. I fully expected to hear a dating-the-boss cautionary lecture at some point, either from the professor or from Lourdes, who was now also lifting an eyebrow at me in a way that only haughty, South American aristocrats could really do well. Not that she actually was haughty most of the time, she was usually a lovely woman to be around. But she sure could do the eyebrow thing to great effect.

I was starting to wonder whether dinner was such a good idea, after all.

Chapter Fourteen

"Sure I don't know how she found the time, but she made quite a contribution to the article. I miss her way with organizing a piece. Even purely academic work from her had such a flow, such style."

"I actually agree with you, sir, and I know she's still in touch with several other researchers as well. I think it's probably just a matter of time before she decides to go back to that line of work."

"I *am* sitting right here, you know," I said with yet another blush. "And flattering though this is, I admit it's disconcerting to hear you planning my departure from my job, since you do employ me at the moment."

"Just resigning myself to the inevitable," said Jack, lifting his wineglass in a gallant little salute. "I've known all along we won't keep you, Kate. Not just the fact that you're still more interested in fieldwork, but the way your face lights up when you talk about research and the fact that hardly a week goes by that you don't latch on to some topic and mention what a great dissertation it would make."

"That's just the problem, Jack. A different topic every week. It took me forever to narrow down my thesis, there's no way I could decide what I would write a dissertation on, which is why —"

"Now, now, children." Lourdes tapped her fingers abruptly but elegantly on the table between us, stopping the banter instantly. I had often wondered what her university classes must be like. The students were very well behaved, no doubt. "We are here to eat. You'll ruin your digestion. No arguments, please." She turned to Jack, her aquiline features softening a bit, making it easy to recognize the flirtatious beauty she must once have been. "Jack, Arturo tells me you know a Coelho family. Is this the same Coelho family of Carlos y Fernanda? They...have a few boats?"

"Yes, ma'am," Jack said obediently. It was adorable, watching him fall into step for Lourdes, around whom he seemed completely docile and in awe. I had seen this effect on many of my fellow researchers during my graduate school days, as the Drs. Johnston enjoyed entertaining the students regularly. Her power over men never seemed to fade, and I could only watch in admiration as she twined Jack around her little finger. "Although, of course, to say they own a *few* boats —"

"Sí. It is a good family. Nice people. Are you, then, the boy that Marisa visited so often in Houston? The boy Fernanda so despaired of ever proposing to her daughter?"

Jack *blushed*.

I felt slightly faint.

Arthur Johnson's eyes widened perceptibly, but he didn't dare face down his wife directly. Few men would — she was quite intimidating. He took a less direct route.

"More wine, my dear? Mr. Benedict is here with one of his employees, after all. Perhaps such a personal topic..." He trailed off delicately as he finished topping off the wine in his wife's glass. She was clearly not to be put off. Jack, however, saved her the trouble of investigating further.

"That would be me, ma'am. Of course it was quite a long time ago." He smiled in such a way that anyone who didn't know him would assume he was simply engaging in fond reminiscence. I heard the truth in his voice, however. Like a lot of men from Houston, he only had a noticeably Texan accent when he was angry, drunk or selling something — and he was definitely not drunk or trying to sell anything right now. "She was a lovely girl but I haven't seen her in years, I'm really just in touch with her brother. Of course she did get married some time ago. And Mario tells me she's working for the *universidade* now? He sent a picture of his son with his two nephews a few weeks ago, actually, Marisa's boys. They were all visiting at the Coelhos' ranch. The two nephews are just old enough to start riding horses."

I recalled the picture from his computer desktop of three little boys on horseback. One, a dark-haired, dark-eyed youth of about ten, was leaning comfortably back in the saddle and looking at the camera with a devilish smile. The other two were younger identical twins of perhaps seven or eight. Sandy-haired and squinting in the sun, they looked ill at ease on their mounts. Which would make sense, I supposed, if they were just learning how to ride.

"Those could have been *your* sons," Lourdes pointed out shamelessly. I thought she might actually be doing it to try to get another blush from Jack, but he was better prepared this time, although by now he was nearly drawling.

"Not likely, as Marisa wouldn't have me, ma'am. Whether or not she told her mama, I *did* ask — and she declined. Something about my selling out to the corporate machine. And that, I think, is as much as I'm prepared to expose about myself this evening." He smiled that artificial, very charming smile again, but there was a hint of steel underneath it. He was suddenly one hundred percent in command of the situation and was broadcasting that in a way he hadn't done all week. At least not outside the bedroom.

His commanding behavior was affecting me predictably, even though it wasn't directed my way. Evidently it had some effect on Lourdes too, because she nodded gracefully and began discussing the dessert selection as though nothing untoward had just happened.

I tried to look bland and unconcerned, although my mind was racing from one extreme to the other. I told myself it was years ago, before he went to London from the sound of it, and he was obviously past it. Lourdes just liked to play strange mind games with good-looking men.

But who was this Marisa person, and where did she live—so I could go and let the air out of her tires? I could only assume Jack would enlighten me about the whole thing later. I wondered if enlightenment would come before or after the don't-date-your-boss lecture from the Johnstons, which I was now certain would come at some point before the evening was through. Because Lourdes obviously knew everything—well, not *everything*, but quite enough—and seemed to have taken the stance that Jack was out to despoil and then desert me.

I had spent at least some time nearly every weekend in graduate school at the Johnstons' large, comfortable home in Austin. Only on the weekends when I wasn't off trudging through the desert, slogging through the mud or braving the frozen tundra to collect data for Arthur, of course. It was a house made for entertaining, and the couple loved to fill it with their friends and students. When I became one of Arthur's research assistants I naturally jumped to the top of the A-list, and was soon a regular fixture at their place, along with a handful of other equally geeky and eager would-be academics.

But more importantly, I think, the Johnstons just liked me, and I liked them. They reminded me quite a bit of my own parents, for one thing, so spending time there was something of a remedy for the homesickness I hadn't quite outgrown. For a time, I think they had hopes that their son Thomas, who was about my age, would take an interest in me.

I was *their* type, but not, it seemed, Tom's type. He had disappointed them in that, as in so much else, including his insistence on going straight to business school out of college. He spurned all pursuits he deemed frivolous, including the study of languages for any purpose other than doing business in them, the reading of novels in any language, the persistent belief in global warming and just about anything else his parents held dear. I could only hope that he had mellowed somewhat in the subsequent years.

I tried to remember what I knew about where Tom was now. He had finished his MBA about the time I was finishing my masters, and I knew he then went on to earn a law degree, but as for details following that I hadn't a clue. I suddenly felt slightly guilty for not asking Dr. Johnston about his family, but I wasn't about to bring up Tom with his mother in her current mood.

Lourdes was a strange sort to be a mother hen, but she was fiercely protective of both her own and Arthur's favorite students. She had always taken us to task for eating poorly, staying out too late...and the girls, in particular, she harangued about our more foolish relationship choices, if we were foolish enough to let her know about them. But even I, secretive as I tended to be, had asked Lourdes for advice on that score once or twice, because she so clearly knew things about men that the rest of us didn't. Her advice, which I had ignored the first time and taken the second, consisted of telling me to dump the idiots and look after myself instead.

Even better than she knew men, she knew *herself*, a trait I lacked. It was something I came to realize I needed to work on. And thereafter—after I had dumped the second

idiot in question—Lourdes viewed me with much greater approval, and I fell into the circle of extra protection she seemed to afford those she liked best.

It was protection I thought I could do without at the moment, although it touched me that even now, years later, she would still be so willing to fend off a potential wolf on my behalf. A part of me wondered just what she would say if I were to ask advice about this particular situation? Because Jack was clearly no idiot, and she seemed to have accepted that. In fact, they seemed to be making small talk now, and Lourdes was eyeing him thoughtfully over the last bites of her orange flan. Arthur had asked me for details about Jack's presentation, which he hoped to sit in on the next time, and I was giving him a synopsis while trying to tune back in to what Jack was saying as well.

I realized Jack was speaking in Portuguese again. I'd forgotten it was one of the many language Lourdes spoke, or at least understood. He spoke with a cadence, slow and mellifluous, almost as though he were reciting poetry. As it turned out, he was indeed reciting poetry. By the time he finished, Lourdes was resting her chin against her hand, smiling openly, enamored.

Jack realized all three of us were watching him and cleared his throat softly, a bit embarrassed.

"It's the, um, 'Song of Exile'. By Antônio Gonçalves Dias, the national poet of Brazil. He was in Lisbon and homesick for his native country. He said—I only know it in Portuguese, it's hard to translate off the cuff—he said that in Brazil, 'Our skies have more stars, our meadows many more blooms, our forests have more life and our life has much more love'. And that he prayed to return here, of course."

"It was beautiful," Lourdes said, shaking her head. He had wooed her, it seemed, despite her firm intentions to resist wooing. Presumably this would not have worked as well had she not understood Portuguese. On the other hand, if poetry was all it took, she was going to be weak on the fronts of not only Portuguese and English, but also Spanish, Italian, French and even Latin, since she spoke and read all those languages and dabbled in a few more besides. But she was nobody to trifle with, in any language. I was impressed that Jack had managed to sway her opinion.

As we were gathering our things to leave and agreeing that the dinner had been lovely and saying we should make plans to meet again before the week was out and so forth, Lourdes commented to Jack that she'd liked his first poem better. He just smiled and nodded, saying he was glad she'd enjoyed it, and he'd meant every word. And then he took my hand very firmly in his, with a calm air of possessiveness that stunned me.

"My dear, perhaps I'll walk ahead with Katherine," Arthur began, as we headed down the *Avenida*, intending to return directly to the hotel. He sounded a bit anxious—and a bit rehearsed too. "We had that little something to discuss."

"Do you know, Arturo, I prefer you to walk with *me*." Lourdes offered her husband a winning smile, not only an echo of her past beauty but a force to be reckoned with then and there. "I think Mr. Benedict will take Katherine down to the beach now, to

walk in the moonlight and recite poetry to her, instead of to an old woman. *Buenas noches*, Mr. Benedict, Katherine.” And with that, she swept her husband away, brooking no argument, leaving me somewhat speechless there in the middle of the sidewalk with Jack.

Arthur just shrugged and waved at me over his shoulder, but then turned away and angled his head down, the better to hear whatever his captivating wife was telling him. They were quickly lost in the crowd and I turned back to see Jack standing at ease, his free hand in his pocket, his patented smug smile on his face.

“I was expecting them to try to rescue me from your clutches and instead you’ve given permission to take me to the beach and recite poetry to me in the moonlight?” I asked, marveling at the way he’d played the situation.

“What can I say? I’m good with people.” He pulled me along and across the street, over one block to the beach, where we took our shoes off and headed down closer to the water’s edge.

“What was the poem she liked better?” I asked idly, after we’d walked for a few minutes, skimming the tide line. “She looked positively enthralled.”

“I can really only say it in Portuguese,” he said coyly.

“Well, Lourdes did say you were supposed to bring me here and recite poetry in the moonlight. So I should probably hear something. She may expect me to report back in the morning.”

“Seriously?”

“At this point, I wouldn’t put it past her. I’m really sorry about all that in there, by the way.”

“They were just looking out for you. You must have been one hell of a research assistant. Ah, who am I kidding? Of course you were one hell of a research assistant. Arthur’s chomping at the bit to get you back. And I can only assume he’s not the only one. Kate, why didn’t you stay and keep working on—”

“Are you just stalling? Do you not know any poetry in English?” I had snapped without meaning to and instantly regretted it. “I’m sorry, just...I heard it from the professor all through dinner, so can we table that topic for now? I really don’t know why anymore, anyway, so my answers aren’t likely to be very good.”

“Fair enough. Do you really want to hear the poem?” I nodded, and he screwed up his face in concentration. “It’s actually by the guy who wrote the lyrics to ‘Girl from Ipanema’. It’s a sonnet though, about fidelity. Or...faithfulness, I guess. Saying ‘fidelity’ makes it sound like it’s about not cheating. I really can’t translate the whole thing very well. I’m going to have to leave some things out.

“To my love I shall be...attentive above all and always with passion...so that even in the face of the greatest enchantment, my thoughts...only become more enchanted by my love. I want to live it in each...something I can’t translate...each moment, and praising it I will sing my song, share my laughter and shed my tears, when she is worried or when she is...not happy, or, um...content. So that...something about how if

I were dying, I could say to myself about this love, may it not live forever, because it is a flame, but let it be endless for as long as it lasts. That's pretty much the gist of it."

"That's..." I wasn't quite sure what to say. "I can tell it's beautiful. You were right about translating it, but —"

"I did warn you," he said with an easy laugh. "I'm not the one with the language skills here. I have people to do that for me."

"It was beautiful. So...that's what won Lourdes over?"

"I guess so. A little poetry goes a long way."

Chapter Fifteen

We walked somewhat aimlessly along the shore, which was not nearly as deserted as one was led to believe from movies, even at this time of night. There was a bonfire there, not too far from the hotel, and a party of some sort. We skirted it and kept going, seeking darkness and never really finding it.

"So," Jack said finally. "I am having the *best* week. Have I told you that? I really didn't expect this week to turn out like this."

"Me either. It's fun though."

"You sound a little sad, Kate. Fun's not supposed to be sad."

I smiled and wrapped my arm a little farther around his, leaning my head briefly on his shoulder as we walked. "I'm not sad. I just can't help thinking about going back. It'll all be over and it's been...fun. And not what I expected."

Jack was silent for a minute then surprised me utterly by asking, "When you say it'll all be over, you mean the Rio part, right? Because it almost sounds like you think the whole *thing* will be over—and that's not what I want. I don't think it's what you want either."

Ah. Well. At least I knew he wanted to keep going when we got back. Although the potential terms of such an arrangement could still be interpreted too many ways to count. "When we get back," I equivocated, "it won't be dreamlike anymore. It'll be Houston, for one thing. And there will be work, which is going to be really strange. And there's not knowing if I'm supposed to invite you to meet my family, and do we stay the night right away, and do we assume we're doing something together every weekend, and can I keep a toothbrush at your place, and..."

Jack laughed out loud and tugged me to him with a little yank, halting our progress and throwing his arms around me, picking me up by my waist and kissing me soundly, spontaneously, before setting me gently back down on the sand. "Katie, I think you need a little downtime. Your brain is working too hard again, isn't it?"

"Always," I admitted regretfully, wishing he would just kiss me again.

"When we get back to the hotel, I'll see to it that you don't think for the rest of the night, little one." His words, his low murmur in my ear—for my benefit, because it wasn't as though there was anybody close enough to hear us on the beach—sent chills racing through me, from my stomach down to my legs. "But we should probably talk about some things first."

"No," I said, deliberately whining. "No talking. Talking sucks. I *hate* talking."

It earned a chuckle, but he was going to talk anyway. "Okay, first things first. Big confession time. Are you ready?"

"No," I said truthfully. "But you're going to say it anyway, so let 'er rip. Is this about Marisa?"

"Oh...no. I'll tell you about her, but let me do this other one first, all right? Let's stick to the agenda. This is about the other night."

"Oh." So *this* was "later"...when we'd agreed to talk about it. "Later" always seemed to arrive so soon.

"I wanted you to know that was really not what I'd intended to have happen. Mood-wise, I mean. I don't normally... When there's discipline, I always feel like I'm either inventing rules that are sort of meaningless to me or just making up infractions after the fact to justify the whole thing. Which works, I guess. Everyone seems happy with that arrangement. It's sort of what we're about, right? It's part of a scene. But that time—"

"It was real," I interjected.

"Exactly. And the whole thing scared the shit out of me for a couple of reasons. For one thing, I was surprised by my own reactions. I felt so disappointed in you—"

"I'm so sorry! I just wasn't thinking, I was so sleepy, it—"

"Kate. Stop talking."

"Sorry."

"Kate, I really don't mean I was disappointed about you falling asleep. I mean, look at it logically. You were exhausted from the flight, the hiking and swimming, relaxed from the massage. There's really no way you could have stayed awake in that bed. Once you were down you were going to be out. It's a non-issue. Consider it paid, okay?"

"Okay," I said reluctantly.

"Would you feel better if I gave you that one last swat?"

"Ultimately, probably yes. But not right this second."

"Duly noted. Here..." He pulled me down to sit next to him on the sand and threw an arm around my shoulders. "Too cold?"

I shook my head. It was perfect, in fact, the temperature felt like air-conditioning. It had rained earlier in the day so it was a bit more humid than usual, but still I could hardly complain.

"What really bothered me, and this is the part that had me a little freaked out, because it didn't actually have anything to do with the sex—well, indirectly it did, obviously—was when I told you to go upstairs and you kept on teasing. No, stop, don't keep apologizing or you *will* get that last lick now. It's just that I was genuinely upset. And I can't remember ever actually feeling that way before, in that situation. Not that I've had all that much experience. I guess at some point here, it'll be time for me to tell you my own sordid history. Marisa and all.

"But that feeling...it was really unsettling, to feel that way unexpectedly. In case you had missed it, I enjoy being in control."

"No! You? Really?" I was pushing it, and knew it, but he'd left such an opening. Jack was good-natured about it though.

"I know, I know. But I hide it so well, right? And then we got into it and you were clearly taking it seriously too. I felt out of control, but I felt like I needed to go through with it. Because if I didn't do it, didn't follow through, not only would it confuse us both, it would feel dishonest. It was going to leave this issue hanging out there for us both to feel bad about. Which, obviously, is happening still, since I didn't finish and you feel like you haven't paid your dues yet."

"It's true. I sort of wish you'd just finished anyway. I know why you didn't, but—"

"I couldn't, Kate. You know that, right? It was a safety issue. Neither one of us is that hardcore. You were so out of it, I was really worried. I actually thought you might have been in shock for a few minutes there. Which was another reason the whole episode was scary. I mean, it's my job to keep you safe. Weird as that may sound."

"I'd never had that happen before," I said, knowing I was repeating myself. "It was a little scary. But I think it was the same issue you were having. It felt real. And instead of it being a game, it was suddenly the person whose approval I craved the most being disappointed in me and feeling like he had to teach me a lesson. With a paddle, no less. That was... For some reason, that was the worst part. Because you'd said you liked using your hand. I felt genuinely ashamed. But the thing is, I *did* feel like it was necessary. You'd been very clear and I hadn't met your expectation for me, and I wanted to make it right. That was my chance to make it right. I really felt that way—and I *never* feel that way. Because it's a game, right? Deep down, why should I care? But I *did* care."

Jack tightened his hold on my shoulders, pressing his face against my hair for a few seconds. "Person whose approval you craved the most?"

"Well..." It was more than I'd planned to say, but it had just slipped out.

"You have my approval. You do know that, don't you?"

"I'm starting to realize that, yes," I said, feeling the blush creep over me even though I knew it would not be visible to Jack in the growing moonlight.

"And since this is obviously turning into a meta-analysis, because we both think too much about stuff...you know that I don't think I actually have any sort of entitlement to use corporal punishment to teach you anything, right?"

"Yes, I know you're a sensitive, pro-woman kind of a guy, Jack. When you aren't paddling girls for their own good, of course."

"I really should put you over my knee for that right now."

I giggled into his shoulder, feeling bubbly and relieved. "I try not to confuse people's sexual preferences with their personalities. Everybody's weird. That part, it just doesn't pay to analyze. And if you really did think you were entitled to that, rest assured I wouldn't want you to put me over your knee or tie me up or do any of those other things. A lot. Hopefully soon."

"You're making it hard for me to concentrate on our serious talk, Katherine." Indeed, Jack's hand was drifting down, fondling my waist and hip in a way that was making it equally hard for me to concentrate.

"Well, scary though it was, I felt like I needed it. I can't guarantee I won't feel that way again, Jack. And in all fairness, *you* felt like I needed it too. You needed to do it. And trusting you with that was...I don't know, maybe we both just have to use a little caution. Forewarned is forearmed, that sort of thing."

"That makes sense. But you said trusting me with that was...what?"

"Amazing," I admitted. "It's never been like that."

He seemed to mull this over for a few minutes as we sat in companionable silence, just watching the waves. The sounds of the beach party blew closer with the wind then faded again, a counterpoint to the rhythm of the water against the shore.

"So," he said finally, "do you want the full sordid history or the condensed version?"

I gave it some thought before answering. I did want to know, but not if it was going to ruin the night. "I guess the condensed version, with an option to know the full version if it seems important?"

"Of course. So. Marisa. Well, you probably figured out she's Mario's sister, so I guess I don't have to mention how we met. Mario just sort of rolled his eyes at the whole thing. I was expecting him to pull the big-brother act, but he said Marisa would do what she wanted to do, and then he seemed to wash his hands of it. Not of me or our friendship, just...like my relationship with Marisa didn't exist. Probably should've paid more attention to his attitude, because I think he knew from the start she didn't mean for it to last.

"I was in college, of course, and we've already agreed that makes you an idiot, remember? So after I'd finished my masters and went back home for good to get a job, I was still stupid and Marisa could afford to make a lot of hops to Houston. I have no idea how she got the visas. She would come up about once a month, sometimes not quite that often. She was...an adventurous girl. She was into *everything*, she wanted to try *everything* at least once. I was just the lucky guinea pig, although it was obvious I hadn't been the first."

Jack sighed with a certain wistfulness. "She was wild. And as I already said, I was young and stupid. Also very idealistic. I was doing my first real job then, for a nonprofit wildlife rescue agency, and she loved that. Marisa was a big animal rights activist. At first. Eventually she got more into the anti-world-market thing, but at the time it was still all about spray painting furs and learning to be a vegan. She hated Houston, of course. Lotta furs and meat in Houston. I'd take her out to dinner and she'd complain about stuff, and then we'd go back to my ratty little garage apartment and...well, you know."

"Yeah, I think I have a pretty good idea," I said dryly.

"This period of time, by the way, was when I figured out I liked being on top."

"Really? She let you top? That surprises me for some reason."

"She didn't let me very often," he said ruefully. "And of course there was always the awareness that she was only *letting* me, which is a little different. But still, when that happened...man." He was lost in thought for a moment, remembering his wild girl, whom I hated now with every fiber of my irrational being.

"Anyway," Jack finally continued. "I'd been in Houston about a year, with this insane Brazilian girlfriend I only saw once a month, and I decided my job sucked, being poor sucked, everything sucked—and I was going back for an MBA."

"Oh, is this the part where you sold out?"

"Almost. That came later. It took me a couple years of night and weekend classes, and I wasn't nearly as interested in it as I'd been in researching my masters, so my motivation was a lot lower. But I was living near my folks again, so they gave me the occasional kick in the butt. And about one year into working on the degree I got a much, much better job in—cue ominous music—"

I dutifully supplied a fairly pathetic-sounding, "*Dunh, dunh, duuuunh!*"

"Big. Oil."

"Oh, you bastard."

"Exactly. That, by the way, was my big sell-out moment. I paid off my student loans in a few months, bought a car that actually ran every time I started it, moved into an apartment with more than one room and an actual dishwasher. I was a grownup. And I liked it. Even the work part, which surprised me. I was doing the same thing as your old job, more or less."

"And Marisa?"

"Came to visit a few more times, got her shapely bottom spanked a few times and was grumpy when I didn't let her reciprocate anymore, then got downright bitchy when I finally just told her to shut the hell up about all the fur coats in Houston. Although that was my mistake, really. I had taken her to the symphony that particular night, so it was just a good thing she didn't have spray paint with her. You know how much fur you tend to see at the symphony."

"But...I still thought it was love. You know? It was this big, passionate thing, everything was very serious, everything was an argument and then we'd end up in bed for all kinds of wild sex. And yes, I did ask her to marry me somewhere in that period. She just laughed at me. Probably smarter than I was. We'd have been so miserable."

"By the time I'd finished up the MBA and started actually moving up in the company I was with then, she wasn't coming back anymore. So I moved on. Phew! It was a relief. I felt free. I dated a little, but nothing like what we'd been doing. I figured the wild times were over, you know how that goes. And then, about a year before I ended up leaving for London, I started seeing this girl from the accounting department at my company. Typical CPA, had the dull suits and everything...and she was absolutely in love with being spanked. I had the magic hands, evidently."

"Good times," I said, slightly bitchily.

"Don't be jealous, little Katie," Jack said, leering a bit. "I said I had the magic hands, not that she had the magic ass. *You* have the magic ass."

I couldn't restrain the snicker, but I also found it sort of sweet in a twisted way.

"Okay then, keep talking. You sure this is the condensed version?"

"You talked my ear off the other night. Anyway, Lisa, this girl, she was great and we had a lot of fun. But we both knew she wasn't moving to London with me. We'd been tapering off anyway, and we pretty much just had an amicable parting of ways when I moved.

"Then there was London. Which was a little harder to negotiate. I didn't know many people and I was traveling around quite a bit. The North Sea, mostly, but also back to the States some. Alaska, San Francisco, Cleveland...even Houston. I was mainly overseeing data collection on pipelines and then later on natural gas facilities, but I'll give you a copy of my c.v. if you really want to know all that."

"I've already got a copy," I told him. "You have a typo in your 'Articles and Publications' section, by the way. Would you like me to fix it for you sometime?"

"Of course. Thanks. Um, so anyway, it took me a long time to even try dating anybody in London. I saw a few people who... A couple of times I sort of picked up some women at a club I'd found, which was a very stupid thing to do. Even with precautions. But it was *that* sort of club, so I knew what I'd be getting into from the start, and so did they. I was lucky not to catch anything, I guess. Eventually...oh, maybe five years after I'd gotten there? About the time Globe bought out the company and I thought I might end up back in the States, I met somebody at work who was like the gay Clark Kent."

"Excuse me?"

"Mild-mannered and straight-acting on the outside, but he takes off the suit and..."

"Gay Superman?"

"Well. Male Lois Lane, maybe, is a better analogy. If Lois Lane were a petroleum engineer. But the thing is, one day he was fussing with his tie and he went to take it off to retie it, and I saw that telltale sign. Collar-chafing marks. And not from too much starch. So I checked the wrists and sure enough...more chafing. And he was not sitting comfortably, shall we say."

"Needed Tiger Balm," I quipped. "Speaking of which, when do I get mine back?"

"Later, later." He patted my head patronizingly. "Story time first, little Katie. So I finally worked up the courage to make a few sly insider jokes to Wesley, with the collar chafing, and after pretending not to get my drift the first few times, he finally broke down and told me *far* more than I wanted to know about his sex life. So much for the famous British reserve. And more importantly, he brought me along to meet some people.

"Nothing really lasted. It was just an educational time for me. There was a girl I saw for a few months, but it didn't really work out. She was very subby, but then she tended to get resentful if I actually did anything on the Dominant end that she didn't like, or didn't read her mind to figure out what she actually wanted. She wasn't exactly topping from the bottom but in a passive-aggressive way, I guess she was.

"I also did a lot of research online, frankly. I don't mean porn, I mean actual research, because I'm a geek. Scholarly articles about the psychology of it, that kind of thing. And a lot of other reading on the subject, which helped pass the time and was usually pretty interesting, although I don't know how useful all of it was.

"Then too, my new boss's wife kept trying to set me up with people, just these very nice girls who I felt obligated to take out but I couldn't shake the feeling that they were just beads. I think she did start to wonder if I was gay and just a really good actor, because after a few years of that she gave up. I guess *I* sort of gave up. I was mainly focused on work, anyway, more and more into the management side of things, and then of course purely into the management side. And then came the reorganization and...back to Houston."

"Anticlimactic?"

"Not really. I mean, I came back to be a VP and it was kind of a coup to get upgraded that far, that fast. Mainly I got lucky. They needed somebody in that spot who had both the science and the business credentials."

"I don't think it was just luck. I've seen you work, remember? And you're not just a VP anymore either."

"Well, thank you. It's about time you did some of the flattering. Of course once I got back here, my sister Anne...she's pretty open-minded and knows her way around a bit." I didn't mention, of course, that I already knew quite a bit more than he was telling me about Anne. "She introduced me to some people. But I don't know...none of them really piqued my interest. There was this girl at the office, is the thing—this very, very *smart* girl, kind of shy and bratty at the same time, with the most amazing white skin."

Jack pulled me in a little tighter with one arm and slipped the other hand neatly under the hem of my skirt, which I'd pulled down over my knees. His hand began a slow, stroking rhythm along the back of my thigh, and he leaned close enough to my ear that each word tickled the edge, sending a series of thrills along that side of my body.

"And all I could think about was how she would look tied to my bed, completely at my mercy, while I slowly and methodically turned her creamy ass so red it was almost—not quite, but *almost*—raw. No bruises, not even too many broken blood vessels, just bright, cherry red against all that white. Very distracting. And then eventually, of course, I would start thinking about how it would feel, after doing that, to fuck her silly in every possible way I could dream up. Do you think I was able to dream up a number of different ways, Katie?"

"Yes Sir," I whispered, already under his spell. Right there, on the beach, in the open. Just like that...like magic. His hand, which had been stroking lower with each pass, finally came to rest against my sex, covered though it was by a layer of silk that did nothing to hide the fact I was already thoroughly wet. Even the light brush of his fingers set me shaking, and I bit my lip to keep from crying out when he slipped his fingers underneath the fabric and pushed one inside me without preamble.

"You would let me take you right here on this beach, wouldn't you, little one?" he asked, clearly already knowing the answer. He had found my clit and was fingering it now in agonizingly slow circles.

"Yes Sir...oh don't stop, please don't stop...!"

I felt his laugh through his arm and side, rather than hearing it. "I'll stop when I want to, little one, you know that. And you'll come when I want you to. Not here, and not yet. I'm just playing with my toys right now." Looking up and down the beach, he tried to assess the crowd and the darkness. There was nobody close to us now, even the sounds of the party were being blown in the opposite direction, and he must have deemed it safe enough because he suddenly removed his hand.

"If you want to keep those panties, you have about two seconds to get them off before I tear them off."

"Y-yes Sir. Thank you, Sir." *That Jack, always so thoughtful.* The panties were off just in time for him to grab them and stow them in his pocket before reaching for my hand and placing it squarely on his lap. I hadn't realized he was as aroused as I was, but I realized it then. His erection felt hot and tight, stretching the denim of his jeans.

"Take it out."

"I...yes Si— You mean *here?*" I couldn't help it. It was a public beach. Mostly deserted, mostly dark, true, but...

"Excuse me?" I felt Jack's hand cup my breast and then tweak my nipple just sharply enough to qualify as a warning.

"I...I'm sorry, Sir. Yes Sir." And I unbuttoned Jack's jeans and carefully lifted his erection free of its nest of denim and soft cotton boxer briefs.

"Better. Now one for the mental scrapbook, I think. I'll call it, 'Copacabana Beach— Little Katie, licking my cock like an ice-cream cone under the moonlight'."

"I hope you treasure it always, Sir," I sassed, but quickly sucked his tip into my mouth to avoid repercussions...for the moment.

"Such a smart little mouth," Jack said a little breathily, wrapping his fingers firmly into the hair at the nape of my neck. "But I like it even better when it's full of my dick."

I had shifted so I was lying on my side over Jack's lap, with my knees curled toward his hip, and he let go of my hair after a minute to reach down and pull my skirt up a little more in front, just past the vee of my legs...giving him a private view of the very top of my exposed pussy although my skirt still covered enough of my rear. From whom, I wasn't sure, since anyone who looked very closely at all would see instantly

what we were doing. Still, I could only suppose we were not the first to use this beach in this way.

I suckled Jack with a growing enthusiasm, surprising myself in the end by how turned-on it made me to lick and suck his cock out in the open. Jack seemed a bit surprised too, coming more quickly than I imagined he would, wrapping his hand in my hair again as I swallowed each spurt and then lovingly licked him clean.

"Hmm. Good girl, little Katie. See, that wasn't so bad once you started, was it?" He was tucking himself back in, buttoning his fly.

"No Sir," I said truthfully.

"You did well, little one. But you didn't start when I told you to, did you? Not right away. What do you think I'll need to do about that?"

"Punish me, Sir. I'm sorry, Sir."

Jack grabbed my shoulders and sat me up, gently lifting my chin and holding my eyes with his, searching.

"I mean it, Katie. You didn't do it right away, and that's what I want from you when I do get to the point where I'm actually ordering. Do you understand?"

All too well. The fuzzy glow of having pleased him was already fading in the face of his disappointed frown. "I do, Sir. I'm ready this time, Sir. I *think*."

Jack's smile was just visible in the low light. I realized dimly that the bonfire was dying, the party around it quieting somewhat. "We'll work it out together. Come on, back to the room."

There was much dusting off of sand — although I was stuck with a bit of it in the one place I really couldn't dust it away — and Jack pulled me in for a rough kiss, bending me back over his arm and wrapping my hair around his other hand, before leading me back to the hotel.

Chapter Sixteen

Jack was fairly terse when we got the door closed behind us at last, saying only, "Strip. Go rinse the sand off, then on the bed like last time."

"Yes Sir," I said, already unfastening my dress and heading for the bathroom. I was naked and free from sand when I got to the bedside, and had just time to see Jack digging in his suitcase—he must have transferred the contents of his bag—before I arranged myself facedown with my arms and legs spread.

Ah. He had also acquired long tether straps at some point, because once he had cuffed my wrists and ankles, Jack fastened the tethers to the cuffs and secured me in my spread-eagle by running the tethers down to the legs of the bed. I was splayed out on my stomach like a starfish, and Jack wasted no time in taking advantage of my position by once again sliding his finger inside me—a bit more roughly this time, since I wasn't quite as ready as I had been earlier—and then with more care, stroking my clit as well with short, rapid strokes until I was wet again, and had started bucking my hips toward the delicious pressure.

"Not yet," he reminded me, and drew his hand away, patting my bottom softly. "Now, you do still owe me one with the paddle, little Katie." Jack bent over from where he was seated on the bed to kiss my forehead. He was still in the jeans and button-down shirt he'd worn to dinner, and as ever the disparity in our dress was arousing in itself. I loved being naked when Jack still had clothes on. "Focus, Katie," he growled, clearly seeing my mind was wandering. "One little pop so I can gauge the distance, and then one stripe—and it *will* be a stripe—with the paddle. Then...it's a second offense, isn't it? And it was fifteen last time. So let's say twenty with my hand this time, for the beach earlier. We'll go slowly and you'll count each stroke. If you lose count this time, we go back to one and start over. Fair enough?"

"Yes Sir," I replied.

"Glad you think so. Not that your opinion would change anything at this point, of course."

I suddenly got the piece about the strokes increasing for subsequent offenses, and was glad the count was starting as low as it was. Still far fewer smacks than I might enjoy, were I meant to be enjoying them. But twenty seemed like an awful lot after last time's mishap.

Jack took a moment to shift my hair up out of the way, twisting it into a loose knot over my shoulder, before he stood and I heard the whistling sound of him taking a practice swing in the air.

"Paddle first. Remember, one stroke so I can gauge the swing and then the real one. You don't have to count this first one."

Smack!

The “practice” stroke was every bit as bad as I feared it would be, and only made me dread the real one more. That one came hard and fast on the heels of the first, a crack of fire against my ass, and I yelped loudly, twitching at the suddenness of it, the thoroughness of it. Tears were already rolling down my face and I had no idea how I would get through the rest of this.

Jack had leaned in and was tracing a slow line down my back with the edge of the paddle, steering clear of the mark I knew must be blooming in fiery red now. I twitched and bit back a sob, not wanting to disappoint him again, but...

“I...dammit! Don’t, wait! Yellow, yellow light!” I couldn’t bear it. I didn’t want to stop but I knew I couldn’t go on yet.

“Shhh. Okay, that’s okay. Good girl. I’m proud of you. I know that must have been hard.” Jack had climbed onto the bed with me, was lying down alongside me, and started wiping my tears back with his fingers, rubbing my shoulder gently afterward in slow, soothing circles. “Katie, I’m really proud of you for doing that, for admitting you needed me to slow down, okay?”

“Okay. God, it *hurt*! I *hate* that paddle.”

“Yeah,” he said, amused now that I was obviously going to survive. “Which is exactly why I plan to keep it around. I’m thinking of having it mounted in a case with a sign, you know, like a fire extinguisher. ‘In Case of Noncompliance, Break Glass.’ Hang it next to the bed as a reminder.”

My pained chuckle was his cue to get up again, which I knew he must but still regretted. “Time to get back on the horse, little one?”

“Yes Sir. Go...green light.”

“Good girl. Now twenty with my hand, and you’re counting. Don’t lose count this time, little one.”

I didn’t lose count, although Jack also didn’t really hit his stride until the early teens and it felt like he might have pulled back just a bit on the last two. But still, it was no fun, particularly not on top of the paddle welt. Focusing on the numbers kept me from dropping into the blissful headspace that usually let me warm to the pain, and I was crying so hard by the time he was through I could barely choke out the numbers.

Crying and pleading and thanking Jack through my tears as he came to my side again and petted me, praised me, told me it was all over, that all was forgiven.

It hadn’t felt like foreplay at the time, but when he kissed me, *everything* lit up, and I leaned into him as eagerly as I could to return his kiss. He deepened it slowly, pacing me, releasing my lips before I wanted him to. I watched, helpless to do more, as he turned out the bedside lamps and opened the curtains to the balcony, leaving the room lit only indirectly by the lights from the hotel’s exterior and the broad avenue below.

He moved to the other side of the bed and I shifted my head over to track him as he took his clothes off, letting them fall to the floor before climbing back up beside me to

kiss me again. Light, teasing kisses, and a warning spank on the thigh when I tried too hard to catch his lip between my teeth. He mouthed his way across my shoulder and down my back to place soft kisses everywhere the skin on my ass seemed most in need.

And fingers, busy between my legs as he caressed me with his mouth. First he stroked until my pussy was throbbing with want and soaking wet again. Then he pulled away, leaving me hanging. Back a moment later, working two fingers quickly inside my lips and pumping in a shallow, steady rhythm for too short a time and then thrusting only once deeper, curving his fingers to stroke the spongy pad that was already swelling slightly...and then gone again, his hand somewhere far less interesting. A third time, he used the fingers of both hand to gently part my labia, stroking at the slightly fluted edged with the juices gathered there, and then tracing a slow line along to my already-aching clit.

One stroke, a second, third, fourth...a building tempo of pressure and motion...

And stopped again. Jack laughed at my pleading groans.

Next was his cock, Jack stroking it first against the marks on my backside and then against my sopping cunt, while I shamelessly tried to open myself farther, move closer, despite the fact that I was tied firmly to the bed.

"Mmm. You want that, don't you, little one? You aren't getting it at the moment, just so you know. But tell me what you want anyway."

"Fuck me, Sir, please fuck me!" I said instantly. "Please, I want your cock inside me, pleasepleaseplease, Sir, *please*..."

"All right, Katie, I get it. You *are* getting better at saying it, aren't you? I'll take your request into consideration. All in good time."

Damn.

Jack bent behind me again, holding me open with both hands and dipping his tongue to lap at my clit a few times, then licking higher. He used his fingers to stroke along my outer lips as he licked me with his tongue, and then dipped his finger inside my pussy as he suckled his way back down to my clit.

It was sheer heaven, although torture as well because I wanted so badly to come. And then I felt Jack move one pussy-wet fingertip just an inch or so higher, and he pressed the wet digit gently against my anus, clearly about to seek entrance.

I couldn't help it—I clenched so tightly I almost pulled a muscle against the restraint, and my little gasp sounded of distress even to my ears.

Testing, obviously wanting to be sure, Jack pressed his fingertip, and then what felt like a knuckle, against the ring of muscle, only pulling back when I whimpered.

"Talk to me, little Katie. You're not giving me traffic signals but it doesn't feel like you're playing, so what's going on...*here*?" He dipped his finger toward my ass again but only for a second, before pulling back and tracing along my perineum instead.

"I really don't...like that, Sir. That whole area is usually just, um, off-limits."

"I see. So is that a hard limit?" He stroked my perineum once more, trailing just the edge of his fingernail there and eliciting a shiver in response before moving his finger away.

"I really don't like to set hard limits," I said uncomfortably. I didn't even like to discuss them, actually, unless it was absolutely necessary. Jack, however, kept picking at the topic, carefully peeling up the edges.

"Maybe you need to," he pointed out. "We all have hard limits about certain things, even if we don't say it. Maybe you need to say it. If it's something you genuinely aren't ever going to be comfortable with."

"Somebody...tried that. Once. It didn't go well."

By "didn't go well", I hoped he understood that I meant, "I was sobbing in the fetal position for about ten minutes before I could unclench enough to get dressed and go home".

"Ouch," he said with a wince. Clearly he understood enough. "How far in did —"

"Not very far at all, and I really don't like to talk about it. Can we just move on, please? *Sir*."

Jack frowned and shook his head slightly, disapproving. "Hey, I think it's a time-out, Kate. This just got derailed a little and we both know it, don't try to... That clouds things, okay? We're just stopping to talk about it for a minute." He started removing restraints as he spoke, although despite the sudden freedom I remained where I was, only moving my arms in to fold them and rest my head on them.

I was properly chagrined. I knew it had been a catty, petty thing to say just then, and that I was being silly to withhold information about something that, after all, had happened many years ago and had hardly been Jack's fault. "This wasn't part of the official history, I guess. I was about nineteen, the guy in question and I were both complete idiots who knew nothing about what we were doing. This was before...before I knew what I wanted, all right? It was a very vanilla situation, on the whole. But he pushed and pushed about trying it, I finally gave in and let him try it—and he didn't know what he was doing. And I didn't know enough to *realize* that, because I didn't know anything at all back then. I didn't even know about lube, so I didn't know it was a problem that he had none. *Idiot*. I thought I was going to either die on the spot or kill him."

Jack nodded, stroking my back gently. "I think we've all been someplace like that at one point or another. Still...poor Katie."

I looked for sarcasm and, finding none, continued. "He didn't really apologize either, which I think was the worst part. He made it clear he thought the fault was somehow mine. For being...uptight or something, I don't know. We were in college."

"That does excuse a lot of idiocy. Although how he could mistake you for uptight is baffling."

"Yep." I was getting a little drowsy now, the soothing motions of his hand along my spine and the relief of telling him—telling anyone—this tense little piece of history

combined to make me more relaxed than I'd been in years. It's possible the repeat international-caliber massage I'd enjoyed a few hours earlier contributed too, of course. I was in danger of becoming addicted to those massages. "So that's my no-butt-sex story, I guess. The early trauma that makes me clench up at the very idea."

His laugh was warm, thrilling as always, and it lured a smirk and a snicker out of me in response. Turning my head toward him, I met his eyes and still saw no sarcasm, no cynicism and, most importantly, no agreement at all with the idiot boyfriend who thought I was uptight.

What I saw in Jack's eyes was that he found me attractive, interesting...and because of that, around him I *felt* attractive and interesting. I felt that the traits I feared might be annoying were, instead, sort of endearing. I felt like a better person, seeing myself through his eyes. It was like a magic trick.

"You know about operant conditioning, right?" Jack said in that easy, conversational tone. As if we'd just been having a friendly talk about Skinner boxes.

Somehow the fact that he could drop into that intellectual mode in the middle of a sexual romp was, in itself, attractive to me. I realized that, contrary to what I usually thought about Doms, I found Jack just plain cute at times. And he seemed okay with that. He was very good-looking but at heart he was kind of nerdy, and had an irrepressible sense of the absurd.

"A response can be conditioned different ways. Repeated punishment or reinforcement of a behavior is usually what we think of, but there's always the conditioning that can happen with one really bad scare. It's the hardest kind of behavior to change."

"True," I agreed. "Although in this case I don't know that it was the scare or the pain itself. I think it was more the way Ken acted afterward. Um, Ken was the guy who—"

"I figured. And from what I know of you so far, I think you're probably right about that. The way he acted would matter more to you." He paused thoughtfully, playing with the loose ends of my hair. "What a jerk."

I gave that a little thought. "Maybe. I think he was mainly just young. And so was I. Young and ignorant."

"But he's probably gone on to talk somebody else into letting him experiment on them without doing his homework first, whereas you're left with a huge piece of baggage. Which also affects anybody you're with from then on."

"Isn't that what college is for, Jack? Accumulating our baggage?" I asked cheekily, earning a chuckle.

"Yeah, from what little I can remember of college." He slapped my tush affectionately then drummed his fingers, deep in thought again. "I think it's time you started chipping slowly away at that issue, Kate."

I tensed up all over again. "What?"

"No, hear me out." He flopped on his side to face me directly, a look of boyish eagerness stealing over his handsome features. He looked like an excited kid with a cool new project in mind, which was a charming look. I was just a little uneasy about my own part in the project. "You can have a hard limit if you want to. And I'll respect that for as long as you say it's there. No anal, okay? I get that. But you seized up when I just started to—"

"I think 'seized up' is a bit strong," I interrupted.

"I don't. You felt like you were going to levitate off the mattress. And that's just not right."

"So you see it as your mission to enlighten me about the joys of the anal region? I think I've been doing just fine without them, thanks."

"Hey, hey..." He raised a hand to my cheek, stroking a loose thread of hair back behind my ear. "See, this is what I mean. You're getting all tense and defensive, and now neither of us is having fun. You let that creep in college steal that fun from you."

"Steal my fun?" I wasn't sure whether to giggle at that or snort derisively.

"Yes, steal your fun. I admit, full-on butt sex is mostly entertaining for the person on top. But not exclusively so, by any means. That region in general," he slid his hand down again, fingers lingering just at the edge of anything troublesome, "has as many nerve endings as the fun parts you've been enjoying. For you, right now, the fun stops *here*." Jack pressed his fingers without warning back down against the back edge of my perineum—and I tensed nearly as much as I had the first time he'd gone there.

I tried to make myself relax but had only limited success. My body and mind recalled the jolt of unexpected and truly agonizing pain, the embarrassment afterward, like a dose of poison. Things—fingers, toys, penises—just shouldn't go *there*.

"See?" Jack said softly. "You went right back there, where he left you hurting. Jerk not only stole your fun, he's *still* stealing it. You're what, twenty-nine? He's been stealing it for ten years, Kate. Is that really what you want?"

His voice, low and even and eminently reasonable, made me want to listen to him. But I was clearheaded now, not in the mindset of obeying automatically and the disconnect was unsettling to me. It wasn't a dynamic I was used to or comfortable with, listening to a Dom make a persuasive argument rather than just ordering. It was clear that this discomfort was transmitted to Jack. He kept his hand where it was though, and kept talking, changing his tone just a little.

"I'm not being altruistic, little one. I will readily admit I have an ulterior motive. I want to be able to play with your body like the beautiful toy it is, and right now I can't play with my whole toy. My pet needs some reconditioning, I think. A little positive reinforcement." He slid his hand lower, palming my labia and just tickling at my clit. "What do you say, Kate? You didn't red-light me right away, which tells me you're not completely opposed to the idea in theory. Think of it as a science experiment. All those nerve endings..."

"You're not really playing fair," I pointed out. "It's a different set of nerve endings than the ones you're playing with right now."

"Oh, I'm well aware of that." Jack had slowly maneuvered down my side and was now kneeling back between my legs, using his free hand to stroke up and down on my inner thighs, push them farther apart again so gradually I almost didn't notice. Almost. "I don't want to play fair. I want to play foul. I thought I'd made that clear."

I groaned at the bad pun – and then groaned again as he slid a finger into my pussy and out again, spreading the moisture over my lips and clit.

"Five...no, ten minutes. Give me ten minutes. We'll set the alarm clock. When the clock goes off, if you still want me to stop what I'm doing, you tell me and I will. And I won't ask again. Okay?" When I hesitated, he flicked his finger against my clit, playing foul again. "Ten minutes. No scene, just...us. I can promise that there will be absolutely nothing painful involved. Not even potentially painful. I can also promise," he leaned over my back, dropping his voice again in the way he obviously knew drove me crazy, "it will feel very good if you just relax and allow yourself to enjoy it, even though it's different. You have to just trust that I only want to make you feel good."

I did trust him for that, I had to admit. He made me feel better than I'd probably ever felt in my life. No, not just probably. I didn't really have any basis for comparison. I was already hooked on Jack, and I thought he could probably talk me into just about anything, much less ten minutes of applied attention to what was, after all, widely considered to be an erogenous zone.

"Okay," I conceded. If I seemed a bit anxious still, he let it slide. Reaching over me, he grabbed the small bedside clock and set the alarm for eleven minutes – saying he wanted some lead-in time, which made me tingle in anticipation – and then placed it on the bed next to my head before resuming his earlier position, snuggled between my thighs.

Chapter Seventeen

The lead-in time...was good.

Very good. I'd had no idea he could accomplish that much arousal in a single minute, especially as he barely touched me during that time. Teasing little strokes and licks—not only avoiding the area in dispute but scarcely skimming the more conventional zones—soon had me squirming uncomfortably, craving any sort of real contact.

I couldn't really forget what he was there to do though. When he had progressed past teasing, started gently rubbing my already hard clit with two fingers while licking in slow little laps at my pussy, I started to tense without realizing it, knowing what was coming.

"Katie, relax...it's not going to hurt, I promised you. You're just giving me ten minutes." Jack returned to his enjoyable task of driving me insane but lifted one finger to his mouth, wetting it and then placing it directly over the little pucker of muscles that was his ultimate destination. But other than sliding his finger in the occasional gentle circle, he did nothing more and continued to employ his other hand and his mouth in such ways that I thought I could probably live with the unfamiliar third point of pressure, as long as he didn't stop anything else he was doing.

When he started dipping his tongue inside my pussy every few strokes, I was so eager for more that I didn't notice, at first, his fingers now moving in tandem against my clit and anus. It was just feeling, more feeling, a band of sensation from pelvis to tailbone, making it hard to keep still. And then even more, as he slid two fingers into my pussy with a practiced twist, curving them into my G-spot as his thumb took up the insistent circles over my now almost painfully throbbing clit.

The maneuver, obviously, freed up his tongue to do other things, which I was actually too stimulated to realize at first. It was just more of the same only better, wetter little circles on that ring of muscles that had started out tight, but was starting to loosen as I instinctively pushed back to get closer to his hand and mouth, arching my back a little.

When he pushed the tip of his tongue inside my ass just once, withdrawing quickly to lick and tease some more, I was shocked to find the jolt of sensation carried straight to my clit, almost sending me into an orgasm without warning.

And I sort of wanted him to do it again.

I couldn't admit it, not yet. I just moaned in what I hoped was an encouraging way and tried to arch my hips even higher. Jack rewarded me with another quick swipe, pumping his fingers inside my pussy a little faster and harder as he did so, and any

thought I might have had that this was a bad idea was wiped clean away in anticipation of the climax I felt building.

Which, of course, meant that the alarm went off. The harsh beeping by my ear made me jump, and Jack stopped what he was doing immediately but kept his hands in place as I started fumbling with the clock, finally finding the “off” switch and silencing it.

The silence continued, broken only by my harsh breathing, until Jack finally said, very quietly, giving a little press to the one spot on my body that seemed to hold our attention so firmly at the moment, “If I keep going here, you’re back on *my* clock, little one. So I want you to think about this very carefully before answering, all right?”

At my breathless nod, he continued. “You tell me to stop now and I will. Hard limit. I won’t bring it up again unless you do. But—and this is the part to think over—if you tell me to keep going...no limits. This becomes another toy of mine, and I play with my toy any way I like. Which means that *eventually*, and not tonight or this week or any time soon,” he said soothingly, pressing an incongruously gentle kiss to the crest of my hip, “but at *some point*, I will be putting my cock here, not just my tongue or my finger or any of the toys I have in mind for you when we get home. Because I do want to fuck you in the ass. I want to be crystal clear on that. Do you understand?”

“Yes Sir.” I gulped. He was certainly being more than explicit in making sure I understood, so there was really no way I could misconstrue him.

“But if it’s done right, it shouldn’t hurt. Not bad pain, anyway. You’re very small, and...*God*, you’re tight, I can tell...but I can be patient. I want to hear my pet begging for it. I think I’ll train you until you’re so eager and curious you do just that, little Katie. When I do it, it’ll be because you’re begging me and working hard for it. A little challenge for both of us.”

“You may be waiting a while,” I replied wryly, but flexed my hips reflexively when he pressed his fingers into me a bit, reminding me again just where he was.

“How old were you when you first had sex, little one? High school, college, what?”

“Oh, um...I left that part out too, I guess. When I told you my sordid history. It was still the not-too-sordid part. I was eighteen, I was in college. He was only my second serious boyfriend, really. Could we...this seems like not the time to talk about this.”

“And before you had sex with him, you did what? Had a few dinners? Talked about it over drinks? Did he whine until you gave in, like the ass guy? What?”

“No,” I laughed. “Of course not. We, oh...necked and fooled around in the car, and snuck into each other’s dorm rooms to fool around and did whatever we could get away with in public. You know, we were horny little animals, we fooled around every chance we got.”

“Define ‘fooled around’.” Jack’s hands had started moving again, ever-so slowly, and I had a little trouble thinking of a definition.

“Well, there was necking. And lots of petting at first. Then around the third or fourth time we went out, we got about half-naked in his car. There was a certain amount of dry humping, if I recall. I didn’t think of it that way at the time, of course.

He...I let him finger-fuck me, which was new and fun at the time. Nobody had ever done that. After we'd been going out a few weeks he went down on me in his dorm room, which was also new and even more fun. But he wouldn't let me take his pants off. Probably smart of him. I was so clueless and overexcited I might have bitten it off or something if I'd tried that just then."

"Ow. Don't even joke about that. So, back up a minute. You worked your way up from petting to getting naked to going down, and after you came you wanted...what?"

"To suck his dick," I said crisply.

"I see. Had you ever seen his dick? Or anybody else's? Did you have any idea what you were going to do with it?"

I looked back at him with a raised eyebrow that Lourdes Johnston couldn't have outdone. "I had a general idea, yes. I had read books, I had seen porn. I wasn't completely ignorant on the subject."

"I gotcha. So you knew a little, but mainly you just knew you wanted it. You wanted that cock. And I assume that at some point he let you perform this act on him, porn princess?" He shifted his hands again, pulsing slowly inside me.

"Oh yes. I was a natural. Oh...deeper...*please*..."

And then he stopped again, to my extreme frustration. "No. You still haven't given me your answer yet. But let's finish this. So you sucked this guy off and the next time you saw him, I'm guessing, or maybe the time after that, he started to go down on you or was fucking you with his hand or whatever or you were sucking him. And then what happened?"

"Were you there or something? We'd been sort of planning it. We'd had the condoms for a few weeks but...I made him stop going down and put on a condom and just *do* it. I couldn't take it anymore, I just wanted—"

"His dick inside you, fucking you, filling up your pussy instead of just playing with it like he had been?"

"Well...yes, actually. But what does that have to do with... Oh."

"Mm-hmm. You *will* be begging for it, if I want you to, Kate. Little Katie girl, with such a *sweet* ass, and nobody's ever really touched it but me. I don't just want to fuck it, I want to make love to it, little one." Contrary to his intention of waiting for me to decide, he bent down and licked me gently a few times, swirling his tongue around the hole where his fingertip was resting, just teasing at the opening. "Let me in, Katie. Let me keep going with this. Say yes. Just say it—you wouldn't be waiting if you didn't want to. You want me to have *all* of you. I want all of you."

"Yes Sir," I finally choked out, the sensations he was stirring already making it difficult to think, to talk.

"Good girl," he said, and that familiar warm glow spread over me even as he tongued me more vigorously before pulling back again. "Very good girl. That's very

brave of you, Katie. I need you to relax now, all right? But when I tell you what to do, remember to *do* it, don't ask questions. Not this time. Whatever it is. Understand?"

"Yes Sir." *Just please don't take your hands away...*

He did take his hands away, to bind my legs again, and one of my hands, although a little more loosely than before. Still, although I could bend my knees just enough to raise myself up on them, I couldn't close my legs and I couldn't reach any of the tethers with the loose hand.

A second later I heard the quiet snap of a plastic lid opening, and felt a cold drip of liquid slide between my cheeks, quickly coating me from ass to clit as Jack worked the slippery stuff with his fingers. *When did he get out the lube?* He slid the fluid everywhere and I squirmed at the differences in sensation the slickness provided as his hand smoothed and probed and slid over me. He rubbed a quantity of the stuff along my ass, using the lack of friction to dip into the tight little bud with more ease, before pressing more firmly at the spot and giving me the instruction he must have anticipated I'd balk at.

"Now push against my finger. Push *out*."

I didn't want to. It felt wrong, but I didn't want to face the consequences of not obeying either. And so I pushed—and he slid his finger smoothly past the double ring of muscles that had caused me so much pain before.

In my surprise I stopped pushing, and I felt him even more keenly as my ass clenched around him. The unexpected feeling of intrusion triggered the impulse to push again, and this time Jack slid his finger in to the hilt, twisting slightly to get in as deep as possible. He stroked his lubed fingers over and around my clit and pussy again, already so wet they scarcely needed help.

"Good girl. That was good, for a start." Jack slowly retrieved his finger nearly all the way, working the digit a bit at the opening before sliding it back in again. "Now keep your head down but get to your knees...there. Hmmm, very nice, little one. I do love this view of you. And so wet. Now reach one hand between your legs and play with yourself, show yourself off for me. Like a porn star, since evidently you would know."

I didn't, really, but could make a fairly educated guess. I started lazily tracing the outline of my pussy lips, stroking and separating the folds, resisting the temptation to do more than give my clit the briefest attention before slipping the tip of one finger inside myself, my index finger, so that my hand wouldn't obscure the view from Jack.

It was apparently the right thing to do. Growling, he pushed my hand aside and rammed his cock inside me in one rough thrust, all the natural and artificial moisture easing his passage. With shallow strokes at first, he pumped into me more slowly than I had expected, keeping haphazard pace with the finger still buried in my ass, sometimes matching the rhythm of cock and finger and sometimes hitting an uneven counterpoint.

It didn't quite hurt, it was mostly...different. I still wasn't sure I saw the appeal. Until Jack started talking to me again, leaning close over my back to speak in a rough near-whisper in my ear, a habit I could already see would be my downfall every time.

"I'll let you come when I can see you're starting to enjoy this, little one. That's what positive reinforcement is all about."

"I'm...enjoying it, Sir..." It wasn't exactly a lie. I was enjoying some of what he was doing quite a bit. And if I tried, I could just manage to ignore the less-than-savory bits.

"No, you're *putting up* with it. There's a big difference." He thrust deeper with his cock, almost angrily, using his free hand to tug my hips up higher. It wasn't anger, I realized. He was just turned-on, starting to lose control, and I could hear it a little in his voice when he spoke again. "I want you to think about it, Katie. Think about exactly what my hand is doing. Feel every bit of it. It's wicked, to be letting me do *that*, isn't it? I wish you could see what I'm watching right now. My cock pumping in and out of your pussy, my finger pumping in your ass. You look so...*open*. I want you to *feel* that open to me, little one."

He reached beneath me and cupped a breast, stroking at the sides, rolling the nipple between finger and thumb. It was a distraction, something new to think about, and I was already so overstimulated...

"Play with yourself some more," Jack ordered softly. "Play with yourself like a little slut who'd do anything for a fuck. Anything to get to come. You want to, don't you, little Katie? I wonder if I should even let you."

"Yes Sir, please, please let me come, I'll be good," I whimpered, reaching obediently between my legs again to rub my clit, already shivering at the sensations that threatened to overtake me. It was growing hard to focus, hard to answer. Jack's touch at my nipple grew lighter, a tease I could hardly feel at this point, but it somehow pulled a gasp from me, sent a sympathetic vibration through me straight to where my fingers were working so frantically.

"Tell me what I'm doing back here, Katie. I want to hear it from you, from those shy little lips."

"Sir? You're...oh! You're fucking me and..." *What else? Think!* Words had to be in there somewhere, but they didn't seem to want to come out. "Fuck."

"We already covered that," Jack chuckled.

"You're...putting...you're finger-fucking my ass...Sir. And, um..."

"So articulate. Such a good girl. But you're not being all *that* good, are you? Showing off your pussy like a bitch in heat, letting me finger your ass, begging me to fuck you, to let you come. You are such a *naughty* little thing."

Something...something he said, or some subtle twist of his finger...I moaned as a wave of need swept over me and I pushed back into his next thrust, suddenly not knowing where I needed the pressure most, only knowing his cock and finger were filling me in ways I'd never imagined. *Open*, he'd said, open for *him*, and I felt completely open in that moment, laid bare, turned inside out. He'd managed to make

me feel both wanton and cherished at the same time, valued property that existed only to serve this one wicked purpose, for *him*, and it was almost more than I could bear.

When he started thrusting his finger and cock in counter-rhythm again, deeper and harder this time, I almost screamed.

"Please, Sir...oh God..."

"*There* it is!" I didn't need to see his smile. I could hear it. "Please *what*, little one?"

I'd had too much, my senses were overloaded and I didn't know whether I wanted to come or for him to go on forever, and it didn't matter because my mind was too far from where words were to say anything anyway.

"Katie, ask me for what you want," Jack said sternly.

And after some struggle, I gasped out something containing the words "Sir", "come" and "please" and probably also invoked several deities, and he gave me permission to come and then I did scream, because I came *forever*.

The first peak was sharp and lancing and necessary. The second, as the first subsided, rippled through me slowly and just kept going as Jack came after me with a deep groan, jerking his hips sharply against me and calling my name.

I was still shuddering when he said my name again, just a whisper, and fell against my back. After a minute he seemed to gather himself and collapsed to one side, reaching up just long enough to rip open my restraints before tumbling back down and pulling me down with him to spoon with my back against his chest.

My tremors only subsided, letting my mind clear a little, when Jack wrapped his arm over mine and his leg over my legs and hugged me so close I could hardly breathe, as if he couldn't get me close enough.

I squeezed back, feeling as though if I squeezed hard enough against him, I might just sink in forever.

Chapter Eighteen

I gave up after the first session in the morning and decided to go for a walk instead of attempting to sit on one of the meeting-room chairs for another two hours before lunch. My butt was sore, the paddle stripe now a long, narrow, grayish-purple-rectangular bruise across the meat of both cheeks, as if Jack had calculated the precise spot that would make it hardest for me to sit. So I'd remember it longer, which I did with a smile and a blush now, although it was a rueful smile. These things always *seem* like a good idea at the time. Or they seem like a bad idea, but one you simply can't live without.

I'd decided on artwork as a suitable memento of the trip, and set out in search of a street vendor I'd passed a few times already during the week. In addition to the usual trite watercolors, he had a few more interesting pieces—acrylics or oils of abstracted flora and fauna—that bore looking at again. And then there were souvenirs to buy for everyone back home of course, since it was one of the first trips I'd taken where I had the time to shop and could actually afford presents.

I had already picked up a few things for my dad, who was easy to buy gifts for. A lifelong rock hound, he was always happy if you brought him examples of the native stones, and the souvenir shop on Sugarloaf had proved a bonanza in that regard. But there were still others to consider, so I dipped into a few of the tourist traps for fun, selecting postcards and t-shirts for my niece and nephew, and some other fun if kitschy souvenirs for people at the office—pencils with tiny glued-on Carnival masks, miniature glittery beach-scene snow globes that said “Blame it on Rio”, that sort of thing.

Then an art vendor caught my eye, though not the vendor I'd been looking for, and I used the little Portuguese I'd learned thus far to haggle over a pair of watercolor prints for my mother. They were just scenes of the bay, but nicely rendered. I walked away feeling not too badly shafted, venturing next into a somewhat more upscale jewelry shop where a pair of unusual blue-green tourmaline earrings had been calling my name from the window display all week. They were far too expensive but I bought them anyway, wondering when I'd ever have the money to do something like that again...especially if I went back into the world of scholarship, as everybody thought I was bound to do someday soon.

Some similar but less costly earrings were added to the tab for my mother and sister—pale blue iolite for Margaret, an unusual local orange topaz for Mom. And some ametrine drops, their color changing from lavender to gold in mid-stone. Birthday or Christmas, they would make a good gift for *someone* I thought, as I justified the expense,

knowing I would eventually break down and wear them myself. Tourmaline brought out the green in my eyes better, but I had a fondness for purple as well.

Deciding I liked the idea of bringing everyone some sort of “rock” from Rio, I found a pair of cufflinks for my brother-in-law, who occasionally wore French cuffs. And then my eye lingered over the tray of gemstones, wondering if I should get some for Jack, who frequently wore cuffs that required links. Most of the shirts he’d brought this week had French cuffs, in fact. But were presents even appropriate? They must be. He had bought me a bathing suit, after all. And a manicure and pedicure. And a massage.

The cufflinks Jack seemed to wear most at the office, and the only ones he seemed to have brought here, were understated flat squares of hematite. He wasn’t really a jewelry sort of person. But on the other hand, the sheer-white moonstone cabochons I spotted were as tasteful as it got—just an oval of translucent white, another oval etched around it, set in a not-too-large rectangle of white gold.

I rolled my eyes and said, “Pfft,” with just the right amount of skepticism at the price and pushed them away, indicating I would stick with the cheaper links I’d picked for Toby and the array of earrings I’d selected.

Perhaps it was because I really did plan to walk away—I wasn’t sure about the purchase anyway—that the shop owner instantly offered me a slightly better deal. I took it, again rationalizing to myself that if I changed my mind I could always just keep them and give them to Toby some other time. When he’d done something really great for Margaret and the kids. Like rescued them all from a fire or something. I mean, I wasn’t going to get cheap cufflinks for Jack, after all, but I didn’t normally spend quite that much—all right, anywhere close to that much—on my brother-in-law.

I was hopeless. I really was. I continued down the *avenida* but didn’t want to wander too far with so much merchandise, and I wasn’t finding the perfect piece of art to take home with me. So after another few shops I made my way back to the hotel, where I had all but my new earrings and the troublesome cufflinks stored securely in the hotel safe for the night. We would be leaving tomorrow afternoon anyway, to go up to Mario Coelho’s undoubtedly lavish place in the hills, but I thought it best not to tempt fate.

Back in the room I stared at the little velvet-and-silk box containing the cufflinks for a good ten minutes, as if some message might magically appear on the outside of the thing, telling me what to do. Finally, realizing I was over-thinking it, I pulled out the hotel stationary and jotted a little note for Jack to find with the box when next he came back to the room.

J—

I never really did thank you properly for the other afternoon, not to mention the bathing suit. I thought these might make a nice change from hematite...and since you wanted to remember me in the moonlight on Copacabana Beach, Brazilian moonstones were the obvious choice.

K –

And then I left the gift in the middle of the bed, hoping against hope that he would stop by the room and find it before I saw him again, and went back out to get something to eat.

* * * * *

Jack was presenting again in the afternoon, the last session of the day, and it had been assumed I would sit in. He wasn't in the room yet when I arrived, although it was nearly time for the session to start. Professor Johnston was there, however, and snagged the seat next to me in the back row with a look of professorial censure.

"How can I be expected to learn anything from back here?" he chided.

"It's a very small room, sir," I pointed out, grinning. "Besides, the cool kids always sit in the back."

"Do they, do they? I suppose that explains why I never got to know any of them. I was always up at the front. Nearsighted, you see. I suppose the cool kids all had twenty-twenty vision. I never realized that was the requirement."

"Speaking of cool kids, Professor, how is Tom? I didn't want to ask the other night, Lourdes seemed a little...edgy."

He laughed aloud, pulling my attention away just as Jack entered the room carrying a stack of freshly copied handouts, plopped them on a table in the back near where we sat and headed straight for the front of the room, looking a bit distracted. He didn't seem to have seen us.

"Edgy? She was a harridan, Katherine, and please accept my apologies to your young man. Oh don't try to be coy," he added, when I made an automatic gesture of denial. "You're both adults, you seem happy enough—who am I to judge? It did take Lourdes to convince me of that, of course. Once she'd seen the error of her ways. She's quite taken with Mr. Benedict now, incidentally."

"The poetry," I suggested with a knowing nod. I looked up at Jack, who'd been caught by a conference attendee with a question as he stood to the side of the projection screen, booting up his laptop and getting ready to speak. He still hadn't seen us, I realized.

"Gets 'em every time," the professor agreed amiably. "I know that's how I managed it. Italian sonnets. Mmm...the memories. But you were asking about Tom. He's quite well, actually. And he's engaged. To a lovely young woman from Buenos Aires, whose family knows Lourdes' family quite well. Almost a cousin, really."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" I was genuinely happy. I knew how Dr. Johnston had anguished over his son's seeming disinterest in romance. "But Lourdes, isn't she thrilled? I mean a wedding, grandchildren?"

"No, no," he corrected me. "She despises the girl. Natalia is her name, by the way. Lourdes thinks Thomas is a fool who is throwing his life away," he said, in the exact manner of his wife. The brief impression was so true to life I couldn't help but giggle, especially as it was so odd to see the dramatic gesture and tragic face on Professor Johnston's normally placid and amiable face. "The trouble is, you see, Natalia is *exactly* like Lourdes. It's uncanny. Not physically, really. She's very lovely, but not the great beauty Lourdes was at that age. But the attitude, the mannerisms. Lourdes thinks the girl is horrendous of course. Natalia responds in kind, and the claws come out whenever they're in a room together. I really wouldn't be surprised if actual blood was spilled before the wedding. It's in December, by the way. Would you like to come?"

"Oh, that's perfect! I'm sorry, I'm not laughing at you, and I'd be honored to come. It's just—" I couldn't stifle my amusement at the mental image of cool, sophisticated Lourdes Johnston getting into a catfight with her youthful doppelganger.

"Laugh away, dear girl. Heaven knows I do, only please don't let Lourdes or Thomas hear about it. I have every confidence that at some point Lourdes will go through a one-hundred-eighty-degree turn and take Natalia under her wing. Perhaps if there are grandchildren. But hopefully sooner than that. Natalia seems strong, and Lourdes likes strong women. It's why she likes you, of course. Oh, he's starting. Shhh."

And the professor gave his rapt attention to Jack, leaving me to ponder this bit of information as Jack, finally free from the early questioner, brought up the first slide and walked to the lectern...

Where he stopped as he spotted me in the back row, and stared as if he'd forgotten about everyone else in the room.

He gave a distracted "um". His mouth turned up at one corner in a tiny half smile and then the moment passed. He greeted the audience warmly and gave his presentation just as he had the last two times, smoothly and professionally. No doubt I was the only one who'd noticed the bobble at the start. Well, and obviously Professor Johnston, who patted my hand gently as Jack started to speak, but otherwise said not a word until the lecture was over.

After the session I waited for the room to clear, picking up Jack's spare handouts and eventually wandering over to his computer once the crowd had dissipated and he stood talking to Dr. Johnston and a few others. I held my hands over the keyboard and mimed to Jack what I hoped was the universal gesture for "should I go ahead and shut this down?" He nodded, still engaged in discussion, and I turned off the projector, unplugging the computer from everything and closing the program. Jack's wallpaper was the same on his laptop as it had been on his desktop at work—his friend Mario's boy and two nephews, the boys that could have been his sons, on their horses.

But of course they *aren't* his sons, I reminded myself, shutting the computer down and closing it. Glancing over at Jack and the professor, it struck me that they looked oddly similar, both leaning forward and smiling, intent but casual at the same time. Confident, likeable men who were used to having people respect their opinions and

decisions. They also looked slightly conspiratorial, which made me wonder a bit what they were plotting.

Then Jack ran a hand over the back of his neck, stretching, and there, at his wrist, was a moonstone cabochon embedded in white gold. I forgot everything else for a few seconds in the flood of relief.

Coming to myself after my momentary lapse, I looked around for his laptop case and tucked the machine neatly away in its little padded compartment, along with the spare session handouts and some other pages of handwritten notes Jack had left on the lectern. All tidy and ready to go – and I really *must not* look over at Jack and grin like a fool at his cuffs.

Jack lifted the case out of my hand, hefting it easily. “Dr. Johnston tells me his wife wants to go dancing tonight. I told him I’m from Houston so I only know the two-step, the polka, the waltz and the chicken dance. But he insists that anybody can learn to samba. I’m thinking of challenging Lourdes. If I do successfully samba by the time the evening is over, she has to get up and do the chicken dance. So what do you say?”

I say this is the strangest double date ever. “That sounds wonderful.”

Chapter Nineteen

Jack made me pull my new dress out of the closet, insisting it was perfect for dancing. Insisting I wear it, actually, although I wasn't exactly complaining. Mainly I was too busy admiring Jack's suit, which was a dark charcoal with the most subtle gray pinstripe imaginable, and draped perfectly over his body.

"My other vice," he said, when he caught me peeking at the lining of his jacket as it lay on the bed, tossed there while he fiddled with his tie in the mirror. "I had a few suits made in London while I was there. This was the most recent one, it's the closest to still being in style I guess. Really the only one lightweight enough to wear here. Or back home, except in January or February."

"You really had them made from scratch? Like, bespoke?" I tried to picture Jack standing while all those measurements were being taken, and realized it was no problem as long as I pictured him with a kind of childish glee at the absurdity of it all.

"Mm-hmmm. You get spoiled though. It's like flying first class. You can never go back to coach after that. I can never buy suits off the rack again."

"Let's hope you never have to, unless you lose your luggage again sometime." I tried to keep a solemn face but couldn't hold it for long, and Jack smiled back affably. He really was like a giant kid about some things, I was starting to realize. Which was sort of endearing, given how very much like a grownup he was about so many other things. "You really like clothes, don't you? You *are* straight, right?"

He shrugged, looking back into the mirror and undoing his tie with a grimace to start all over. "Guys don't do it for me. And clothes are just equipment. You know...you want the right equipment to do a job, and you have to take care of the equipment. Well, in London I had this epiphany that for my job, the equipment was a really well cut, conservative suit and the right kind of tie. I hadn't ever really cared much before then. Kept my shoes polished, that was about it, and only because my dad drummed that into my head from an early age."

He finally achieved the magic proportions he'd been seeking for his tie—it looked identical to the previous two efforts to me, but what did I know?—and reached for his jacket, which settled easily and beautifully on his shoulders. I suddenly felt vaguely cheap looking next to him in my store-bought finery.

Until, that is, Jack looked over at me where I lay musing on the bed, and smiled *that* smile.

"You look amazing. I mean, you look amazing anyway, but that dress is just..." He slouched down onto the bed, disregarding the wrinkles it might create in his suit, and bent to kiss me very carefully on the lips. "I get why you're wearing lipstick but I hate it. I always feel like I'm gonna end up smearing it everywhere."

"It's equipment," I said with a smirk. "I'll take it off later, as soon as I'm done using it." I wasn't feeling quite as amused as I let on. Even his chaste peck had caused the now-familiar burn to start up again. Was I that easy to program?

"Thank you, by the way. I really like these." Jack sat up and toyed with his cufflinks, turning the stone on one to let the light play through it. "But when I saw you at the back of the room earlier, all I could think about was you on the beach in the moonlight. I almost had to take a short break before I could start the presentation."

I chuckled, remembering the look on his face at that moment—it was something I thought I might like to remember forever. "I don't think anybody noticed though. You covered well."

The boyish grin was back again as Jack stood and took my hand, pulling me up and into a little spin before catching me in his arms for a deeper kiss. I didn't want it to end, but eventually it had to. He used his finger to gently dab a tiny smear of lipstick from below my bottom lip.

"Let's go dancing."

* * * * *

Of course we went eating first, to a restaurant in Ipanema that must have carried at least six stars on a five-star rating scale. Everything was melt-in-the-mouth delicious—or perhaps I was just that hungry. It was local food, and after studying the menu awhile I finally just let Jack order for me, despite his grumbled reassurance that he wasn't *always* planning to do the ordering for both of us.

His next whispered comment, that he was only sorry he wouldn't get to feed me by hand like the other night, just made me blush and look over at the Johnstons with a gulp and a sheepish smile, like a guilty teenager. I felt like it must be blazing in neon across my body—"I am having wild sex with this gorgeous man nightly". But evidently it wasn't. Professor Johnston just smiled back and started asking about work, as if we were simply four reasonable adults eating dinner.

Lourdes seemed a bit less fraught this evening, and entertained us all with some amusing stories about planning Tom's wedding, which sounded as though it was likely to be quite an extravagant affair. Had I not already heard her true opinion of her future daughter-in-law from her husband, I might not have caught the subtle innuendos, the damning by faint praise, that characterized her descriptions of the bride, the bride's taste in clothes, the bride's choice of flowers, the bride's registry selections. I was tempted to think "poor Natalia", but from Arthur's interjected remarks, it sounded as though the bride was getting every bit of her own back from her future mother-in-law. It promised to be a highly entertaining event and I was glad Arthur had invited me.

Then I surprised myself by thinking of, and feeling a bit sorry for, Tom. He really wasn't cut out to be caught between two women of this caliber, if what I remembered of him was accurate, and I hoped for his sake he didn't get injured too badly in the crossfire. He should at least be able to enjoy his own wedding...

Which I realized Arthur was now discussing as though assuming Jack would also be in attendance.

I gave that some thought and then quickly shut down that line of thinking, as I realized if I kept going it was really only a matter of time before I started doodling “Mrs. John Benedict” on the tablecloth. We had only been going out—and staying in—for five days, after all.

After slowly getting to know each other for two years, and then spending ten and twelve hours a day together, five or six days a week, for the past month or so, my traitorous subconscious chimed in. Ordering all those lunches in so you could stay at the office and eat together while you worked wasn't just about efficiency and productivity, was it?

Had we really been doing that? Manufacturing excuses to spend time together, even weeks ago?

I thought about the many late nights, the many working lunches and dinners, and just how often those meals had stretched out far longer than they needed to as we'd talked about things that had little to do with work. The environment and politics, of course. Those were good starting places because they were necessarily related to the job.

But looking back, I suddenly realized how often those had been *only* starting places. I knew things about Jack that I wasn't even quite sure how I knew, when I actually thought back on those conversations. Not just his politics, but things like his views on religion—raised Methodist, but never went to church—and how many children he wanted—two, because he liked the idea of a big family but more than two per couple wasn't in line with sustainability of the earth's resources. Even things like the fact that he was two months overdue to have his teeth cleaned, but he always had his car serviced ahead of schedule. Well, that made sense—cars were equipment, not unlike his suits or his rock-climbing paraphernalia. Teeth were equipment too, but he didn't look at it that way so he was taking them for granted.

Thinking about things like this always got me into trouble. When Jack next took a bite of his chop and seemed to be struggling with a piece of gristle, I looked at him sternly and said, out of the blue as far as he was concerned, “See? Teeth are equipment too. You should get them serviced regularly, just like your car.”

What was probably most telling was that, instead of giving me a look as though I'd gone crazy, he just kept chewing and then once he had swallowed said thoughtfully, “You know, you're right. I hadn't thought of it that way. Okay, I'll call when we get back, I promise.”

And then he kept on eating. As if my bringing up something from a random conversation we'd had three weeks ago made perfect sense. As if I was now the person who was allowed to nag him about getting his teeth cleaned.

The Professors Johnston weren't giving me funny looks either. They were giving me and Jack and one another very knowing looks, which I wished they would keep to themselves. But still it was a fantastic dinner, another little weight on one side of the

scale that was rapidly tipping in favor of a return visit to this city despite its unfortunate beachiness.

On the other side of the scale, however, we had to go dancing next. The club was just a few blocks away and we arrived far too quickly in my opinion. Lourdes whipped her husband out onto the dance floor almost instantly, and Jack and I were first amused and then amazed at the way the pair moved. It was like water, that fluid and easy, and although it seemed to make perfect sense for Lourdes, I couldn't shake the feeling that it was like an optical illusion to see Arthur, my old professor, moving his hips that way.

Only after a few minutes did I notice their intense eye contact and feel something like embarrassment, even though they were only dancing. The room seemed to get a bit smaller and warmer all of a sudden. I had to divert my attention a bit, looking at some of the other couples on the moderately crowded floor.

We had found a table not too far from the dance floor, and from where I sat next to Jack I could feel the muscles in his leg moving as he caught the infectious beat. I felt the same way. It looked like fun, and they all made it look so easy. However, it also looked a far cry from a waltz or a two-step.

The song ended and as the Johnstons made their smiling, breathless way to our table, I felt Jack pick up the faster beat of the next song before he stood and offered his arm to Lourdes with a cordial little bow.

Baffled, I watched them make their way out to the center of the floor just as Dr. Johnston leaned over and said loudly over the music, "Jack wanted me to confess something on his behalf. He lied. He didn't think you'd come if you knew you were the only beginner among us. He was going to break it to you more slowly, but Lourdes wanted him for the faster numbers. I can't quite manage those like I used to."

And even as he spoke they started dancing—and it was just about as far from the chicken dance as one could possibly get.

How could Arthur seem so unconcerned? How could he order drinks with such smiling equanimity? Jack was out there making fully clothed, vertical, mad, passionate love to his *wife*, and the professor was just watching as though it were no big deal.

I looked around the room again, dragging my eyes away from the pair of them through sheer force of will. Okay, that was better—clearly everyone else was doing it too.

And I realized, with the dull thud that comes when you realize you've been stupid, that obviously Marisa would have wanted to do it like everyone else—ergo, Jack would have had to learn how. He would have certainly had ample motivation, from everything he'd said about their relationship.

And I had ample motivation too, only partly because of Jack. Because it really did look like fun. Smoldering, sexy, slightly sweaty fun, to boot—all longtime favorites of mine. And if Jack, a Houston boy, could learn to move his hips like that...

I felt the gauntlet had been thrown down, and I had no choice but to accept the challenge. It was either that or watch Lourdes slither around the dance floor with my boyfriend all night.

Only later, while Lourdes and Jack were tag-teaming my samba lesson to the great amusement of Arthur, who sat observing, did I consider that I was no longer thinking of Jack as my boss first. Interesting.

Boyfriend, though? *Lover* seemed like a more appropriate term, but it was always one that sounded a bit pretentious to me. Perhaps the term *beau* should be taken out of mothballs?

"Katie, take your shoes off and try just putting your feet on mine until you get the beat."

"What am I, five years old?"

"Katie, shoes. Off. Now."

No, I was fairly certain that one did not indulge in Domination and submission games with one's *beau*. I took my shoes off and placed my bare feet on Jack's shiny black shoes, marveling that the leather was so soft I could feel his toes moving beneath mine. But did one's master ask one to dance on his feet?

"Now look at me. Eyes on mine, okay? Just feel the beat, don't worry about memorizing the steps."

"You're lucky she's such a tiny little thing, Jack," Arthur commented dryly as Jack started to move to the music again.

"True. Imagine if I'd had to teach *you* that way," Lourdes quipped, cracking us all up at the immediate image her words conjured – Arthur, trying not to crush her elegant feet while Lourdes struggled to lift them at all.

"Focus," Jack said softly, and my eyes flew back to his. All that blue...and the most wonderful crinkles at the corners when he smiled, even when he didn't quite smile with his mouth. I let myself stare into his eyes for a few minutes and once my mind was off my feet, I finally caught the basic steps, the syncopation, and was able to duplicate it for a few minutes before I started thinking too hard again and lost it.

"You just need to practice now. Learn the feet, then I will teach you about the hips," Lourdes said blithely, sweeping Arthur off for another round of sultry dance floor doings.

"She could teach us all some things about the hips," Jack admitted, waiting while I donned my shoes again and then pulling me back into his arms.

"She is sort of a force of nature," I agreed, trying to look into his eyes some more and just follow his lead, giggling hopelessly when I inevitably goofed and stepped on his feet. It would happen quite a few times that evening, I knew. "Why didn't you just tell me you already knew how to do this? I still would have come."

"Would you?"

"Well, probably. Maybe."

"You mostly like to do things that you already know how to do well."

True. "Don't we all?" I asked.

"You didn't have a chance to study up in private about this before people saw you doing it."

Ah, also true. But when the hell had he become such an expert on my insecurity?

"Have you actually been stalking me for the past two years, Jack?" I was being flippant, but there was a real question in there somewhere, a question to which I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to know the answer.

He thought about it before answering, in the meantime attempting a spinout that failed hopelessly, to our mutual amusement. "Not as such. Not driving by your house or taking clandestine pictures of you or anything like that."

"You've taken at least one clandestine picture of me," I pointed out, thinking back to the unexpected image on my digital camera that first day. Jack had the grace to look a little chagrined.

"That one's for your scrapbook. I was really just planning on pushing your camera down a little farther in your bag. I was worried about it being right there on top where a pickpocket could grab it. And then I couldn't resist—when you walked out of the dressing room you looked so pretty. And that dress..."

"That's very sweet of you, in a stalkerish sort of way," I teased.

"I promise that's the only one. Okay, a couple at the last company picnic but those were all just group shots. I think you've seen those, actually." He reached a hand to tip my chin up. I'd been looking away again. "Maybe I've been mentally stalking you without meaning to. Just a little. Fantasizing, anyway. You keep, um, fulfilling my fantasies of you, is the thing. This week especially, of course."

"I hope you never had a fantasy where we danced a great samba together," I demurred, blushing typically. He spun me out again and it worked a bit better this time. I lost my step but was able to regain the beat when he whirled me back in.

"It's a start," he said, rather graciously I thought. I still felt very much like I was operating with two left feet, only able to accomplish as much as I had because he was such a strong lead. "It takes a long time to dance a really great samba together though."

"You looked great with Lourdes," I pointed out.

Jack laughed, looking over at the Johnstons who were moving like one being across the floor. "Good maybe. Not great. Just competent. And besides," he winked, "she kept trying to lead. And as you can imagine, that really bugs me."

The music was ending, a faster tempo taking its place, and Arthur was heading back to the table as Lourdes arrowed in on Jack with a determined gleam in her eye.

I didn't even try to get in her way, just stepped back and let her tug Jack back out onto the floor. She seemed to possess endless stamina when it came to dancing. But somehow, this time I didn't mind so much. I rejoined Arthur and ordered another

drink, and we yelled over the music at each other about ecology as we watched Jack and Lourdes tear up the dance floor.

Chapter Twenty

Walking home started out slow and cool, our arms twined around each other's waists, my head on Jack's shoulder. The professors had taken a cab back to the hotel but Jack had declined to share, pulling me down the sidewalk instead. It was still busy, even at one in the morning, pedestrians everywhere and the streets still lined with cars. Music poured from clubs, one song carrying us to the next as we marked the blocks back to the hotel.

The first time Jack tugged me into an alleyway, I followed with a lighthearted giggle. It seemed such a romantic, unexpected thing to do, perfectly in keeping with the feel of the city at night.

"I couldn't wait anymore to do this," he explained, and then kissed me with a heat I hadn't expected. Perhaps it had been all the samba. As he nipped along my lips, pressing me into the wall and making absolutely sure I knew he was aroused, he lifted my arms slowly over my head and gripped my wrists lightly, one of his large hands easily holding both of mine in check. The next thing I felt was his now-free hand, slipping up my bare thigh under the dress.

"Another fantasy fulfilled," he whispered in my ear, as he shifted his attention to that stretch of neck he had clearly deduced was the fastest route by which to drive me insane with lust.

I had just time to remember what he was talking about before his fingers were pushing aside the silky fabric of my panties, stroking the soft skin of my outer lips. He hooked one finger around the fabric and held it out of the way as he teased his way closer and closer to the sensitive bundle of nerves that his caresses had already set throbbing.

At the next stop I felt a bit more apprehension. He pulled me farther away from the street this time, into a little well of shadow that particular alley offered, and thoughts of muggers flitted through my mind but were quickly dismissed by the sensations Jack was calling up. His lips were rougher, more insistent on my mouth, and his hand was just as demanding at my breast, plucking at the nipple until it was an aching, tingling knot of need.

"Take your bra off," he ordered quietly, and I knew better now than to resist for even a heartbeat. I had the piece of silk and boning free from my dress in under ten seconds, despite how badly my hands were shaking. The bra dangled from my fingertips as Jack dipped his hand inside the wrap front of the dress, finally pushing the soft fabric out of the way completely and taking my bared nipple into his mouth for a torturous, sensual moment before releasing it with a gentle smacking sound and telling me to cover myself back up. The bra just fit into my evening bag, fortunately.

We were so close to the hotel by the third time that I'd honestly thought I was home free. I could see the light at the end of the tunnel...

I *couldn't* see that light, however, from the secluded little courtyard I was led into, some little bistro's walled-in patio now long since closed for the day. Jack sat me on one of the little wrought iron tables and raised my skirt nearly to my waist, stroking the soaked silk he uncovered with a speculative look before sliding one finger under it and inside me.

Yep, still wet, I thought, and struggled to choke back the hysterical giggle I felt bubbling up at the feel of his finger pumping slowly in and out of my drenched pussy a few times before he removed it.

"Move this out of the way, little Katie." He tugged at the silk, as if I needed any further explanation, and I lowered my hand to slide the moist fabric to one side, exposing myself to him and feeling exposed to the world. My other arm was behind me, braced against the tabletop, and I felt glad for the support—his eyes felt like a physical weight, as though they might actually push me over with the force I could see in them. I tried to get to a better place, to concentrate only on Jack's voice, Jack's orders...but I could hear the footsteps and voices from the sidewalk just a few feet away, and the knowledge of how easily we might get caught was as frightening as it was arousing.

"Play with yourself now. Just one finger. Slide it all the way in." I did it, feeling my muscles clench. I realized then just how aroused I was, just how much I was depending on Jack to make this all right, and maybe he saw all that telegraphed on my face because the next thing he said was, "Good girl, Katie. You're obeying all my orders perfectly tonight, pet. I'm very pleased."

"Thank you, Sir," I said gratefully, rather pathetically in all probability, but it seemed I was indeed that easy to train because just his words, the tone of his voice, made me hotter still, made me ache to do whatever it took to keep pleasing him and keep hearing him tell me I was a good girl, his perfect pet. Sitting there with my legs spread, the breeze blowing over my pussy as I fingered myself in a near-public place for Jack to watch, suddenly seemed like the best thing in the world I could possibly be doing at that moment.

"Now take your finger out and lick it all clean," he said, kissing me deeply once I'd complied. His tongue flicked over mine, stealing my own flavor from my mouth, and his fingers found their way back to where mine had just been, brushing so lightly it was almost as if they were not touching me at all. He kept up that easy, maddening hint of contact as he stopped kissing me and gave me a grin of pure evil.

"Little Katie, I think it's time to play with some of the toys you brought along." And from his left breast pocket, he pulled the least dangerous of the three—my little silver bullet. My training toy, as I now thought of it. "To start with, let's have a pop quiz. Question one—whose toys are they now, pet?"

"Yours, Sir," I said without hesitation, but flinched when I heard the familiar buzz start up.

"And whose toy is this?" He pressed a bit more firmly against my slick pussy but pulled away before I had time to do more than whimper and yearn. He casually licked the moisture from his own finger as I answered.

"Yours, Sir."

"Any other toys of mine you're carrying around with you, little one?"

I had always hated short-answer questions. "My...mouth. And my ass. Sir."

"Very, very good. I may have to rethink my position on the Big Book of Submission, little one. I think you may have learned some useful things from it after all. And what can I do with all my toys, pet? I'm accumulating quite a few."

"Whatever pleases you, Sir."

"Absolutely correct. In fact, I think you deserve a reward for being such a good student, little one." And he brought the still-vibrating bullet down to my clit with no warning, just resting it there enough to titillate.

I was just turned-on enough that it felt too good. If he didn't take it off soon, I'd be close to the edge. But then he did take it off and I regretted the loss instantly.

"You know, I think I'm in the mood to hear more from that Big Book of Submission, Katie. I think I'm going to want to hear from you quite a bit tonight." He was looking at me with amusement, with that evil glint in his eye, and it only got worse as he kept talking. "And I don't want any hesitation or over-thinking either. Just say it when I ask for it. Is that clear?"

"Yes Sir." I wasn't happy about it, of course. I hated talking that way, mainly because I was always afraid of coming up with something really stupid sounding in the effort to sound sexy. But I was starting to think Jack would probably just take that in stride too. Even if he laughed at me, he would somehow make it all work out.

"So. More essay questions then. Describe for me, little Katie, what you would do if I told you to suck my cock right now? And remember, you get extra points for details." He had turned the vibe off but was resting it against my thigh, his hand curled protectively around both the toy and its controller. It was the carrot, and I knew all too well that the stick was waiting in the hotel room. Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and dove right in with one last frantic hope that I wouldn't drown in the stream of consciousness I was about to enter.

"I would...get off the table and get on my knees in front of you. Then I'd stroke you...your cock, I mean, stroke your cock through your pants, maybe rub my cheek against it, because that soft fabric has been driving me crazy all night, it looks like it would feel really good against my skin. And then I'd unzip your pants. No, I'd unbuckle your belt and unfasten the pants first of course, and *then* I'd unzip them. And probably unbutton a few of your shirt buttons, so I could push it out of the way because you wouldn't want to get come on it, it's a beautiful shirt. And— Are you wearing boxers, Sir?"

"Huh?" Jack said a little stupidly. I opened my eyes to see him staring at me, his mouth open, his eyes blinking too rapidly.

"Boxers? Or boxer briefs? Sir?"

"B-boxers. Navy blue cotton," he replied, still looking a bit stunned. I just nodded and closed my eyes again.

"So then I'd slide your hard, gorgeous cock out of your boxers and rub my face against it for just a little while, because even when it's really hard the skin is *so* soft and I love the way it feels. I love everything about your cock, actually, I love sucking it and licking it and kissing it. I especially like kissing the end and closing my lips right around the head and running my tongue along the vein. And the...the frenulum, right? Underneath? But for now I think I'd start with just a few licks, right at the tip, just to taste those few drops I know would be there already. And then I'd press it up toward your stomach and start kissing and licking my way along the underside where it's sensitive. Once I got to the base...well, your boxers would be in the way, so sucking your balls would be out of the question. I'd probably just play with them through your pants, just teasing a little.

"I think next I would work my way back up to the top and start working you with my hand a little, and then just when you'd gotten into that, I'd start taking your whole cock into my mouth, but *very* slowly, and I'd work my tongue against you while I was doing it, until—"

"Stop," Jack gasped.

I looked at him—he was staring at me still, like a man who hadn't seen a woman in twenty years. Vaguely it dawned on me that I must have done a bit *too* well, just about the time he'd pocketed my toy and dragged me back to the sidewalk so fast I nearly fell off my shoes in the effort to keep up.

"Sir," I queried breathlessly, "that was okay, right?"

"Just... *God*. Just don't...yes, it was okay, it was more than okay. Just don't talk anymore."

I looked down at his groin to see the all-too-clear evidence of my success pressing firmly against the fine fabric of his tailored trousers. Too late, he took off his jacket and draped it over his arm in a futile attempt to hide the bulge. It was just lucky the hotel was close by or I don't know how he'd have made it. As it was, it looked like he must be uncomfortable walking around like that. I think we broke some land-speed records in covering the remaining few blocks and the wide lobby to get to the elevator.

My wrist was actually a bit sore, Jack was gripping it so tightly. I didn't care, only cared about what was going to happen when he got me alone. He didn't even make eye contact in the elevator, which was crowded with other guests all the way up to our floor. He just stared at the ceiling with a clenched jaw and never released his grip on my wrist.

He almost pulled me off my feet again in his rush from the elevator to the suite. His hands fumbled with the cardkey and he almost dropped it before he finally managed to slide it through the slot and pull me inside after him.

The door had barely closed before Jack had me up against it, claiming my mouth harshly until I was nearly as tense as he seemed to be. But then he pulled back with a look I could read easily, and said tersely, "Do it. Just like you described it."

I would have a bruise on one knee the next day, I dropped so fast, but at the moment I didn't notice. I only wished I hadn't put quite so much foreplay into my description, because I wanted his cock in my mouth *right away* but I had to wait.

If I rushed things a little, Jack didn't seem to notice. Far from the tender way he'd wrapped his fingers in my hair on the beach when I sucked him, this time he held my head with both hands, firmly. When I shoved his pants and boxers down farther to get them out of the way and ran my fingernails over his balls, he grunted and started fucking my mouth in earnest, barely giving me time to breathe between thrusts. But it was only a matter of a few short seconds before he came, shooting straight down the back of my throat with a force that might have made me gag if I hadn't been anticipating it. As it was, I just kept my mouth still and open, breathing heavily through my nose, until he pulled his still-firm cock free.

Jack reached one arm out, grasping for the wall and finding it to lean over me, his breathing still a little ragged. Unable to resist, since it was dangling right in front of my face, I gave his cock a swift puppy lick, then another few little laps, until his hand came down to stop me.

"No, pet," he said, the humor creeping slowly back into his voice. "That's enough for now. Good girl."

I was tempted to follow him on all fours when he staggered into the bedroom and ordered me after him, but the dress would have gotten in the way. And besides, since when had I been interested in puppy play? With Jack, strangely, even that seemed like it might be fun. Sitting on his bathmat while he'd patted my head had been fun, after all.

"Do you want me to strip, Sir?" I asked hesitantly once we'd stopped by the bed.

"Any time we're alone together in the bedroom I expect you to be naked unless I tell you otherwise," he remarked, as he used the toe of one shoe to nudge the other off.

I only had the dress and a pair of panties on anyway, so taking them off was the work of a minute.

"Get on the bed, on your back. And here, play with this until I come back. Don't come, pet."

Jack tossed something onto the bed as I crawled to the center...my bullet vibe. And then he was in the bathroom with the door not quite closed, and I could hear splashing water. I flopped to my back and considered the toy Jack had decided to let me play with, smiling at myself for automatically thinking of it that way — *it was my damn toy to begin with* — but then frowning at the thought of playing with it in front of him. Hmmm.

Perhaps it would be best just to close my eyes and pretend I was home. Turning the toy on, I lay back and thought of my apartment. Inspiration failed to strike but I dutifully raised the vibrator to one nipple anyway, teasing it to a high peak. Ignoring

the other one, I decided to cut to the chase and lower the buzzing toy to the spot where Jack had placed it earlier, trying to put myself back there.

And then I *was* there, my body answering the vibration with a sweet hum of its own. Not wanting to tease myself too badly, I moved the toy down farther, playing it over each fold of my cunt and feeling it grow slicker and a bit sticky with the juices it gathered there. Nestling the tip just inside for a moment made it warm, and on its next trip to my clit it was a different little beast, almost like a lick, warm and wet.

Don't come, the little submissive in my brain reminded me, and I obediently shifted the vibrator down again, using my fingers to spread myself wider and take a bit more of it into my pussy. Warm again, wet again, it traveled slowly back up to my clit, which was now practically sitting up and begging for attention like the puppy I'd been playing earlier. The thought of the analogy broke my concentration for a minute and then I started getting into the idea, wondering what Jack would make me do as a puppy, what it would feel like not to be able to talk, not to use my hands except as paws, to be his little bitch in heat –

"That is beautiful, pet."

I squeaked and jumped at the sound of Jack's voice. He was standing, still fully clothed, at the end of the bed, staring right between my legs where the vibe was busily buzzing.

"Don't stop," he ordered quickly, and without thought I immediately dropped my head back down and started sliding the toy just inside my pussy again, spreading my legs wider. "Now tell me – in ten words or less – what you were thinking about." The wry tone in his voice registered only dimly.

"I was thinking about...puppy play, Sir."

"Really?"

"Yes Sir."

"Huh. Have you ever done that?"

"No Sir." *But at the moment I'm getting off to the memory of you calling me a bitch in heat, so it's clearly open for discussion.*

"Me neither. Although it sounds like fun. Not as a lifestyle, mind you. Just something to play around with sometime."

"Of course, Sir," I murmured. "You already have a dog."

Jack's laugh warmed me. My hands were on autopilot – I was perilously close to coming but knew he wasn't going to let me yet. Life had seldom seemed so rosy.

"True. But Rufus has clearly never studied the Big Book of Submission." He was on the move, unzipping his suitcase again, and I felt and heard two soft thumps on the mattress. Glancing to the side, since he hadn't said I couldn't, I saw my other two purloined toys. Jack's toys now, that he might let me play with if I was good. I planned to be as good as humanly possible.

The toy I was using was starting to annoy, however. I had gone too long without coming but I suspected that no orgasm was in my immediate future, judging by Jack's mood, and even the lightest touch of the buzzing metal against my clit took me too close now. I whimpered and slid it back down to the somewhat safer region of my pussy. It was almost with relief that I handed the bullet over to Jack when he held out his hand, though it was to be a short-lived recess.

"Come over here," he called once he'd placed the toy out of reach. Then, with a grin, a sharper, "Come!" He patted his leg and then pointed at the bed directly in front of him. Grinning back, I rolled over to all fours and puppy crawled to where he'd indicated, mentally wagging my tail for all it was worth.

"Okay, enough puppy for now."

Pouting a little, I knelt in front of him, trying to look more subservient and less rabidly horny than I was actually feeling. Jack's next words really didn't help.

"Two toys left, little one. Which one are you going to demonstrate for me next? Oh, and the pop quiz will be continuing while you perform for me, porn princess. Just so you know."

I surveyed the remaining two toys in dismay. There was my little massager with the cute bunny ears, of course, my favorite toy of all, the one guaranteed to work every time. But I wasn't going to be allowed to come, I was positive, so the idea of using Bunny on my already swollen clit and sore pussy was a little horrifying at the moment.

On the other hand, I was getting this little break right now, and at least I might be able to withstand the pleasure of Bunny for a few minutes. Whereas if I had to use Bunny after yet another round of entertaining Jack with my other toy, and he *still* didn't let me come...

I looked at Slim, the slender, heavy, copper-colored piece of art that was the only dildo-shaped vibrator I owned, and then at Bunny, calculating the advantages and disadvantages of each.

"Choose, or I'm choosing for you," Jack prompted—and without thinking I reached for Slim.

"This one, Sir," I responded uncertainly, clutching the toy to my chest. At least with Slim I could focus my attention away from my clit without raising any suspicions. I hoped.

"That one? Okay, little Katie. Show me what you got. Back to the middle of the bed with you." He took off his tie as I slid back to the center of the king-size bed and contemplated the toy in my hand for a few seconds. "And don't just show me, tell me. Tell me what you like doing to yourself with that toy."

"Yes Sir. May I have some lube, Sir?"

The question took Jack by surprise, and I could see him biting his lip to keep from laughing. "So polite. Yes, of course you may have some lube, Katie." Still struggling to put on a poker face, Jack strode over to the closet, dug in his bag for the bottle and brought it to me. "I'm prepared to be dazzled now."

"I don't usually turn it on right away," I started, pleased with this sudden inspiration. I opened the flip-top on the lube and spread the heavy liquid liberally over the cool metal of the toy, coating it thoroughly. "I just play with it at first, like..." I paused to arrange myself on my back again, stifling the feeling that the whole thing was a bit too clinical. "Like this. Just teasing." I demonstrated, sliding the slick metal over my clit, back and forth, only a few times because it was excruciating not to be able to come. And then—with a sense of relief—down to my pussy, which would normally not be quite so wet and willing at this stage of the game.

"And then I usually fuck myself with it and just sort of play with my other hand, like this." Matching actions to words, I slid my hands into place, feeling the familiarity in my own actions, if not in this current setting. Instinctively I eased the pressure of my fingers to the bare minimum, hoping I was getting away with it, trying to ignore the tension even that much stimulation was causing.

I was doing fine holding myself back until Jack climbed up between my legs on the bed and started running a fingertip everywhere the toy wasn't.

"You're not really playing my game, little one. You're hardly breaking a sweat."

"Sir?" *No, no, please, please don't...*

He bore down with the pad of his finger where I wanted it most and could take it the least, circling hard enough that it was nearly painful on the abused nerve endings there. I couldn't help it—I gave myself away by begging him to stop.

He did, but only long enough for the threat of orgasm to pass. Then he was at it again, and again, until I was moaning and thrashing, in an agony of need, more than breaking a sweat.

Jack just smiled a cruel little smile and said, "That's more like it."

And then, five words that sounded like a death knell. "Now—turn that thing on."

I know I wept but I did as I was told, scrabbling frantically until I found the control and then sobbing as the toy leapt to life inside my pussy. I tried to stroke it in and out of myself as I had earlier, but even a half-dozen strokes had me practically flinching away from it. Usually Slim wasn't quite thick or buzzy enough on his own to do the job without a lot of extra help from my hand. But this time it was too much, I wouldn't be able to stop myself, I *had to*—until Jack pushed my hands away, slid the vibrator out of me and just looked at it thoughtfully before turning it off and tossing it carefully to one side.

"I have great plans for that toy. Later, though."

I couldn't answer, just lie there trying to catch my breath, trying desperately to think myself to some place where my nerves weren't screaming for relief. Wherever that place was, it wasn't in the hotel suite, that much was clear. Jack had an evil gleam in his eye and I shuddered at what he might be thinking of. Only one toy left.

"Only one toy left, little one. I'm wondering why you saved it for last. Is it the best one?" He held up the stubby little bunny-headed wand and turned it on, raising an eyebrow at the unexpected power of the vibration. "Oh my. That is a special bun-bun."

You've been holding out on me. I bet he's probably not your favorite right now though, is he, pet?"

"No Sir!" I replied instantly and adamantly. And very foolishly, I thought a moment later, because I'd just revealed a weakness, and Jack already knew enough of my weaknesses as it was. "He's...he's not really my favorite anyway, Sir." It sounded weak, even to me. And I could tell right away that Jack wasn't buying it.

"Just for that I should make you use it until you're screaming. But I think I'll still give you this choice. You demonstrate the bunny right now, or you get to take a break first while I warm up your butt with my hand—extra hard for lying just now. But mainly just because I feel like it." He rose from the bed and was already rolling up his sleeves—he obviously knew which option I was going to choose. The new cufflinks were deposited neatly on the bedside table.

"The spanking, please. Sir." I sounded as miserable as I was, and Jack looked insufferably pleased with himself.

"Oh, hearing you actually ask for it is priceless, pet. Just priceless."

I wasn't expecting him to jump onto the bed and drag me, automatically struggling a bit, to the edge. He sat and slung me over his knee, still startled and kicking, and dropped a rapid-fire series of smacks on the meat of one buttock before I could even get my bearings. Hard enough at first—his hands were so large, they made a lot of contact—and then ramping upward, a slow crescendo of pain and stimulation.

I tried to adjust my position a few times, to angle myself higher over his thigh, craving the pressure against my clit even though I knew it was a bad idea. But he kept me too firmly pinned down, as if he knew my motive and was actively thwarting it. The spanking itself was already more stimulation than I could take, with Jack's occasional stray blows against my upturned pussy lighting every nerve ending on fire, keeping me too aware of my arousal to let it subside.

At last, when every inch of my ass felt like it was on fire and I was aching along the still-livid paddle stripe despite his avoiding any direct blows to it—he really was mostly a spanko at heart, I thought, as no sadist worth the name would have passed up *that* opportunity—he dropped his hand to my pussy and patted the tender flesh with a happy sigh. My throat was sore from sobbing, from begging him to stop, but not as sore as my sex, which seemed to be begging him for more, for *anything*.

When Jack grabbed one fiery-red cheek and squeezed hard, I could only whimper at the lingering pain.

"I could do that all night, little one. You are just so spankable. Really."

"Thank you, Sir." My voice sounded weak and shaky, just like my legs when Jack moved me off his lap and leaned over to pat the middle of the bed, indicating I should return there. With no energy left for grace. I flopped onto my stomach and clutched at the sheet spasmodically as if clinging to it for some sort of comfort.

"I don't think that's how you usually lie in bed when you're playing with your bunny friend, little Katie. Is it?"

"Nooooo!" I cried. "Please, no, I can't, Sir. *Please!*"

"Wow. You're asking the wrong person, pet. Now get on your back and spread your legs for me like the good little slut I know you are." He waited for me to comply before continuing. "Just for me, of course. My own personal little porn princess. Who is now going to demonstrate just what she likes to do with this. Her favorite toy." And he pressed Bunny into my hand and turned on the vibrator.

With a feeling of impending doom, I raised the toy to one of my nipples, my back arching involuntarily when the soft, buzzing ears brushed the already rock-hard peak.

"You're just aching, aren't you, little one? Even thinking about those bunny ears touching your clit is painful right now, I'll bet. Tell me what you want."

A ray of hope. Jack was unbuttoning his shirt, shucking it off, slipping his trousers past his hips.

"I want to come, *please*, I *need* to, Sir! I can't stand it anymore, *please*, *please* let me come, *please*..."

"It's a long drive tomorrow, Katie. Might be entertaining to watch you squirm around for an hour and a half on that bumpy road. Sore butt, keyed up. Sort of how I like you, you know."

"No, *please*, no! Sir, *please*, *please!*" The horror in my voice was evident, as was the humor on Jack's face at my dilemma. He was naked now, and his cock jutted almost straight out from his hips, bobbing gently as he stalked to the side of the bed. "Please..."

My vocabulary seemed to have been reduced to a handful of goal-oriented words. They filled up the parts of my mind that could still handle language at all, the parts that didn't feel ready to short-circuit from sensual overload. Yet my hands were still working, slipping the bunny ears around and over my nipples, trying to postpone the inevitable moment when Jack would decide I'd stalled long enough.

"Put the toy down," he said instead. "Turn it off, put it down."

I almost threw it away from me, I was so happy to just get to stop, even if it was only a short respite.

"And now don't move. Not a muscle. I want to hear you, but I don't want you moving, understand me, pet? *Stay.*"

"Yes Sir, I understand..." I followed his progress onto the bed with my eyes, keeping my hands in loose fists up by my shoulders, my legs splayed open like a bendy doll that somebody's thirteen-year-old brother has gotten hold of. Jack dipped his head and took Bunny's place at my breasts, nuzzling and licking from one to the other for some time. It was almost bearable. The near-pain of over-arousal was starting to subside to a dull roar in my crotch, an ache I could live with, although every so often a flick of Jack's tongue would set off a twinge, a reminder that he wasn't through with me yet. But still, I started to relax under his ministrations until my impulse was no longer to shrink away but to curl into him, curve my fingers into his hair to draw him closer.

Remaining still got truly difficult when Jack started wending his way downward, as slowly as only a man who had already had one explosive orgasm that evening could go. By the time he reached my navel, I was breathing hard again. When he started pressing kisses across my pubic bone, the breathy whining started. I was just aware enough to know what was coming, where his mouth was headed, but too overwhelmed to brace myself for it in any meaningful way. Just a quivering, moaning piece of putty in Jack's hands.

But once again he defeated my expectation, this time by sliding forward again, pressing his lips to mine in a lazy, tender kiss, and slipping inside me in a slow, halting progression. He was taking his weight on his elbows, taking care not to grind against me, in this seemingly simple act of sex that was more excruciating than any beating he might have cared to give.

Excruciating but exquisite, and I think if he'd asked me my own name just then I wouldn't have been able to reply with anything but, "Yours."

He pushed my legs a little higher—more penetration for him, less stimulation for me—and gave me one more lingering, sweet kiss, soft lips and a gentle tongue playing with mine. Pulling back a bit, he looked at me in the half-light of the room. He was there, totally absorbed in the moment, totally absorbed in *me*—and it was breathtaking. Everything he did, everything he was, took my breath away, and I was sure I wouldn't be able to breathe again unless he told me I could.

I was barely aware when he picked up his pace, pumped harder and faster for just a few beats before crying out softly at his climax. I'd gotten lost in the world of what he wanted, which was for me to *not* come and to be still and to let him do what he would. And he did. And even if I knew the feeling wouldn't last, at that moment all that mattered in the world to me was that Jack had been able to do what he wanted, because I had done as he told me to.

Simple. As simple as brainwashing, as simple as the place where psychology and philosophy meet...as simple as love.

Chapter Twenty-One

Among the various opportunities that Rio and environs offer the casual visitor, one of the few I do not recommend—other than the beach, that is—is bouncing around on increasingly rough roads, going up and down mountains in a vintage Mercedes with stiff suspension while trying to coddle a bruised ass and an unsatisfied libido at the same time.

There was absolutely no comfortable way to sit. And Jack knew it. He made small talk with his friend Mario and pointed out sights as if there wasn't this simultaneous, unspoken conversation going on between us the whole time. Knowing that he knew, and having to smile and try to be charming and make a good first impression on Jack's best friend, and seem suitably appreciative of each successive natural wonder in its turn, was all nearly unbearable.

But I bore it, of course. Although there was a certain point, going down the very long and barely paved asphalt road to Mario's house, that I thought if I sat *just right* the vibration of the car might be enough...

"Kate," said Jack, leaning over the back of the seat to where I sat in the front, next to his friend. "Can you reach that camera bag for me? I left it right down by your feet." And after leaning down to get the bag, which hadn't made an appearance before this afternoon but had evidently been stowed in Jack's large suitcase, I sat back up but had lost my momentum entirely. We arrived at Mario's house just a few minutes later, and I don't think anybody ever felt more eager to stretch their legs than I did upon getting out of that car.

We had seen some extraordinary views though. Higher and farther into the mountains, away from the shoreline, the forest grew thicker and wilder and was teeming with wildlife that our eager eyes catalogued during the drive. Once off the major roads, Mario had been able to point out creatures and trees, elements of the rainforest landscape that I had only dreamed of seeing up close in the wild. A pair of golden lion tamarins, for instance, squabbling or playing back and forth along the branch of a type of tree I didn't know. And the silence was astonishing in itself. We stopped to take a longer look at a particularly scenic drop-off where the shoulder of the road was just wide enough to park the car, and there was only the soft hum of the jungle behind and below us. Not the city, not the ocean, not anything that might make a sound louder than the wind in the trees and the occasional distant call of a bird or beast.

"In a way, it's loud at night," Jack assured me.

Mario, who was indeed too chubby for safe rock-climbing but an utterly delightful person nevertheless, kept up a lively stream of conversation that didn't end when we crunched to a halt in the wide gravel drive that circled in front of his house.

I gathered that his family's fortune had been made in shipping, and the house had a vaguely nautical feel, but that may just have been all the exposed wood beams and the breathtaking panoramic view of the ocean just past the treetops.

The house, which was built into the side of the hill, was like a cross between a tree house and an interior designer's wet dream. Each stick of furniture, each gently curving paneled wall or cunningly crafted array of lighting, was utterly and absolutely perfect. And the whole thing had the desirable quality of being enormous overall yet cozy in its particulars, with the feeling one might ramble forever but never be at a loss for a little nook in which to have a chat or read a book. And from every space—for it was difficult to say just where rooms ended and began in much of that house—there was a view of the forest, or the treetops over which the house was perched, or a grotto created by the structural relationship between the house itself and the hill into which it was nestled.

Jack summed it up best. "It's like every little kid's dream house, if the little kid had all the money in the world and a team of internationally famous designers."

"The little kid is also a fan of the fine arts," I added, automatically scanning the spines of the books in one of the built-in shelves that seemed to grace every likely inch of wall. Shelves for books, but also pottery and oil paintings both large and small. Most were jungly abstractions of just the type I had been looking for from that street vendor I'd never been able to find again. I suspected I wouldn't have been able to afford even signed prints of most of the pieces in Mario's collection, however.

"I haven't been here since Anne and I finished my place," Jack said, frowning as he joined me in looking over the titles. "Now I'm going to go back home and my place will look like crap after this."

I knew what he meant, but laughed anyway. "I like your place. It's just more structured than this." A few seconds later I wondered if that had been the right thing to say, but it was too late. My brain seemed to be short-circuiting at the oddest moments, despite the relief of being out of the car and off the bumpy road.

"You still haven't invited me to your new home," Mario pointed out to Jack, shaking his finger in accusation. "The children have never been to Texas. They want to go, they want to see Texas cowboys. I keep telling them that we have more cowboys here, and in Houston they're more likely to see businessmen in suits, but..."

"Rodeo," Jack laughed, clapping Mario on the shoulder. "You can come during the stock show and rodeo next February, Mario. The kids will love it. They'll get to see honest-to-God cowboys riding bulls and horses. Marta may even like it too, she's the horsy one anyway. Speaking of which, where is everyone?"

"On their way back from the ranch. They should be here soon. And Marta apologizes in advance, she won't be cooking tonight, but she promises to make it up to us all tomorrow." He was leading us as he talked and we wound up in the kitchen, a space that would have made most professional chefs drool with envy. Even though I wasn't much of a cook, I was envious myself. There were acres of stainless steel and granite, blond wood and industrial-strength cooking and cooling capabilities.

Considering that the house seemed fairly remote and must be relying on generators, propane and septic systems, the whole thing seemed even more impressive. It had long since crossed my mind that Mario's family must do quite a bit more than just own "a few boats", but until seeing his home I hadn't quite grasped the extent to which there must be fabulous wealth involved. I had to approve of the way Mario had put his funds to use. The house was just so much *fun*.

"So," Mario explained, pulling things from an enormous refrigerator tastefully concealed behind panels that matched the cabinetry. "We are fending for ourselves tonight, on sandwiches and beer. Like college!"

Maybe things had been different for Jack and Mario. In college, *I* never had paper-thin slices of rare roast beef and savory pork for my sandwiches, on fresh rolls, with horseradish sauce handmade by the cook-cum-factotum who was the only servant in evidence, though I sensed there were probably more about the place.

Mario seemed at home in the kitchen, slicing onions and tomatoes with an ease that suggested he often helped Marta with her legendary cooking. When I mentioned I wasn't much of a beer drinker, Mario got a gleam in his eye and led me into what I thought was a butler's pantry. It turned out to be a wine cellar, with several different zones of cooled and climate-controlled storage for everything from crisp, dry whites to heavy dessert wines, ancient bottles with flaking yellowed labels to the red he pulled out which was a very nice, young Beaujolais.

Once the sandwiches were made, our genial host led us from the kitchen through the adjoining seating area, which featured a windowed wall and a huge native stone fireplace, out to a cantilevered terrace from which the full impact of the view became clear. This surely must have been the best time to see it, at sunset, with the jungle behind us and spread out below, and the hills deepening to darkest blue just where they met the ocean at the horizon.

Once the sun was truly down, which we couldn't quite see from our vantage, the distant land and sea seemed to melt together into a band of midnight, with only the faint afterglow from the sun's departure marking the line of sky. By the time we'd finished eating it had all faded into darkness, and a smattering of lights across the hills made it clear that the area wasn't as isolated as it seemed. Still, it was quiet, almost eerily so, and I wondered what Jack had meant by his earlier comment about the noise.

The arrival of Marta and Mario's children, however, was far from quiet. We heard the car first, and saw the headlights flickering lower down on the hill before the curve of the road took it back out of sight again. Then the muffled hubbub of the family entering the house, carried down the hill from the front door. We couldn't hear them once they were inside, but the sound burst forth again when two tiny cannonballs came hurtling through the door and out onto the patio, barreling into Mario with cries of glee and fierce competition for his attention. The boy, Gabriel, seemed to win out, and he started telling his father a lively story in incredibly rapid Portuguese, ignoring us completely. Meanwhile his little sister, Silvia, who seemed to be about four, stared out at us from behind her father's leg with huge, dark eyes, somber and suspicious.

The children must have inherited their coloring from their mother, because their raven-black hair and fair, fair skin hadn't come from the rather sandy-and-tawny Mario. But Gabriel was in all other respects a copy of his father, with the same mannerisms and the same laugh, identical features and an identical radiant smile of slightly mischievous goodwill. When he was done regaling his father with his tale, he turned to acknowledge Jack and me with as courtly a bow as I'd ever seen, clearly not something that even a formal etiquette class would teach these days in the States.

"*Dona* Kate, I am Gabriel. It is an honor to make your acquaintance," he said in barely accented English, and then the little rascal actually kissed the back of my hand before he finally broke into a snicker.

The snicker was only because Jack reached under his arm and started tickling him, at which point the boy finally gave up the hug he'd obviously been withholding. Jack picked him up and bear-hugged him, tousled his hair and then set him on his feet again, warning him he'd get into trouble one of these days flirting with pretty girls who were already taken. Undaunted, Gabriel flashed another winning smile my way before giving in to his father's demand to go see what was taking his mother so long.

"Silvia, come out and say hello," Mario encouraged the little girl once her boisterous brother had left and the energy level on the terrace had been reduced by several magnitudes. "This is your uncle Jack and his friend Kate. Sorry, Jack, she probably doesn't remember." He had succeeded in coaxing his daughter to his lap, but she was now burying her face in his chest.

"That's okay, I doubt she does. She was...what? One year old last time I was here? I can't believe how big she is." And then Jack said something very quietly in Portuguese, and the little girl turned a tiny bit, just far enough to see what he was holding out in his hand. It seemed to be a tiny jade frog, although I couldn't grasp the significance.

"Oh, just what she needs, Jack, *another* frog," Mario said wryly, but encouraged Silvia to take the offering. She did so with all the reticence of a shy woodland creature taking a handful of corn from a camper, snatching the trinket back and eyeing it with growing excitement and the first hint of a smile I'd seen.

"*Obrigada*," she suddenly chirped politely, without prompting. Clearly she liked frogs, although how Jack came to have a miniature jade one in his pocket was a mystery to me.

"Marta told me frogs were 'it' right now," he explained, when Silvia had finally scampered off into the house to show her mother and brother her new acquisition. "I saw it at home actually, in this place in the Heights, and got to thinking it might go over well."

"She didn't burst into tears and refuse to speak," Mario said with obvious concern for his unaccountably shrinking violet of a child. "So you're way ahead of most strangers, I admit. Everyone keeps saying it's just a phase."

"I was like that until I was about seven," I admitted. "Although in my family you hardly noticed, since all we did was sit around reading all the time anyway."

"Ah, well then, perhaps there is still hope for Silvia," Mario grinned. "I will give her until she is seven before seeking professional help to find out how this family could have possibly produced a shy child."

Once Marta came out, it became even more evident why shyness seemed so extraordinary in this household. Marta was not only lovely—she looked, in fact, rather like Snow White, and was far too slim for all the fabulous cooking she was supposed to be doing—she possessed social graces I knew I never would. She managed to make me and Jack feel like honored guests and comfortable old friends at the same time, and only much later that evening did I realize that I'd been pretty thoroughly grilled for information over the course of the fifteen or so minutes she spent with us before ducking back inside to make sure the children got ready for bed. She'd done it skillfully enough that, at the time, all I felt was that she was tremendously interested in everything I had to say. The woman must have been a world-class date before she settled down.

When the mosquitoes and other flying horrors grew too irksome despite the elaborate built-in spray system that protected the little terrace, Mario saw us back inside and back through the house to the front door. He'd explained we were in the "guesthouse", which turned out to be accessible only by foot, by way of a little lighted path through the jungle itself.

Or at least it seemed to be jungle at first glance in the darkness. In fact, it was rather more manicured than that, part of a much larger tropical garden sculpted into the hill around the house. The guesthouse was at the far extreme of that garden, and turned out to be a little cottage built from the same native materials and in the same very modern style as the main house. There was a queen-size bed under mosquito netting, two fans turning lazily in the exposed-wood ceiling, a well-appointed full bath and a wide decked porch along the front and side of the little house. Mario pointed out that there was air-conditioning should we prefer it, but the cottage was cool and comfortable enough in the evening air.

I seemed to have guessed correctly about the invisible servants, because somebody had already brought our bags along from the car. Mario left Jack and I to "freshen up", an expression I thought he had surely learned in Texas.

"This is amazing," I said, wishing I could think of a more original way to put it.

"It's like a movie set, isn't it?" Jack agreed, pulling a polo shirt out of his suitcase and sniffing it experimentally before exchanging it for the one he'd been wearing. I enjoyed the brief glimpse of his torso, pouting a little when he covered it with the fresh shirt. "This is really just sort of his getaway home. He has a place up in Recife. He's up there on business quite a lot but he doesn't always want to stay at his parents' place. Their compound, really. And then of course, his family and Marta's both have ranches near São Paulo."

"So what exactly is it that Mario's family does? Obviously it's more than just owning some boats."

"Shipping. And cattle ranching, although that's more of a sideline. I think Mario's grandfather just liked the idea of doing that. Marta's family are the real ranchers. Packaging and distribution too. So there's a certain extent to which the marriage was...well, not arranged, but it sure was convenient to bring the two families together."

I was surprised. "They seem like they're crazy about each other." In fact, the couple had been openly affectionate, though never inappropriate, during our brief visit. They seemed thrilled to be back in one another's company after what was apparently just a few days spent apart.

"They are crazy about each other, *now*. They just both resisted the whole thing at first. Their families had known each other forever and both sides were really pushing for the match. I think they only figured out they liked each other because they spent so much time together, plotting how to convince their families to get off their backs about it. But it worked out well."

"Their kids are gorgeous." I contemplated my dwindling supply of clean clothes, trying to decide whether I should change too.

"Silvia's so big," he said as if still stunned by this. "Somehow it's more startling to see her jump from one to five than to see Gabriel jump from six to ten. I've seen pictures of course, but it's just not the same."

I wondered if he saw frequent pictures of the children's cousins too, Marisa's sons, who might have been Jack's if things had gone differently. From what I'd seen over the past few months, he and Mario phoned and e-mailed each other a few times a week. A lot of chances for photos to be relayed back and forth.

Why do you even care, Kate? I asked myself furiously, then looked up at Jack, worried for a moment I'd spoken out loud. He was watching me fiddle with my clothes but his mind seemed to be elsewhere.

"Mario actually seems a little quiet, for *him*," he said out of the blue. "I know, I know, you're thinking if that's quiet, what's he usually like? But seriously, he seems like he's worried about something. I'm trying to figure out if I should just ask him or..."

I didn't want to, but I felt obliged to make the offer, just to be a bigger person than I felt like I really was. "Do you want me to stay here, and you can just go and catch up for a bit? Maybe it's something he doesn't feel comfortable telling you in front of me?"

"No," Jack said instantly. "I think it's actually something he doesn't feel comfortable telling *me*. But I guess it'll either come out or it won't. I just hope it's nothing bad about him or Marta or the kids." Smiling suddenly, shaking off the topic with a shrug, he said, "He likes you, by the way. Do you know what he said when I talked to him yesterday and mentioned we'd only need one room?"

I blushed automatically and looked back at the contents of my suitcase. "No, what?"

"He said, 'I wondered when you would figure it out'."

"Ah."

Jack snorted and flopped onto the bed, looking up playfully from where he lay flat on his back, just past my suitcase. "You think we have time for a quickie?"

I glared at him. "Would I get to come?"

"Nope." His grin was shameless, unrepentant.

"Then no, we don't have time." Pulling my cosmetic bag from my suitcase, I rummaged around for the smaller bag of makeup, some cleanser, my toothbrush and toothpaste.

"What if I told you to pull off all your clothes and get on my dick, right now?" He was still smiling that obnoxious frat-boy smile, and I could tell he wasn't serious.

"I think I might have to tell you to go straight to hell," I said with what I hoped was a winning smile.

His peals of laughter chased me all the way into the bathroom.

* * * * *

We talked with Mario and Marta late into the night, over several more glasses of wine and bottles of beer, about anything and nothing. I was startled by the frequency with which Jack and Mario got pulled into debating the environment with one another. While both passionate about conservation in their ways, each accused the other of wasting the opportunity to do something about it.

Two captains of industry, I thought, and was a little awestruck by the knowledge that it wasn't really an exaggeration—and by the company I suddenly found myself in. This largely friendly debate, clearly one that had been evolving since their college days, was now a multimillion- or even multibillion-dollar issue for both of them.

Marta was the mediator, always slipping into the conversation sideways and emerging in some completely different place with both men in tow. It was impressive, and I couldn't quite figure out how she managed it even though I was sitting right there. She was like an anti-Lourdes, really.

"We'll leave them to it," she said finally, rising with a final roll of her eyes at the ongoing restrained argument. "I've already been hearing this for years, it never changes. Come with me, you can help." I followed her from the cozy snug with the fireplace, where we'd been sitting and talking and drinking, back up into the kitchen, where from yet another cleverly concealed refrigerator she was pulling a covered cake plate.

"Jack's favorite," she explained, pulling the cover aside to reveal what turned out to be a dense, dark chocolate cheesecake. She made an exploratory cut into the smoothly swirled surface with a table knife as she spoke. "I made it for him before I left. Good, Mario remembered to pull it out of the freezer in time."

I offered to help, already feeling lost in the giant kitchen, but Marta pointed out the cabinet with the plates and I was able to find them with no difficulty while she was busy retrieving forks and a pointed cake server. To my enormous delight, she called the

two men into the kitchen with a two-fingered shriek of a whistle that would have stopped any New York cabbie on the spot, and never lost her smooth façade of cultured amusement while doing it.

“This place is too big,” she said by way of explanation as she neatly dished up four perfectly sliced pieces of the rich dessert, which Jack was already almost visibly salivating over. She refused to slide the plates over to either man, however, until they promised to stop arguing. From the tone of her voice and their fervent responses, I could tell that not only did she mean it, but she must make one *hell* of a chocolate cheesecake.

The reality didn’t disappoint. I found myself looking forward to tomorrow’s meals, if this was just a sample of what Marta could make in the way of food. And perhaps if I could get the courage up, I could ask for the recipe before I left, since Jack’s reaction seemed to confirm that the cheesecake really was his favorite.

The one sour note of the evening came near its end, when we were making our final plans for the morning and were interrupted by a phone call. Marta answered, frowning at the lateness of the hour, frowning deeper still and handing the phone to Mario without a word once she’d identified the caller. He didn’t even need to ask. He obviously knew who it was, and held the earpiece against his shoulder while he made his apologies to us, saying we could talk more in the morning but that he would likely be on the phone too long for us to bother waiting this evening.

When Jack led me by the hand back through the kitchen and into the darkened hallway beyond, we could hear Mario quickly losing a struggle to keep his voice calm as he spoke to whoever was on the other end of the line.

We had exited as gracefully as possible, everyone there embarrassed by the sudden awkwardness, and though it was evident Jack had been correct—his friend *had* been bothered by something—the situation was now such that it would be too impolite to simply ask what the trouble was. I only hoped that whatever it was wouldn’t impact too heavily on this wonderful couple. They seemed so happy, and so *good*, as if they genuinely deserved to have this fairy-tale lifestyle. I suspected that perhaps with the fairy-tale trappings came a lot of very real-world stresses, however. They weren’t rich by accident, but by continuing the very hard work their families had begun generations ago.

Jack’s house in Memorial wasn’t quite the American version of Mario’s tree house, I reflected as we trod carefully down the little path to the guesthouse, always mindful and on the lookout for snakes. But it wasn’t far behind.

One of the fun things about Houston is that complete, detailed real estate listings for the greater metropolitan and suburban areas are available for free online, and looking at them has long been a somewhat obsessive hobby of mine. After that Christmas party—had that really only been three months ago?—I had looked at the listings for the area near Jack’s house, and unless I was very much mistaken he’d been sitting in a cool half-million worth of home even before all the renovations.

I assumed at the time, as I still did, that there was money in his family. Not because I thought he'd used their money to purchase the house, because I knew he made easily enough to afford it on his own, but because he knew what sort of house to buy to entertain at the level required by his position. I figured a single, straight guy would probably had to have been raised that way, to know just what to look for. Or a major social climber, but Jack certainly didn't seem to be one of those. And his sister was the caliber of architect and designer who knew the appropriate contractors to remodel his house and make the whole thing look magazine-cover perfect in under a year, with *real* art, and accessories that were clearly not the cheap chain-store knockoffs of the real things, but simply the real things. Like Mario's house, it all spoke of money not being an issue.

And, like Mario's house, it would be all too easy to get used to—and spoiled by.

Captains of industry, I thought again, and let my own personal captain of industry lead me deeper into the rainforest to the tiny cabin we were sharing for the next two nights.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Are you always like this?" I asked breathlessly as Jack finally released me from the scorching kiss he'd planted on me as soon as we were inside the guesthouse.

"No," he admitted. "Why are your clothes still on, little Katie? This is a bedroom, we're alone, the door's closed..."

"Oh. I, um...okay. Sir." I was taken aback by the quick transition, by how far my mind was from where Jack suddenly demanded it be. With fumbling fingers I started to unbutton my blouse, unfasten my shorts, trying to get the offending garments out of the way as fast as possible. Compliance equaled the possibility of orgasm, an equation that had been steadily increasing in significance for me all day long.

"Need more time?" Jack said with amusement. "D'you think I'm going to give you more time, pet?"

"No Sir," I said quickly. I might be a bit slow off the mark, but I was quickly catching up. The still-humid air of the room felt cool and dank against my bare skin as I finally shed my underwear and bra and stood in front of him, clad only in his gaze.

He looked bemused, appreciative...*happy*. He looked like a man who couldn't believe his luck and I couldn't shake the temptation to look back over my shoulder, to see that girl behind me he must be looking at, because how could he be looking at me that way? But there was nobody else of course, just us, standing in the dark in this tiny house in the middle of the jungle. It felt like that, although of course it wasn't a jungle, and it wasn't in the middle of anywhere but just a few dozen yards from Mario's hillside playhouse.

"There's no soundproofing. We'll have to be quieter than usual," Jack whispered ruefully.

"I think I can manage that, Sir."

We grinned conspiratorially at each other. There was just enough moonlight and path light filtering through the opaque louvered windows to let us see one another's faces. Jack stepped closer and took my hands in his, looping his fingers around mine and using his thumbs to stroke my palms. Not suggestively, really. It was just a hint, a reminder of the string he had been dangling me from since last night. Tendrils of need, dormant while we'd eaten and socialized, crept back out to tease the sensitive areas of my body. A sensory memory from the night before, recalled instantly by Jack's touch.

But to my surprise, he didn't move any farther right away. He seemed content to hold my hands in the dark, swinging them slightly as he spoke. "You'd be completely silent or yell your head off or *stand* on your head, or just about anything else I told you

to do, wouldn't you, little one? I'd imagine you'd sell your soul for an orgasm right about now."

"Am I going to have to, Sir?" I wasn't serious, wasn't into it yet, but I didn't feel like he was either. This was something else again, another of those strange *betweens* we seemed to get into. I still couldn't decide whether I liked it or not, but I was starting to think I might not be able to live without these moments.

"I haven't decided yet. Probably not, actually," he chuckled. "I'm not really in a torturing mood for some reason."

"Are you feeling all right, Sir?" I felt his forehead with mock concern, prompting another chuckle.

"Some sort of rainforest fever, probably."

"I hear those can be pretty bad."

"I think I may have to settle for just ravishing you."

"Sir?"

"*Jack*. I want to hear my name. I want to hear you say it tonight. Do you think you can?"

"I really don't know, Si— Jack."

Laughing at my slip, he led me closer to the bed that took up most of the space in the little house, and brought my hands to his shirt hem, encouraging me to tug it up and off. "Just think of me as a sex toy. Big, walking, talking sex toy named Jack, okay?"

Pulling the shirt free from his arms and throwing it aside to start on his pants, I considered this approach. "Are you switching on me...*Jack*? I'm not sure how I feel about that, I guess I can feel free to say."

"No, no switching. Just not playing that particular game for the evening."

"Just trying to see if you still know how?" I asked, perhaps with more irony in my voice than intended. His belt came free easily and I flung it across the room with abandon, knowing it wouldn't be needed again this evening.

Jack's eyes fell to my hands, busy unzipping the fly of his shorts. He was already hard, pushing gently into the pressure I couldn't resist putting on the firm lump the zipper revealed as I lowered it. "Maybe I'm trying to see if *you* know how."

Taken aback by that, I looked up at him but his eyes were half closed. "Is that a challenge?" His mood seemed so mercurial, I couldn't follow the changes.

"Kate, is it what you do...or is it who you are?"

I gave this question some thought before answering. "I think maybe...it's something I do *because* of who I am. It's my natural inclination. But I like other things too. Sometimes."

His pants fell to the floor with a jangling thud. His wallet, change and, for some reason I couldn't grasp, house and car keys, were still in the pockets. His boxers—dark green paisley today, I noticed—fell silently after and Jack kicked the pile of discarded

clothes to one side. We were both standing there naked, more naked than usual, I realized. It wasn't the kind of conversation I was used to having naked, next to a bed, before any sort of sex had taken place. I wished he would order me around a little just to put me back in my comfort zone, but I knew he wouldn't. He seemed to enjoy toying with the boundaries of that zone. And I wanted those boundaries to grow for him, I really did. For *me*, of course, but also for him.

No orders. He led me to the bed, walking backward until his knees hit the edge and then toppling us both down, me falling on top of him and then rolling off to the side as our mouths collided in an unremarkable and slightly sloppy kiss.

"It's..." Jack pulled away with a sigh, flopping back flat with an arm flung over his eyes. "It's something I *do*. Okay? I don't even know why. I just—"

"You don't want to feel like it's something you have to do, to enjoy it," I finished for him.

He moved his arm and looked at me with a mock frown. "How'd you get in my head like that? Get outta there. That's my job."

I propped up on one elbow and gazed down at him, mapping his chest lazily with the fingers of my other hand and letting my foot slip around on his calves until he trapped it between his own. "I think we all feel like that sometimes. There's, like...this fine line between being comfortable with who you are, and feeling like you're accepting some pigeonhole that society's decided you fit into. Even if it's this very off-the-wall fringe of society. You don't want to be one of *those* people, the ones who don't do anything else or talk about anything else, ever. But, you know, you aren't one of those people, Jack. And I hope I'm not either. We're not *made* of kink. Maybe just this week, it's been a little...intense. Concentrated."

"Concentrated," he agreed. "Making up for lost time, maybe."

"A whole courtship's worth of spanking and naughtiness that we've been thinking about for two years, crammed into one week. I don't know about you but I am *exhausted*." I kept my straight face about as long as he did, and we fell over each other laughing,

"So will you moan my name in my ear if I let you come?"

"What do mean *let* me, sex toy?"

"Touché."

"Does it bother you if I say I may actually *need* permission?" Because it was true, I honestly didn't know if I could come now unless he told me I could. Psychology is a strange and powerful thing, even when we're using it against ourselves. Perhaps especially then.

"You have my blanket permission...for tonight. Is that good enough?"

"You'll be the first to know if it's not," I assured him, lips just brushing against his.

The last time—the first time we'd just had sex, without it being part of a scene—it had come after a slightly failed beating, after weeping and apologies and cuddling and

forgiveness, and a snuggly conversation about old lovers. We'd already been aroused. It was just a culmination of that, more a convenience to round out the evening than anything else. And it had been fun, but not so far from what we'd been doing. After all, he'd had to take a full set of cuffs off me to finish getting me naked, in that instance. It was hard to believe that had just been a few nights ago.

This, on the other hand, felt deliberate. Not an afterthought. And I couldn't remember the last time I'd done this, in this way, on purpose from the start. I thought I would feel shy, would slip into passivity, but I didn't. And the sensation of pushing *against*, of just deciding to do something else and *doing it*, was a heady sort of relief I hadn't expected. Not payback. More like stretching your legs after a very long ride in the car, the unused muscles complaining at first but ultimately thanking you for the reprieve. Even if you enjoyed being in the car in the first place, even if you *loved* riding in that car and couldn't wait to get back in after stretching.

So I let Jack roll me under his body, but I wrapped my arms and legs around him tightly and luxuriated in the freedom of being able to do that. I realized that his thigh, pushing between my legs, was angled just right to rub against, and so I did, making my already-aroused body go from thinking-about-it to ready-to-go in the space of a heartbeat.

Jack was ignoring my mouth, suckling one of my breasts instead with open, wet kisses and boyish enthusiasm. I tugged his head back up by the hair, not very gently, and latched on to his mouth firmly. His hand replaced his lips, tweaking and fondling my nipple until it was peaked and aching and I regretted having taken his mouth away. Jack laughed when I pushed his head back down but obliged willingly enough, taking more care this time and lingering over the task.

Our legs were tangling, adjusting and angling mindlessly toward an ultimate goal I wasn't quite ready to reach yet. Hoping to slow things down, I tried to push him back over to get on top. Jack pretended not to know my intention, just let his weight prevail until I resorted to tickling and we rolled over in a giggling, wrestling heap. I leaned down to claim his mouth as my prize, but lost my concentration momentarily when he cupped my butt with both hands and pressed me firmly against his erection.

Slithering lower, I teased everything I could think to tease, licked and sucked every inch of him I could reach. Storing up, perhaps, because such an opportunity might not come again for a long time. That it *would* come again, I was fairly certain. I mused, as I licked my way carefully up Jack's inner thigh, that I wasn't sure whether I would prefer more of this sort of thing or less. I missed the dynamic I was comfortable with but this was undeniably fun as well, and I relished the feel and sound of Jack groaning and laughing as I once again avoided the area he most wanted me to lick.

"I think I need to show you how that's done," he said, the third or fourth time I'd slipped my tongue just past his testicles to focus on the crease of his inner thigh. "You're not quite getting it." He sat up and wrestled me all too easily to my back, where I was only too happy to stay since his goal was clear. He gave my breasts another passing kiss or two and then headed straight south and stationed himself between my

legs, his arms slipping under my thighs and spreading them wider, his mouth exploring the sensitive skin of the delicate hollows where thighs and pelvis joined.

He said something else, something about doing things right, that I didn't quite catch because it was muffled against my labia and my brain was short-circuiting.

And then it happened, embarrassingly fast but not all that surprising—he licked a few times, slipping his tongue between each fold before dipping inside, but the minute his tongue tickled its way up to my clit and starting working in earnest there, I knew I was done for. All it took was the added sensation of his finger slipping inside me to send me over the edge, hard, stifling my scream against the back of my hand. I only realized I'd bucked my hips hard against him when I heard his startled "oof" but I was too far gone to care. It didn't last long enough, and was hardly over before I wanted more, wanted him inside me, *needed* him there.

And remembered I was fully entitled, just then, to say so. "I need you inside me, *now*." I hadn't really meant to growl but it worked. Jack hardly needed to be told twice. Instead of the hard thrusting I craved though, he worked his way deep with a few strokes and then held there, infuriatingly in control.

"Nice, but not quite perfect, little one. I wanted to hear my name, remember? Let's practice. Say it right now."

He moved and I just moaned, wrapping my legs higher around his hips in a vain effort to set my own pace.

"Say it. *Jack*."

"*Jack*," I said hoarsely, not wanting to feel like I was saying it obediently. But I was, because it wasn't just something I did, it was also who I was, and I knew it even if Jack didn't. Did he even realize he was still issuing orders? Did it matter as long as I was so eager to obey them?

"Better." He started thrusting, firm and hard and deep, measured strokes that fetched up against my center, his pelvis pushing against my clit just before he pulled away again. "But I wanted to hear you moaning it in my ear."

"Yes Sir," I said automatically, and felt him snicker more than heard it, felt it where our bellies were pressed together like a single organism. "Just keep doing what you're doing and I'll...I'll do my best to remember to moan your name in another few minutes."

But his was the next moan, not a name but just an incoherent grunt, when I gripped his buttocks firmly and squeezed him even closer, finding my own leverage. Perhaps it was as unfamiliar a sensation for him as it was for me. He met my eyes with his in between soft, lingering kisses, with a look of something like amused wonder. I finally had to close my eyes against it, bite my lip to keep from saying what I wanted to say just then, and only parted my lips to gasp his name as he shifted his stance a little without warning and the change hit something differently, more deeply...

And I found myself tripping off the edge of arousal into another climax. Falling more slowly this time but just as inevitably, deeper and longer and *better* with him

filling me. I felt it spread from my sex and fill my entire body with sheer joy, curling fingers and toes, drowning out everything else but the one thing I was determined to remember.

In the silence of the rainforest night, the calm was broken by my voice in Jack's ear, not so much moaning as gasping his name when my pleasure was at its height. There was nearly no other word I could have said just then anyway, nothing else I could have held on to in the face of so much bliss. I wanted to say "I love you" but instead I said his name, and it was almost enough.

Chapter Twenty-Three

We had planned a hike for the next day, across Mario's extensive property to a waterfall near which he had started building a little grotto for picnics and outings. Another storybook setting, from the sound of it, and a perfect addition to his tree-house lifestyle. But the near-perfect weather we'd enjoyed most of the week finally broke, and instead of the picnic and the waterfall we found ourselves stuck inside, watching torrents of rain course over the picture windows and down the hillside while we talked about what to do instead of what we'd planned.

And we snacked, because Marta seemed to feel compelled to feed us all continuously. Once breakfast was done—omelets, light and fluffy and stuffed to order—there was sliced fruit, replaced later by marinated olives and mushrooms. Gabriel turned his nose up at these, while Silvia solemnly accepted olive after olive from any adult willing to part with them.

I was startled at how well behaved the children were, having somehow expected them to be more spoiled. Gabriel spent most of the day curled up not with a video game but with a book. From the cover it was clearly a young-adult sort of novel, but I couldn't read the title as it was in Portuguese. He was engrossed in it utterly, as only a seasoned reader could be—his eyes never left the page, even when he walked into the kitchen for a drink or a snack.

Silvia got over some of her shyness and spent the morning scampering back and forth between her room, the kitchen and the little "family room" with a succession of activities, creating an increasing litter over the thick teak-block coffee table as the day wore on. Coloring books and crayons, prickly plastic construction blocks, a magnetic cutout doll form with tiny magnetic clothes and an immense collection of stuffed animals and dollies in various states of undress.

The little girl also clearly had a crush on Jack. At first it was most obvious in her shyness, in the way she ran to hide her face in her mother's or father's lap whenever Jack was in the room or—heaven forbid!—tried to speak to her or play with her. But by midmorning he had managed to win her over, and Silvia was giggling like crazy at the impromptu puppet show he was staging from behind the coffee table, featuring an argument between a dolly and a teddy bear about whether they should all go out and play in the rain.

"Noooo!" cried the teddy bear. "My fur will get all wet and icky!"

"But it would be so much fuuuun!" the dolly argued, slapping the teddy bear on the arm with a plastic hand. "Yay! Mud fight!"

Silvia burst out laughing and said something long and babbling in her native tongue, which Jack responded to from behind the table. Then the characters resumed

their dialogue in high, falsetto voices, this time in Portuguese. I had no idea what they were saying but it was still hysterical. I wondered if there was any blackmail potential in seeing Jack act out *Punch and Judy* in Portuguese on the command of a five-year-old. When he noticed the flashes of light were from my camera and not from lightning, however, Jack popped his head up just far enough to glare at me from over the table.

"You wouldn't dare."

"Just trying to capture the local wildlife."

"This is just for my own special scrapbook, right?"

"We'll see." And I snapped another shot, Jack's face framed between the two toys perfectly, his scowl at utter odds with the fact that he was holding up a bright pink teddy bear and a baby doll wearing only a baby-doll-size onesie. I scrolled back to the shot and looked at it in delight, lost for a brief pause in how *handsome* he was...but then I was jolted from my reverie by Silvia's voice, squeaky and imperious, clearly demanding that Uncle Jack resume entertaining her.

Still smiling at the sight of Jack brought so low by his tiny "niece", I wandered back up the short flight of stairs to the kitchen, where Marta was standing in front of an open refrigerator with a speculative look in her eyes. Catching sight of me, she grinned and said in a voice too low for the children to hear, "I would never let either of them stand here like this, letting all the cold air out. But I can't figure out what to make for lunch."

"I feel bad that you're spending all this time in here, feeding us —"

She cut me off with a wave of her hand. "Pfft. This is what I do."

"I thought Mario was helping you?"

"He had to go see to the road, there was a little mudslide. Nothing serious, I think."

"Oh. Well, I'm not much of a cook but is there anything I can do to help?"

Marta gestured toward one of the stools lining the far side of the counter where I stood. "Just sit, talk. Tell me about yourself. I know you work for Jack, I hear you can write and I gather you should be back in school, according to Jack and to Mario."

I sat where she'd indicated, a little flustered at the idea of disclosure. "That's a fair assessment, I guess. I do work for Jack, I also hear I can write and I know Jack *does* think I should be back in school." We laughed together, but she clearly wanted more. She just looked at me expectantly as she continued working, assembling ingredients from the refrigerator, a freezer drawer I hadn't noticed before and the huge walk-in pantry.

"Let's see, what else? I'm from Houston and my family all lives there, so I moved back after college. I went to school in Austin. Both degrees, even though they say you should do different schools for undergraduate and graduate work."

"Not always," Marta said cryptically. "And why didn't you continue?"

"I couldn't decide on a dissertation topic."

She shrugged. "Nobody has a dissertation topic at the start. Some *think* they do, but..." Another dramatic shrug, the large knife in her hand lending importance to the gesture.

"I know that *now*," I said. "And I think I probably will go back. It's starting to seem more plausible recently."

"This week?" she asked, with an astuteness that caught me by surprise.

"Um, yeah," I admitted. "This week has been —"

"Too fast." Her disapproval was mild but evident. "You should give it some thought when you get home. With a clear head."

I felt a little automatic resistance but tried to stifle it, remembering she'd known Jack a lot longer than I had. And remembering she was, herself, half of a clearly happy marriage that Jack obviously admired. "And Jack should think things through with a clear head as well?"

Marta laughed softly. "No, Jack should stop thinking so much and trust himself for once."

"That's probably what most people who know me would say about *me*. This is...this whole thing has been completely unlike me."

Her look was a little speculative, a little amused. "Maybe your wild week was a good thing then."

Somewhere in a distant part of the house, a door closed loudly and we heard Mario calling out, asking where everybody was. The children squealed past and returned a few minutes later with their father, who was mopping himself off with a soaked, muddy towel. He looked disgusted with something and I wondered at the severity of the mudslide. The cheerful expression I had already grown accustomed to was replaced with grimness, and he rolled his eyes and shook his head gently when Marta looked his way.

"We have more guests coming," she told me quietly, and began chopping an onion with rather frightening accuracy and determination.

And then, through the archway from the hall, two identical young boys came slouching uncertainly into the kitchen—and Marta's tightly pursed lips melted into a compassionate smile as she ran to embrace her nephews.

* * * * *

I heard Marisa before I saw her, a low and intense voice speaking in impassioned Portuguese to her brother, who merely sounded exhausted as he replied to her.

Drama. That was what I heard, and that was what I saw when she finally joined the rest of us in the kitchen. Drama and glamour, gilded with perfectly highlighted caramel-honey locks and mascara that remained firmly on her eyelashes despite her somewhat extravagant grief.

Not like my mascara which, on the rare occasions when I actually wore it, was often smeared under my eyes by the time I next saw a mirror even when I hadn't been crying. I somehow doubted Marisa's mascara had ever smeared.

She wore a safari-style chemise dress that was smooth and unwrinkled even after a long drive and a walk through the rain. Somehow her impeccable grooming struck me as grossly unfair on top of the fact that she was, quite simply, beautiful. But the important part was the attitude, the air of command, of expecting an audience for whatever she chose to say or do. I hadn't really understood, until seeing her, why the relationship would have affected Jack so strongly. But charisma counted for more than beauty. She was the sort of woman who would always be the life of the party, compellingly attractive, the one whose bad jokes men would always laugh at.

All that I got instantly, and in the next second I understood what the attraction must have been, why Jack would have stayed with her even when she treated him badly. She would have been maddening but enthralling, and her very elusiveness would have pricked at his determination to conquer her.

And she was my polar opposite.

Then, like a bad dream, Jack was springing up from his seat behind the coffee table with a small smile and a hesitant wave, and Marisa was turning toward his voice as though she'd never quite forgotten it, and they met somewhere in the middle in an embrace I really couldn't watch. I was too busy smiling politely through the surrealistic moment, choking back the sickening surge of jealousy and anxiety that had lurched up into my throat when I'd finally realized who the new arrival was.

It was ridiculous to feel this way—and I told myself so repeatedly over a lunch, which was probably restaurant-quality but completely wasted on me because I couldn't taste it.

Antonio and Oscar, the two boys, turned their noses up at the food, even resisting the evident requirement of the house that they at least try one bite of each dish. They were sullen and petulant. Determined that they eat *something*, Marta eventually made them peanut butter sandwiches, for which they did not thank her until prompted by Marisa as if it were an afterthought.

Marisa didn't seem perturbed by the crass behavior of her children. In fact, she had barely noticed the interactions between the children and Marta, from what I could tell. Her full attention seemed focused on Jack, whose head had been tilted toward hers throughout lunch as he listened to what I assumed was her tale of woe. I couldn't hear the words—she was speaking in Portuguese and in a voice that was too low for me to hear, although clearly fervent.

Marta kept up a distracting string of bright conversation throughout the meal with Mario and the children, asking the two grumpy nephews about school, about their friends, about a dozen other little details of their lives I never would have thought to question. They answered in monosyllables, squirming in their chairs uneasily, and then Mario would fill in the rest for them with a slightly overblown bonhomie. At a few points during lunch I could see Marta's smile falter and tears brighten her eyes. Whether they were tears of compassion or frustration, I couldn't tell, only that she was clearly at her wits' end with the whole situation, and that the last thing she wanted was to play hostess to this woman and her two ill-mannered children.

Little Silvia had clammed up again at her aunt and cousins' arrival, and barely picked at her lunch. She watched Jack with Marisa furtively, sensing she had lost her recent conquest to another. I wanted to pick her up and hug her, commiserate with her, because I knew how she felt. I was giving them the same stealthy looks while I tried to eat and make appropriately meaningless conversation with our hosts. Once or twice I caught Jack's eye and he gave me tiny, tight-lipped smiles before turning his attention back to Marisa. Whether he was displeased with what she was telling him, or the distraction from it, I couldn't tell.

It was one of the most bizarre meals I'd ever sat through. Nobody, with the possible exception of Marisa, was saying what they meant.

Afterward Gabriel took his cousins into the snug and attempted to draw them out. If they were spoiled brats, he was, by contrast, a gracious young prince, playing the consummate junior host as he offered books and activities and eventually even the video games I had known must be hiding somewhere in the house. He was a bit over the top but seemed determined to succeed, and kept glancing to his parents for approval. He received it, in smiles and touches and nods. But the two cousins resisted his attempts to entertain them and ended up retreating into the private worlds their little handheld video game players provided. I could see his father in Gabriel, both of them nearly falling over themselves to try to haul their guests into enjoyment. It was hard on them, being good natural hosts, to have such resoundingly bad guests.

Strangely enough, it was Jack who pulled the two boys farthest out of their shells, and he did it incidentally. Gabriel, giving up on his cousins, had asked Jack to play a video game with him, braving a glare from his aunt to make his request. And Jack obliged, to my surprise, leaving Marisa's side on the couch and plunking himself down on the floor next to Gabriel in front of the television that had been cleverly concealed behind a panel in the wall next to the fireplace.

He turned out to be quite astonishingly good at the game, which involved a snowboarding race of some sort. Slowly the two other boys began paying more attention to his onscreen antics than to their own games, until they ended up seated on the floor behind him and Gabriel, cheering him on through turns and gates and impossible freestyle jumps. The computer-generated snow was a sharp contrast to the scenery outside, but the whole scene in the room soon began to develop a wintry feel, the group starting to feel cozy by the fireplace while the rain poured outside and the little characters on the screen schussed and leapt their way down their cybertronic hill. There was cheering, there were high-fives, and at some point Silvia snuck into Jack's lap and sat curled there while he stabbed at the controller with practiced fingers.

"I'm sorry about this," Marta said gently to me as I stood at the archway leading down into the little room, watching them, watching the rain still sheeting down the window, feeling like the grayness of the day was all too appropriate. Feeling miserable and trying not to look it. "She's...we've known this was coming, but for it to be this weekend..."

"That's quite all right," I said, smiling falsely and regretting it instantly. I could see Marta's kind face harden just a little. I didn't want to be churlish, didn't want to lose her approval.

But I was watching the man I'd come to realize I'd loved for two years, the man I had only started to grow close to in the past few days, do his best to make overtures to the boys that might have been his. Boys that clearly might *still* become his, if Marisa had anything to say about it. And I didn't feel nice, I didn't feel pleasant, I felt sick down in the pit of my stomach and I suddenly wanted so badly to go home that my throat was choking up hard with the thought of it.

I wished I knew the full extent of what was going on with Marisa, of what had Marta and Mario so distraught, but I had no idea how to ask, so I resigned myself to finding out by degrees as I pieced things together.

"In all of this, who my greatest feelings for are those two," Marta went on, her emotion getting the better of her grammar for once as she nodded toward her nephews. It would be the only slip, the only syntactic awkwardness I would ever hear from her. Her English was usually much better than my own. "They were never happy children, but now..." Her gesture was futile, resigned. "I'm so grateful for my own children."

"Your children aren't happy by accident," I said firmly, and it turned out to be a good thing to say. Marta hugged me impetuously. But then she frowned again as we heard raised voices from down the hall, where Mario and Marisa had disappeared to talk once Jack became caught up in the game.

Antonio and Oscar, who had been discussing the finer points of play in increasingly enthusiastic voices as Jack worked up through level after level, fell ominously silent. As I watched, they seemed to shrink back into themselves, looking as though they wished the thick wool rug would open up and swallow them whole. Marisa's voice carried, a little shrill but very insistent, and when she preceded Mario into the kitchen, she saw us standing there and switched to English, never missing a beat.

"I don't *have* to hear you, Mario, because you make no sense! It is through, it is finished. I thought you would understand, or at least offer some support for me, for your nephews. But obviously I do not have your support. We will go to the ranch once the road is clear tomorrow. We won't trouble you longer than this one night." She was imperious, magnificent, eyes snapping and hair tossing back over her shoulder, but it was *too* much, like a soap opera.

She reminded me of Lourdes Johnston suddenly—everything had the potential to be a drama. She *fed* off making her life into theater, and unlike Lourdes she didn't require that it be tasteful theater. She didn't seem to require that the ending work out well for any of the characters, herself included.

But because she did it with style and was beautiful, men watched her drama and applauded. Not Mario, obviously. But Jack? He'd played Lourdes so well, and now I thought I knew where he'd started learning that skill. Marisa had been his first choice, she was the one he had asked to marry him all those years ago. He'd been learning how

to manage her because he'd been planning to do it for the rest of his life. He hadn't asked anyone else since she'd turned him down.

Marta rolled her eyes just a little, but not where Marisa could see her do it. "Marisa, of course you can stay here as long as you need to. We can discuss it after the children are asleep. Why don't you go freshen up, I'm sure you're exhausted."

Why she should be exhausted, I wasn't sure. But it seemed to make sense to Marisa.

"I *am* exhausted," she agreed. "In my *bones*, I'm so tired, Marta. You have no idea. You, who have this quiet little life with Mario." Her condescension was not even thinly veiled, and I gaped at the boldness. "You're so sweet together. So fortunate. And Eduardo is...ah!" She broke into another long diatribe in Portuguese, and raised her graceful fingers to her eyes as if to block out the very thought of her husband. I couldn't tell what she was saying about him but it clearly wasn't flattering. It was becoming evident that she was here because she was disenchanted with her husband, was perhaps even in the process of leaving him.

I wondered idly what he must be like. Why had she accepted him, when she had refused Jack? *How* could she have refused Jack? And how could she not regret that refusal? Well, obviously she did regret it. Her body language around Jack spoke volumes about that regret.

Silence had descended on the little group playing by the fireplace in the adjacent room. Antonio and Oscar had returned to their solitary handheld games, Gabriel was lounging moodily on the carpet in front of the TV, staring fixedly at his outstretched toes, and Jack had walked a sleepy-looking Silvia closer to the window to look at the rain.

"It's her naptime." Marta sounded as though she was relieved for any excuse to break the little tableau we'd all fallen into. She went to gather Silvia, whom I could hear whispering her protests, and carried her off down the hall, leaving Jack without a prop.

To my horror, he sighed as if shouldering a burden he'd been expecting and came into the kitchen to lead Marisa away too. She slipped her hand into his and he let it stay there, tugging her out of the room. Mario trailed behind them but it was clear I wasn't invited along. I was left alone in the kitchen, the three young boys in the next room neither needing nor wanting my supervision.

I never knew where they all got off to. The house was too big and rambling to track them all down and the sound generally didn't carry up and down the many levels. After a few minutes I went exploring and ended up on a long gallery overlooking an enormous room that apparently served as both the dining room and a more general venue for entertainment.

Finding the stairs that led there after a little more searching, I made my way down and spent some minutes staring out the giant windowed wall that offered an unimpeded view of the forest and hills beyond. The windows went from the floor to the top of the ceiling, which was probably over twenty feet high, and I could see why the

family chose to spend their time in a cozier setting. This view was stunning, but I almost felt ready to tumble out of the room when I walked too close to the windows.

At the end of the space opposite the stairs, the glass wall had clearly been designed to slide open, granting access to a wide, flagged patio surrounded by a railing. Again, not nearly as comfortable as the terrace gardens and deck on the other end of the house, but I could imagine a party of truly grand scope being held here. A party such as one might see in movies, although I'd never actually attended one of those parties myself.

The room was enormous and could easily accommodate dozens, perhaps a hundred or more of the glitterati. In addition to the long dining table that dominated the raised area by the window wall, there was another larger, more formal sitting area I hadn't seen from up on the gallery, as well as several smaller clusters of chairs grouped for conversation and, in one corner, a substantial wet bar that was better equipped than the kitchens had been in any of the three apartments I'd lived in during college. From there, the waiters at the party I was envisioning would issue forth with champagne and hors d'oeuvres on little trays, serving celebrities who were mingling with oil magnates, that sort of thing. There was even a conveniently located concert grand at which a piano player would be seated, providing tasteful background music. I could almost hear the babble of cultured voices, the *ching* of a bottleneck against crystal as another glass was poured, the subtle notes of jazz underneath it all.

Parties I would never attend. Parties for the likes of Marisa, who would no doubt have the perfect dress for such an occasion and be the envy of all the other socialites.

I realized I was now making myself feel inadequate over an event that had never actually taken place, and vowed to make myself stop. There were bookshelves, of course, lining the back of the room, the part that must run into the hillside itself. Finding a title in English, I opened the volume and sat on one of the long sofas to start reading, my eyes scanning the pages relentlessly but my brain never taking in a single word.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I had obviously fallen asleep at some point, because the next thing I was aware of was a gentle nudge against my shoulder.

"Kate, it's dinnertime. Katie?" Jack was sitting next to me on the couch, wearing an amused but weary look, and when I blinked up at him his smile deepened a little. "You fell asleep. What were you reading?"

"I don't remember," I admitted, looking at the book with that sense of mild confusion that comes with waking up in a strange place after an unexpected nap. "Um...*A Tale of Two Cities*."

"Oh."

"I've read it before."

"Okay."

Waking a fraction farther, I heard soft clinking noises and Gabriel's whispered voice. He was instructing his two cousins as they helped him set one end of the long dining table. It could probably have seated twenty or so. The nine places the boys set only occupied about half its length, and it looked strangely undressed when they were through. Although that might have been the lack of napkins, since they'd forgotten to bring any, as Marta pointed out with wry patience when she came to inspect their work.

"Back to the kitchen, back to work with you," she said briskly to her young charges when she saw me and Jack on the couch, and as she ushered the boys from the room through a door I hadn't noticed before, she gave us a cheeky little wave. Perhaps, I considered, Gabriel didn't get it *all* from his father.

Jack waved back, then scratched uneasily at the back of his head and spoke without really looking at me. "I'm really sorry about today. It's been sort of a write-off for you."

I tried not to place too much meaning in his choice of words, not wanting to face yet that *I* may have been written off. "I probably needed a day to just do nothing and clear my head before we get back home anyway."

"Yeah. She's really something, isn't she?"

The fact that he didn't think it necessary to explain who he was talking about, and that he thought I needed the time to clear my head, made the cold feeling in the pit of my stomach harden and congeal, a nasty lump of sick and sorry. I didn't know how I would ever be rid of it.

"I guess," I said softly, trying to smile. Jack wasn't really paying attention, he was too distracted by his own thoughts. Thoughts of Marisa, I supposed. I wondered what they'd been talking about while I read and napped, then realized I really didn't want to know because it simply didn't matter. What was done was done. If it was going to end,

it was better that it should happen now, I tried to tell myself, than after making a fool of myself back home and finding out one day that it was all over because Marisa had crooked her little finger and Jack had trotted back to her.

Which was a very reasonable way to look at things, but it didn't stop my eyes from pricking with unshed tears as I excused myself to freshen up before dinner. I couldn't see Jack through the tears and I was down the hall before he could follow me. I ignored him when he called my name, because I thought that the only way I could possibly feel *worse* about the situation was to hear him try to explain or apologize.

Splashing cold water on my face and working my courage up did wonders. Dinner, although certainly a little painful, was bearable. I think I put on a good front – the polite guest, the good employee. I complimented Marta on the food which, although I'm sure was wonderful, I could hardly remember tasting afterward. There was a pavlova for dessert, all crunchy meringue and seasonal fruit, and it was good enough to cut through the fog in my brain. But for the most part, all I tasted were the bitter tears I had swallowed earlier and all I could do was try to ignore the fact that although Jack sat next to me, he also sat next to Marisa – and she talked to him constantly throughout dinner. About her husband, about something in Portuguese that sounded like it had to do with the water rights of local farmers, about her boys – she spoke about them in a fairly unflattering way, as if they weren't seated directly opposite her, listening to every word. I wouldn't have thought it possible, but I felt even sorrier for the twins than I felt for myself.

Marta tried to carry the table with topics of general interest, Mario playing along gamely and gallantly, but Marisa kept Jack's attention with whatever she was talking about. One of the twins, I couldn't tell which, had snuck his game player into the room and attempted to play it with the sound off during the meal. Marisa didn't notice, but Marta did. Even *I* did. It was Mario who stood up silently, his mouth firm, and tapped the boy on the shoulder, gesturing for the game. The boy gave it up with an insolent shrug, sharing a look with his brother who was in the process of hiding all his vegetables in his napkin one faked bite at a time.

To Gabriel's credit, he seemed a bit scornful of his cousins' attempted naughtiness. He resumed his "young prince" mode, complimenting his mother fulsomely on each dish and trying to make grownup conversation with his father about the state of the roads following the rains. I suspected there might be an ulterior motive in it, or perhaps just a somewhat manipulative approach to interacting with grownups, but at least it was preferable to watching the twin cousins make ugly faces at all assembled.

When dinner was over, and each of our places littered generously with the snow of meringue crumbs the pavlova had left behind, another mini-drama of differing parenting styles unfolded.

Reminding her own children that it was time to prepare for bed – a routine with which they were clearly familiar – Marta saw that her twin nephews evidently intended to remain encamped in the snug, playing their video games. She gently recommended that they too get ready for bed and was met with blank stares. I expected Marisa to

chime in at any moment, for some reason. Surely bedtime was universal? But evidently not. Marta finally just insisted, escorting the boys out of the room and down the hallway to wherever the children were staying.

If there was no bedtime, I thought, how could there be bedtime stories? Who made sure that these children brushed their teeth each and every night? Their father? A nanny? Why had she brought them with her then?

If I had been less wrung out by the events of the week, or simply more confident about my welcome, I might have gone and wrapped my arm around Jack's waist as he sat on the couch in the snug, still listening to Marisa and occasionally glancing my way with more forced smiles. I could have taken his hand or played with his hair or done something else to at least try to stake a claim.

I pictured myself doing all those things and more at least a hundred times that evening, if I pictured them once. After an hour or so, having partaken of too much wine with dinner and far too much afterward, I finally gave up even picturing it since I knew I would never work up the nerve. And in truth, Jack looked more than a bit grumpy and unapproachable. He kept giving Mario questioning looks I couldn't begin to interpret, and had said hardly a word since dinner. He'd been matching drinks with his friend and was as close to noticeably drunk as I'd ever seen him. All in all, it wasn't a welcoming scene.

The last straw was the moment when she laughed at something he said and then leaned over and kissed his cheek, curling her fingers over his shoulder in a way that was far from platonic.

He didn't object, didn't walk away...just kept talking, seeming to take her gesture, her touch, in stride.

I gave up. I admit it. It couldn't have been much later than nine or nine-thirty, but Marisa was called away reluctantly by Marta to check on the boys and I suddenly just wanted desperately to be gone before she got back to the room, to end the night not having seen her sitting closer and closer to Jack, fondling him more and more openly, ignoring Mario and continuing to talk in Portuguese despite the fact that Mario and Jack were both speaking in English. She hadn't spared me a second glance since her arrival anyway, so it wasn't as though my leaving before she got back could be construed as rude.

She was hardly through the door when I made my apologies to Mario and nodded in understanding as Jack said again that he was sorry, and that he planned to stay up and talk "just a little longer".

His polite peck on the cheek was, I thought, a nice touch. Just the right amount of intimacy for the one who was already on her way out the door.

* * * * *

So strange, how such a few short hours could change things so drastically, could change *everything*. I had been on tenterhooks all morning because of an offhand

comment Jack had made about my getting away with far too much the previous night, and his need to make sure I knew he wasn't going soft. But then came lunch and the rest of the afternoon. Then came dinner and the end of any plans I had allowed myself to make for "back home". And now...

I thought I would barely make it through the door before the tears took over, but all I felt as I brushed my teeth and washed my face was an icy disassociation with everything around me. Which was better, of course, because I still had the next day to get through, the long, *long* flight home next to Jack, during which my tears would be beyond unwelcome. Best if I held off entirely until back in the security of my own home.

Looking in the mirror, I tried to see myself as somebody else might, as Jack might. I saw my skin, paler than pale, a very faint haze of old freckles across the bridge of my nose. My hair, frizzing in the humidity despite being tied back in a ponytail. It surrounded my face with auburn fuzz, like a little kid, messy even in dress-up clothes.

Cute, I saw. That much I gave myself. But glamour? No. Nothing compelling. Nothing that would logically make a person—say, a person like Jack—choose me over somebody else. Somebody with not only beauty but glamour and charisma, with whom he shared a history. His best friend's sister, who had turned him down all those years ago but now clearly thought she'd made the wrong choice. He said he knew they would have been miserable, but did he really think that or was that just his own attempt to come to terms with losing her?

The more I thought about it, the less my rational mind thought I could possibly stand a chance. He would go back to her, of course he would, how could he not? I had been trying not to think all week, but all my doubts and concerns came flooding in now, in a painful rush of reality.

Love. Love might have changed things. But he hadn't said he loved me, nor had I said so to him. Perhaps it had just been caution on my part, but I had no way to know how Jack felt. It wasn't as though I could ask him. All I knew was that he hadn't said the words, the thing that would have mattered, the thing you can't take back after you've said it. And without the words there was still room for doubt, and my hyperactive imagination soon filled that space with more doubt than I could dismiss.

The whole week had been such a bizarre interlude anyway. The way we had discovered one another, the walks through town at night, the dinners and dancing and all those hours in Jack's suite. Not wasted time, I thought, telling myself so with fierce determination. I had learned about myself, and that kind of learning is never wasted.

I had learned, above all else, to never try to worship close-up what I was already perfectly happy worshipping from afar. Things are never as good close-up. But because it had all been so out of character for me, so completely unexpected and unprecedented, maybe I could tell myself it was like a dream, a very strange and sometimes wonderful dream, from which I was now required to wake up.

I almost made it to bed safely. If I had gotten to sleep it would have been all right, I think I really might have made it through the night and through the trip home the next day without breaking down entirely. But there on the bed we'd shared the night before was the t-shirt Jack had tossed aside that morning, deciding to wear something else, and when I'd asked if I could have it to sleep in tonight since it looked so soft—smelled like Jack—he'd grinned down to his dimples and said "Sure" and given me a kiss like heaven. He had acted so thrilled that I wanted his old, soft shirt to sleep in.

Now I clutched the shirt to me, foolishly slipped it on and hugged it around my body, and the tears rolled and rolled as I sobbed my broken heart to sleep in a wet spot tainted with salt and poisonous regret.

* * * * *

If I hadn't cried myself to sleep wanting to erase the week, I might have been in a more decisive or at least semi-lucid mindset when I woke a few hours later to the feel of Jack spooned alongside my back, stroking my body through the worn cotton of his own shirt and crooning nonsense in my ear.

As it was, I was far from lucid, mentally and physically exhausted from the week and from my earlier tears, my brain feeling blank and incapable of thought. If I thought of anything at all, it was that this was to be the last time. I'd been granted it, for whatever reason, and it shouldn't be wasted. I felt empty and wanted only to be filled up, even if it couldn't last, even if I knew deep down I would surely regret it later.

And even if I had wanted to pull away, to argue or resist, Jack was hardly giving me time to consider those options. They must have switched to some stronger stuff than wine at some point after I left, because I could smell the alcohol on his breath, taste it when he pulled me over to kiss me. I could feel his erection already firm against my hip, and it was with a certain amount of vicious spite that I kissed him back, thinking about the possible origins of that erection.

Of course he couldn't have maneuvered a way to sleep with Marisa. But here, back in his assigned room, he had *me*. Convenient, already-broken-in me. And why not? Once more for old time's sake.

When I bit his lip too hard, he winced and pinned me down more firmly with his legs and one arm, only shifting his hand enough to shove the t-shirt up roughly, exposing my breasts. Then it was back to gripping my forearm, tacking it to the mattress with his superior strength and weight, and I got the bite back on the sensitive skin just under my nipple. My already traitorously hard nipple. He rubbed his cheek against the tip, the day's worth of beard rasping at the sensitive flesh until I squirmed and inadvertently knocked him in the chin with my elbow.

"I'm not getting the cuffs and shit out, Katie, just hold *still*, damn it."

I couldn't believe myself. Or maybe I could. Maybe it was just the clue I needed about who I was that all I could do was fall motionless and say, albeit miserably, "Yes Sir."

“Good girl.” His voice was a little slurred, the result of all the liquor. It surprised me, to the extent I had the *capacity* to feel surprise just then. I had never heard he was much of a drinker. He didn’t seem the type.

He took me – and it wasn’t all that much fun. He’d told me not to move so I stayed put, and he hitched my legs up and pushed his way inside without any of the usual formalities. I was aroused but not quite enough, and the sting of his entry woke me up all the way. More awake than I really wanted to be. His usually bright features were clouded, either by the alcohol or – I tried not to think it, but the thought worked its evil way into my brain anyway – because he was trying to envision someone else. Someone who had perhaps indicated a willingness to accept a relationship on *his* terms, were she given another chance.

I hated that just watching him work his way deeper, brow furrowed in concentration, one hand reaching out to tweak at my bared nipples, was turning me on. I grew slicker and he thrust deeper – and my self-loathing was sealed when I realized I was asking him for permission to come.

Permission he granted carelessly, as though it really didn’t matter much to him, because he was already at the end of his own stamina. He shot off inside me, filling my body and leaving me just as empty as before. He fell over me, catching himself on his elbows, and murmured my name and an apology into my mouth as he kissed it. And then, before he’d even caught his breath, he pulled off to one side and fell asleep with my hair caught painfully under his heavy shoulder.

He took me and I let him, because it was what I did, and perhaps because it was who I was.

His sleep after he’d finished was instant and profound, leaving me wakeful and restless against my damp pillow with only the soft rasp of his breathing to keep me company. Soon it was not enough to cancel out the noise I’d somehow missed the night before, a night that seemed to belong to a different and much happier lifetime. This night I listened, and ran out of creatures to assign to all the hundreds of sounds that crept slowly but inexorably into my awareness until I was nearly overwhelmed, startled at each new whisper or rustle that might be a frog or a drowsy monkey or a poisonous viper curling watchfully beneath the bed where I lay so far apart from Jack.

I don’t know how I fell asleep, only that I did, and when I woke up it was morning and Jack was already in the shower, and it was time for us to go home.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The silence would have been awkward if Jack had noticed. But he was hung over and seemed mainly resentful of that fact, as though righteous indignation and the ability to place the blame at Mario's feet for having a higher tolerance would somehow make Jack's head stop pounding or his stomach stop roiling every time the car lurched around a corner or flew over a bump. He wore his dark glasses ostentatiously even into the airport, sucking on his water bottle until they made him throw it away at the security check-through.

I had been more circumspect about what went into my carry-on bag this time. Nothing I thought I couldn't live without at home had been checked through. This meant I was lugging a bag full of souvenirs, a book I strongly suspected I would be unable to read on the plane and my toiletries. I didn't know what Jack's priorities were, and had to keep reminding myself not to ask, not to pay attention to what he'd packed, because it was not my business and never would be.

That had been my mistake, I thought. The flight home gave me plenty of time for thinking, and even if Jack had been in a conversational mood I would have hardly been interested in talking to him. My huge and eminently avoidable mistake. Picturing the future, growing comfortable with the idea—the idea Jack firmly supported, it had seemed at the time—that these things would be my concern henceforward. That it *hadn't* just been a fling, *hadn't* just been something we both knew was a bad idea but felt like we could get away with so far from home. That it hadn't been just another stupid, tacky office affair.

I had envisioned domesticity. I had pondered questions like whether we would take Rufus out for long walks in the evenings through Jack's posh, tree-lined neighborhood. I had even, horror of horrors, wondered whether at some point it would become *my* posh, tree-lined neighborhood. I had thought about how I would learn to give dinner parties and be a senior vice president's wife, God help me. And now...

Now Jack was snoring softly, his neck at an awkward angle against the pillow he'd shoved up against the window, and I elbowed him a little more sharply than perhaps was necessary until he shifted his position with a grunt and a mumble. He had finally taken off his sunglasses and I couldn't help staring at his face as he slept, each line of his profile grown so dear to me over the past week, the past two years, and now I had to wipe that feeling away as if it had never existed. And I just wasn't sure I could do that.

It's a funny contradiction, giving up control to somebody you're counting on to hurt you. But in a way, I think that might have been the pull, the psychological draw of my particular favorite flavor of relationship. In any relationship, you're going to get hurt. But here, the hurt is delineated clearly in the signing contract. We talk about

limits, we talk about what is and is not on the table, we agree in advance as to the manner, length, duration of the hurt. We make the hurt literal, quantifiable, controlled.

Which is, perhaps, why so many relationships in the parallel universe of D/s aficionados are necessarily short lived. Months, a few years perhaps, but very few lifetimes spent together. Because at some point, if you stay with somebody long enough, they will hurt you in a way that is *not* in that contract, and it *hurts*.

Some would argue that in fact it hurts more, because you've laid yourself so open and you've taken so many stringent precautions to protect yourself before doing so. Having kinky sex with a blindfold on is dabbling in the unknown, but the range of possibilities there is not, in fact, infinite. There will be some combination of physical pain and pleasure, sometimes pleasure turned to agony through intensity and duration, and there will either be release or there will not. There will either be words of humiliation, a sense of deliberate debasement, or there will not. There may be many variations but the themes remain the same.

I had never hurt like this before, because I had never let down my guard this way before. Either by accident or design, I genuinely couldn't say which, at some point during that week of repeated bouts of sex, things had ceased to be *about* the sex, ceased even to be about control, and had just become a relationship. Or, if I tried to be more honest with myself, the relationship had begun weeks, maybe months or years ago, and it was only the sex—the lovemaking—that made us acknowledge what was already there between us. Not making love, but recognizing it.

The brutal awareness that I had been the only one recognizing it felt like it might actually choke me to death.

To keep myself from crying or screaming or keeling over, I drafted my resignation letter in my head for approximately three hours of the flight from Rio to São Paulo to Houston. Jack napped for about half the time, sat working on his laptop for the rest, still lightly hung over and not saying much, for which I could only be grateful.

I slept for most of the rest of the flight, an unpleasant sleep punctuated by nightmares I couldn't quite remember when I woke up. At one point I came to with Jack leaning over me, holding my hand, kissing my forehead, saying soothing things like "it's only a nightmare, Katie, everything's okay..."

I wanted to punch him, to hurt him, to scream into his face until he disappeared. I wanted to go back in time and live the entire week the way I would have, had I been in my right mind.

Instead, I just went back to sleep. Even my nightmares seemed preferable to the reality of Jack sitting next to me, pretending to comfort me after what had happened the night before. And even nightmares had to be better than what it would be like back at work, after the mistakes of last week.

* * * * *

As bad as the plane ride was, it wasn't nearly as bad as what would follow. Because Jack, in preparation for our trip, had offered to drive us both to the airport and leave his car parked there. This meant, of course, that he would also be driving me home.

I had been dreading it, trying not to think of it, but hadn't had any time to myself to somehow arrange an alternate ride. Now I was too embarrassed and just too tired to argue when Jack automatically picked up both our bags from the baggage claim and starting walking briskly toward the shuttle that would take us to long-term parking.

So after a short shuttle hop spent crowded between a family with three children and a group of weary-looking businessmen, including one we recognized from the conference, we were at Jack's Land Rover and he was lining our two suitcases up neatly in the back. He opened the passenger door for me and I thanked him automatically, although climbing into his car for what was likely to be at least forty-five minutes alone together was the very last thing on earth I really wanted to do at that moment.

The first few minutes were bearable. There was the parking fee to pay and the tricky navigation from the airport to the freeway to negotiate, and all of that provided some distraction. But once we were on the open road—or as open as a Houston freeway ever is—there was nothing between us but a heavy tension, a silence that had gone on far too long to be comfortable and it was clear neither of us wanted to be the first to break it.

Jack, to my tremendous relief, was the one to break it. "So what's going on, Katie? I know I'm the talker, but I'm getting a little worried that you're being *this* quiet for this long. Earlier I thought you were just being polite around my hangover, but that's pretty much okay now. So go on ahead, chat away. Tell me what's on your mind."

He didn't really seem all that worried, I was astonished to realize. Astonished and something else—something almost like rage. He was paying attention to the road, really, and sounded casual and relaxed and almost as though he really didn't know why I might be upset.

"I'm...what's on *my* mind? Are you serious?"

"I...huh?" Total bafflement. But at least I had a bit of his attention.

"What's on my mind at the moment is... Oh, forget it, there's no point. Really. Just take me home, okay?"

"Is this about last night? Because I know I was a little sloshed, but I think I remember the whole thing and I don't remember doing anything that would get you this pissed off...did I?"

I just stared at him, trying to figure out what wasn't being said. "Didn't you?"

"I didn't *think* I had."

"Really, why are we even having this conversation in the first place?"

"Because... I'm not sure, Kate. I really don't even know for sure what this conversation is about anymore. I sort of wish you'd tell me though. I feel like I'm

missing something here." He was starting to sound a little annoyed and it was like squirting starter fluid on the hot coals of my growing anger.

"I mean, if you're trying to soften the blow or something, the moment's kind of slipped you by quite some time ago. You know that I know. It's not like it's that surprising. Playing this out this way isn't just pointless, it's sort of cruel. That's the exit. Jack, you're missing the exit."

"We're not going that way. What are you *talking* about, Kate?"

"What am *I* talking about? I'm talking about the two of you! I hope you'll be very happy," I said sarcastically.

"The *two* of us? The two of *who*?"

"Oh honestly."

"Since we're obviously not on the same wavelength here and I truly have no idea what you're talking about, would a blanket apology work? Just...I'm sorry. Whatever it was that I did, I'm very sorry. And I may never drink again if this sort of thing is going to happen."

"You said that yesterday, Jack. You kept saying you were sorry. I mean, I knew because of that, even without...your going and doing what you did. But you really had nothing to be sorry about. These things are just inevitable sometimes. I mean, I can't say the timing didn't really suck for me, and I wish I'd never gone on the damn trip in the first place obviously, but —"

"I wasn't sorry because of —"

"But I understand, I really do."

"Katie —"

"So really, it's just another few blocks that way to get on the 610, you can just —"

"Kate. Stop talking. *Please* stop."

"Get on that, go down about three more exits and...okay. I'll stop. You're not going to start saying that at work, are you?"

Jack looked at me with a pained expression and I felt just a little bad. Only a little though. I was starting to think I might actually just e-mail my resignation and get Callie to collect my things from work, because I just wasn't sure I could even walk into the office long enough to put the letter on his desk.

But no, I thought. *Screw him. I'll do it and I'll march out and I'll slam the door behind me while I tell him to go to hell and take the job with him. Not that that makes any sense, but —*

"What in the... *Shit!* I can't do this and drive at the same time, I'm pulling over. Just *wait* a minute, okay? Can you do that?"

I nodded silently, crossing my arms over my chest as he maneuvered through the traffic. Who *were* all these people out driving on a Sunday evening anyway? Didn't they have homes to go to?

At last he made it off the three-lane thoroughfare we'd been on and into a parking lot in front of one of the ubiquitous strip malls that have taken over Houston like a virus. He jerked the wheel a little sharply so that the tires gave a tiny squeak as he slotted the Land Rover into a space. The emergency brake made a sharp ratcheting sound as he yanked it up—probably needlessly, since it was an automatic and the parking lot was completely flat.

And then he was turning and looking at me with a scowl, a what-am-I-going-to-do-with-you look that I just couldn't take. Well aware that I probably looked like a pouting twelve-year-old, I tried just staring out the window.

"Kate, what the *hell* is wrong? You've been pissed off at me all day long, *why*? I mean, yeah, I got pretty drunk last night, but I already said I don't remember saying or doing anything that bad, and I've tried to apologize if there was anything I *did* do. So what's going on here?"

I did look at him then, flabbergasted. "What's...what's going on?" I was growing angrier by the second, rage filling me until I almost felt like I really could see red. "You tell *me* what's going on, Jack! You stay out half the night with your old girlfriend, who has made it painfully obvious she thinks dumping you was the biggest mistake of her life, you finally come to bed at some ungodly hour, sloppy drunk, after ignoring me to listen to her sad tale all day long while she hangs all over you and then you just..."

I thought about it, and clamped down on what I had been planning to say. "No. That part doesn't matter. That was my own fault, for letting myself get to a place where I didn't feel like I could tell you to stop. This whole thing has been one bad choice after another and I just wish I could go back and do the whole week *so* differently, but I *can't*. Neither can you, I guess, but somehow I don't think it will matter quite so much to you. As I said, I hope the two of you will be very happy." That last was probably a bit less than kind, but I felt entitled.

Jack just stared at me, his eyes narrowing in concentration a moment and then widening as if he'd just understood something vital. "But...wait. You thought that whole time after you left, I was talking to *Marisa* before I came back to the guesthouse? That I was still interested in her, but then I came in and...oh *God*. And you thought what, that I wanted to be with her and I was taking my frustration out on you? You think I would *do* something like that?"

For a second it sounded as though he was going to try to pull off righteous indignation, but then his voice seemed to crumble. "Oh hell—of *course* you thought that. *Shit*." When I looked over, confused, he was rubbing his hands over his face, his head thrown back against the headrest. While I watched, he banged it there a few times, softly, as if trying to jostle the contents of his mind into some better order.

"Katie," he finally went on, "I was up all that time drinking with *Mario*. Okay? Marisa never came back either after you left. She went to check on the boys and just stayed away. I stayed and got drunk with Mario because I can't match drinks with him, I never could, and I always forget that. There's a reason I live on another continent and only see the guy every couple years, my constitution can only take so much food and

liquor. But Katie, the thing with Marisa is what's been bothering him. Remember I said I thought there was something? I actually wanted to leave when she showed up, just pack up you and all our stuff and hightail it back to the hotel for the night.

"Seriously, if I feel anything for that woman now it's the creeps, the way she latches on like a leech. I've only seen her a few times since back then, and it's been like this every time. Another reason I don't visit Mario that often, I guess, although I hate to admit it. Man," he said with a rueful chuckle. "There were so many times yesterday when I just wanted to say, 'Hey, since Katie *only speaks English*, let's *all* speak English, okay?' I wouldn't have said that—ever, of course. She would've had a major tantrum. I would've sooner just left. Although I think Marta actually did say it at one point and Marisa just ignored her. But the thing is, I couldn't just leave until I'd given Mario some kind of support, honey. The guy is devastated about this. This is his little sister, and in their family divorce is still a *huge* deal."

As he spoke, I felt myself break into a blush so forceful it seemed to trigger a cold sweat as the events of the last couple days began to replay themselves in this new light, with the sudden knowledge that he was speaking only the truth, which meant what had been torturing me wasn't Jack's faithlessness but my own stupid insecurities. I clung to the door handle, a little faint, and hoped Jack wouldn't notice. He didn't seem to, just kept on talking as though it were a huge relief to get all this off his chest.

"Not to mention the financial implications, because she married into a family with about as much money as Mario's. They're looking at years of dealing with this, if it happens. It's going to be a nightmare. And what's more, he likes his brother-in-law, he wants her to go back to him. He knows that Marisa is the problem, not Eduardo. Because she's always just...had issues. She's *made* of issues, she thrives on drama. Mario's starting to think there's actually something genuinely wrong with her, something she isn't just going to grow out of. Seeing as she's almost forty, of course, it's probably about time he figured that out. Marta's been trying to tell him for years. But Marisa just pushes Mario's buttons, she always has, he's terrible at dealing with her. And we all know that I was fairly good at dealing with her at one point. Or at least as good as anyone ever was."

Sighing, Jack faced me again, his eyes dark with hurt. "But do you know, in three hours of sitting there and drinking ourselves shit-faced—and yeah, I was pretty drunk when I came back, and I can't apologize enough for that because obviously... Anyway, in all that time, never once, *not once*, did Mario suggest that he wished things had gone differently between Marisa and me, or that he wished we could get back together. Nothing like that. And do you know *why*, Kate?"

I shook my head, afraid that if I spoke I'd start crying. *Knowing* that if I spoke I'd start crying.

"Because he'd met you," Jack said simply. "He thinks you're...he's coming out to visit in a few weeks, you know, he says to do business and see my house, but I think it's really to see *you* in my house, because he wants to make sure you *are* in my house. He wants to make sure I don't screw this up. He's my best friend, Kate. Still. He knows me

better than just about anybody outside my own family, and he only had to meet you once to know that this is *it* for me. Don't you get that yet? This is it. This is real. I am *keeping* you, Kate."

I wasn't sure when he'd taken his seat belt off or when he'd taken my hands, just that suddenly he was so close to me I couldn't breathe, much less process what he was saying. It was too much like a dream I'd never been brave enough to have.

"I *love* you, all right?" He said it almost as though he was scolding me for not having understood this, and then I did start to cry, and responded out of habit.

"Yes Sir."

Jack raised his eyebrows, startled, and just looked at me for a second. And then the laugh started, spreading infectiously from his eyes to my heart, and for the next few minutes there was only laughing and crying and telling him I loved him too, and kissing again and again as if there could only ever be kissing, there in the parking lot outside the ugly strip mall that would forever afterward hold a very fond place in my heart. When we finally came up for air I was in Jack's lap, straddling him, my hair stuck in our drying tears as we pulled reluctantly away from one another.

"I'm so sorry —" I started to say.

"No," he stopped me, fingers gentle against my lips. "No, I'm sorry, it's my fault. I realize now, I was taking it for granted that you knew I didn't have any interest in... I mean *any* interest in her anymore, *none*. I can only look back at yesterday now and what you must have thought from how she was acting. Jesus. I'm so sorry. I just thought...this week, I don't know. I knew you were upset before dinner, but I just thought it was the whole thing, the whole week and having to go back home and everything. I was too distracted by the whole damn drama or I would have realized.

"And afterward...you know, I think the last time I was that drunk must have been about fifteen years ago. It kind of caught me off guard. And of course you had no way to know Marisa had gone to bed, and from what you'd seen earlier... Katie, I couldn't just push her away or make a scene in front of her kids or Mario's kids, even if it was what I wanted to do. I didn't want to embarrass them or her. Or abandon Mario with her, because he just gets nuts when she won't listen to reason for hours on end. But I should have made sure you knew all that. I should have *talked* to you when I came back. I meant to talk, actually, but you were just so beautiful lying there in the moonlight, and when I got into bed somehow that t-shirt was even sexier than if you'd been lying there naked. And anyway, you have this *effect* on me, you know? Like right now, actually."

A slight shift in my position brought me into contact with the stiff lump of his erection, straining against his jeans.

"Oops. Sorry." But truthfully I didn't feel all that sorry. I tried to clamber off him but he was holding my hips firmly, keeping me in his lap.

"No, stay. I'm afraid to leave. This parking lot is magical."

I looked out the window at the harsh blue halogen lighting, the wide expanse of concrete and asphalt, the mega-chain storefronts that were repeated every few miles

down this particular stretch of road. "It is magical, isn't it?" Taking a deep breath and giving myself over to the future, I plunged bravely ahead. "But it's all right. Because anytime we need to drop off dry cleaning, buy some computer stuff, find a book, get a chewie toy for Rufus and finish with a frozen yogurt and then a nice cappuccino, all in one trip, we'll know right where to come."

Jack's kiss was fierce enough to push me right back against the steering wheel, and the loud blat of the horn made us jump apart then burst into renewed peals of laughter when we realized what had happened. Reluctantly he helped me slide off his lap and back into my seat, admonishing me to buckle up before he started the engine.

"Okay, little Katie," he said as he revved up, flashing me a cheeky grin with what seemed like an extra dose of baby-blue brilliance to top it off. "Let's go home."

They were the second-best three words I'd ever heard.

About the Author

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