

WORTH *Every* STEP



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Worth Every Step

By

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Disclaimers: This story is uber-esque, with main characters that resemble a couple of familiar faces. Any other similarities to persons living or dead are coincidental.

This story depicts a consenting sexual relationship between adult women, and on occasion, between animals in the wild. There is occasional bad language from the humans; the baboons are incorrigible.

Thanks to my beta reader, Tami, who always gives me more time than she has. Thanks also to my Sweetcakes, who has the final authority on everything that goes out.

Johannesburg to Moshi

Mary Kate Sasser stared out the window of the Air Tanzania A-300, frustrated that the cloud cover had obscured her first peek of the terrain below. Though July wasn't considered the rainy season in the tropical part of East Africa, there really was no dry season per se, just certain times of the year that seemed to get less rain than others. She hoped they wouldn't have to deal with bad weather over the next sixteen days, but her rain gear was packed just in case.

Mary Kate was exhausted, despite the fact that she'd been sitting so long. A last minute seating change on the flight from Atlanta to Johannesburg had landed her in 46-E, the center seat of the middle section in the next to last row. It was very possibly the worst seat on the plane, given the large man next to her who slumped on her shoulder as he snored. On the other side was a baby with an extraordinary set of lungs. When the 15-hour flight finally landed at seven a.m., the petite blonde vowed not to sit again until she boarded her afternoon connection.

Now two hours into the second leg, Mary Kate checked her watch. The local time was 2:15 p.m., and it was...Saturday? Luckily, she had a whole day to recover at the hotel before the official start of her excursion.

The blonde woman's thoughts returned to Bobby, who hasn't come along with her on this trip after all; at least it sure seemed like he was here, since he'd occupied her mind ever since dropping her at the airport. His parting words had set the tone for her ruminations of the last 24 hours.

"I'll be glad when you get back and this is all out of your system, Mary Kate. We've got some serious things to talk about then."

"Bobby...", Mary Kate was exasperated, "...there's nothing 'in my system'. This is serious to me. If you'd been paying the least little bit of attention for the last six months, you'd have realized that this isn't some little mindless whim."

"You know what I mean. I'm talking about things that are important to both of us."

Mary Kate sighed. "Tell me, why is it that things that are important to us don't include things that are important to me?"

"Look, honey, what you need is important to me. That's why I want you to go and do this. But when you get back, we should talk about how we're going to make decisions from now on. I don't want to be standing here next year seeing you off to Mongolia or some South American jungle."

"Don't worry, Bobby. You won't."

The young man misunderstood that and claimed victory in his head.

Most people back home would say that Bobby Britton was a catch. After all, he was a college graduate with an important job, assistant principal at the elementary school where Mary Kate taught special education. But there were other things that distinguished him from most of the men in Mooresville, Georgia: Bobby didn't smoke, chew, or dip tobacco; he drove a car instead of a truck; and unless he was out coaching the high school baseball team, he seldom wore a cap. Those were all favourable attributes, as far as Mary Kate was concerned. Still, they'd been dating almost two years, and every time she tried to imagine them married, it left her unsettled, even depressed. He presented her with a ring last Christmas, but she'd insisted that it was too soon to consider that. Thank God he'd had the good sense to give it to her in private, but it caused a stir anyway, since he'd already told her parents and sister about it. They were all disappointed, but Mary Kate had remained steadfast. She wasn't going to make a commitment like that unless she was sure, and this one just didn't feel right.

But it was soon after she'd decided to come to Africa that things started really heading south for Bobby and Mary Kate. She hadn't exactly used the words "I'm breaking up with you," but her intensive training schedule had made her a lot less available, and she had used a hundred excuses – her period, sore muscles, time constraints, anything – to avoid intimacy ever since she made up her mind three months ago that it was definitely time to call it quits. It was going to be hard to deal with everybody and their expectations; her family wouldn't understand it at all. On top of that, there was the inevitable awkwardness at school. It wasn't so bad that she'd have to still see him every day; it was more that all of the teachers and secretaries would whisper and gossip. In the end, they would blame it all on her decision to come to Africa.

Holy shit! The daunting spectacle that appeared suddenly as the descending plane banked left drew gasps from a number of her fellow passengers, some of whom left their seats to stare out the window on her side. Just beneath them – soaring above the clouds at 19,340 feet – was her ultimate destination: the glacier-capped crest of Mt. Kilimanjaro.

In her 26 years, Mary Kate had never been so awed. The long-dormant volcano below her did not look at all like something a normal person with only foothills hiking experience could conquer. Ever since she'd started training for this trip last February, her singular focus had been to stand atop Uhuru Peak, the very top of the crater rim. And until this very moment, she had managed to suppress her own self-doubts about her chances for success. But now that she'd seen the massive tower up close, she was intimidated as hell.

The pictures she'd seen didn't do the actual sight justice.

"That's amazing! Can you imagine being able to just walk all the way to the top of a glacier like that?" Mary Kate had been glued to the television in her boyfriend's apartment for the last two hours watching the documentary on PBS.

"It must not be any big deal," Bobby scoffed. He had been working on the school's budget, paying only scant attention to the program. "I mean, look at those people who did it. Some of them were old. And a lot of them were women."

"What kind of crack is that?"

"You know what I mean. It doesn't take that much if all you have to do is walk to the top."

"But that's what makes it so cool. Most people who dream of conquering something like that aren't ever going to climb a mountain like Everest. The show said that only three out of 10 make it to the top of Kilimanjaro, but it's the sort of challenge that's within reach for even ordinary people." An idea had taken root, and Mary Kate was growing more and more fascinated with the prospect.

"Well, that's just it. If ordinary people can do it, then what's the big deal?"

"I think it would be fun to do a climb like that. And it's in Africa!"

"That's not even a climb, Mary Kate. It's a hike! If I'm going to climb something, I'd rather climb something more challenging, like Everest or the Matterhorn."

Yeah, like Bobby Britton would ever do something like that! He almost passed on going to college because it meant leaving Hurston County.

Unable to get the image of the mountain out of her head, Mary Kate went online to learn more. Three weeks after the program aired, she had gathered information packets from three expedition outfits, two books on East Africa trekking, and almost a hundred pages of first-hand accounts, downloaded from the Internet. Without telling a soul, she'd sent her non-refundable \$1,000 deposit to the Summit Trail and Safari Company, reserving her place on a trek in early July, the week of the full moon.

Two weeks after she'd made the commitment, Mary Kate decided to ask Bobby to come along, still not confessing that she'd already booked the trip. Again, he ridiculed the idea, suggesting instead that they spend a week in Orlando or maybe Myrtle Beach, like they had last year.

"Vacations are for relaxing, Mary Kate."

"But it doesn't have to be like that every single time. Don't you ever get the urge to do something different? Not just different from what you always do, but different from what everybody in Mooresville does. I really want to go climb this mountain," she pleaded.

"Well, you go right ahead," he said smugly, certain that his dismissal would squelch her desire for this silly pursuit. "I'll just go to Disney World and Epcot by myself."

"Suit yourself, Bobby, because I've already sent my money in. The first week in July, I'm going to Africa."

"What?" Bobby was livid, incredulous that she would have done this on her own, without even asking him first if it was okay. "Mary Kate, that's not right. We're practically engaged. You shouldn't be deciding things like this all by yourself."

"Why not, Bobby? You decided all by yourself that you didn't want to go. I didn't get a say in that. What makes you think you can decide for me too?" Disney World? "Besides, we are not – I repeat, not – practically engaged."

It was then that Mary Kate decided that she must be sending Bobby all the wrong signals. Obviously, he assumed that it was only a matter of time before she came around and accepted his proposal. She was not going to vacation in goddamn Disney World. Next year, they'd probably go back to Myrtle Beach, and the year after that, he'd want to go to Branson! Then they'd just start all over again. Where was the excitement in that?

Storming out of her boyfriend's apartment after that, the biggest fight they'd ever had, Mary Kate drove over to see her best friend Deb Demers and extended the same invitation. The two women had been friends since grade school, and even though the two of them going off together on a trip like this would have surely set the tongues in Mooresville to wagging, Mary Kate was for the moment beyond caring what people said about her.

When Deb heard the details of the trip, she grew envious of her friend. The woman would have given her left kidney to go, but unfortunately couldn't leave her ailing mother in what would likely be her last summer.

Exactly one month before Mary Kate was scheduled to leave, Bobby changed his mind, no doubt realizing that his staunch refusal had put distance between the two of them. But for her, it was too little, too late.

"But you haven't trained!" she protested.

"It doesn't matter, Mary Kate. I'm in pretty good shape. It's just a walk. Anybody can do that. Besides, you shouldn't go by yourself."

"No, Bobby. I've been working out for six months. I do the stair climber for an hour a day carrying a 30 pound pack. I don't want you to jump in at the last minute just because you don't happen to think I can go by myself." She was steamed.

"Come on, Mary Kate. You're just afraid that I'll make it to the top without doing any of the training."

"It isn't always about you, Bobby. You had your chance to be a part of this with me and you said no. Now it's about what I want, and I want to go alone."

So here Mary Kate was, almost 10,000 miles from home, all alone with her dream of being one of the minority who actually reached Uhuru Peak. Despite her rigorous training and detailed preparation, she was worried that success might come down to little more than a roll of the dice. Was she indeed fit enough to endure seven days of uphill hiking? None of the trails around Mooresville were comparable to what she'd face on Kilimanjaro; and even though she'd taken a weekend trip to the mountains of North Carolina, she hadn't been able to test herself with two long hikes on back-to-back days.

There was also the matter of avoiding injury and illness. One of the stories she'd read off the Internet was from a climber who had rolled an ankle on the third day and was unable to continue. Others reported intestinal bugs that left them too feverish and weak to walk. She couldn't imagine going all that way to be felled by something so out of her own control.

But the biggest question was whether or not her body would tolerate the altitude. Some people were genetically predisposed to problems, and she had no way of knowing if she would be afflicted. The temptation for serious climbers – and for fitness enthusiasts – was to charge up the mountain quickly. But it was critical to let your body gradually adapt to the change; thus the mantra for tackling Kili was "*pole pole*," the Swahili word for "very slowly."

The most popular mountain route – the Marangu Route – boasted only a 10 percent success rate to the summit, partly because the ascent was accomplished in four days, leaving little time for one's body to adjust to the altitude. But another reason most Marangu hikers didn't finish was that the final push for the crater rim at Gillman's Point left them too exhausted to traverse the ridge to Uhuru.

To improve her chances of getting all the way to the top, Mary Kate opted for the less-travelled Lemosho Glades route, entering the park at Londorossi Gate, about 20 miles west of the peak. The gradual ascent to their summit camp at Barafu Hut – six days on more than 40 miles of trails – allowed for better acclimatization, with the added bonus of extraordinary scenery along the way. Unlike those on the Marangu Route, who would sleep in bunkhouses each night, Lemosho Glades hikers would share two-person tents.

Mary Kate gripped her armrests tightly, as crosswinds on the savannah made their approach more interesting than she would have liked, the lumbering jet bouncing along in its descent toward the small Kilimanjaro International Airport.

The pilots do this every day. They aren't afraid; I shouldn't be afraid either, Mary Kate told herself as her stomach disagreed. This was only the second time she had flown in her whole life, the first having been a quick trip from Savannah to Charlotte

for her roommate's wedding during her college days at Savannah State. She envied the casual attitude of the passengers around her, and tried hard to emulate them.

Finally letting out a breath as the wheels touched down, Mary Kate watched the small terminal flash by as the jet slowed. When they turned to taxi, she reached under the seat to collect her bag, a small backpack she would use as a handbag during the five day safari she had tacked onto the end of her trip. Her larger backpack – the one she would carry up the mountain each day – was situated in the overhead bin.

Her weariness forgotten, the excited woman pulled out her brand new passport, open and ready for its second immigration stamp. Her bags had been transferred – she hoped – by Delta Airlines in Johannesburg, but she still had to pass through immigration in South Africa. Now in Tanzania, she'd have to pass through both immigration and customs. Unfortunately, she was one of the last passengers off the plane, and that put her at the back of the line.

Finally clearing passport control, Mary Kate proceeded rapidly to baggage claim, anxious because of a story she'd read where luggage was pilfered by the locals while its owners were stuck in line. Finding that most of the bags had been offloaded and stacked next to the wall, it was easy to spot the bright yellow duffle bag, compliments of Summit Trail and Safari Company. It wasn't that Summit was generous to its clients; rather, providing a regulation bag was the company's method of ensuring that no one over-packed. After a brief panic, she found her second bag, this one a green duffle carrying her sleeping bag, cold weather gear, and walking sticks. "Thank goodness," she murmured dragging the canvas across the concrete floor.

"Lucky you. My ugly yellow Summit bag didn't make it."

Mary Kate turned and found herself face to face with a young man she had glimpsed in the departure lounge in Atlanta. He was only a little taller than she, slightly built, maybe a few years older, with a balding crew cut. As she recalled, he was among the last to board their flight to Johannesburg.

"You didn't get your bags?" she asked, alarmed at his predicament, and oh-so-relieved that it wasn't hers.

He shook his head dejectedly. "No, I was afraid that was going to happen. My flight from Kansas City got delayed, and I just barely had enough time to make the plane in Atlanta. I'm Vince, by the way." The young man held out his hand.

"Hi, Vince. I'm Kate." During her high school days in Mooresville, she had tried to get friends and family to use the shortened name, but they wouldn't go for it.

"You sound like you're from Atlanta," he said.

"Not Atlanta, exactly, but near there. What are you going to do about your stuff?" Mary Kate couldn't imagine how Vince managed to remain so calm. She'd planned since February for this trip, carefully selecting each and every item that was essential to the success of this climb. There was *nothing* in her bags that she could do without!

"I'm not sure. I doubt it will get here before this time tomorrow. And we leave first thing tomorrow morning." He knew even that was wishful thinking. The growing crowd at the baggage counter suggested that lost luggage wasn't all that unusual here in Tanzania. "I guess I should go report it, huh? Let's hope someone speaks English."

A half hour later, Vince joined her at the open air airport café, where several of the trekkers waited for the shuttle bus to their hotel. "Bad news. There isn't another flight from Atlanta to Johannesburg until Tuesday."

"Oh, that's right! That's why I had to come a day early. My trek doesn't leave until Monday morning."

"So you're not with our group. That explains why your name didn't ring a bell." All of the Summit trekkers had gotten a list of their climbing companions. "Which route are you taking?"

"Lemosho Glades. What about you?" Mary Kate opened up the map she'd been studying earlier.

"Machame."

"We merge with the Machame Route at Shira 2 on Wednesday night. And you leave tomorrow, so that means you'll be at Shira 2 on Monday, and summit on Friday morning. We don't go up until Sunday morning."

"Wow, you've really studied this!"

"You say study; my boyfriend says obsess." Mary Kate no longer thought of Bobby Britton as her boyfriend, but figured it was best if the guys here thought she was attached.

"So which is it?"

"Probably somewhere in the middle, I guess. I'm a planner. I like to make sure I'm covered for all contingencies." Bobby always did the same thing, but he called it being practical. When she did it, he would tease her about being compulsive.

"So what was your plan if your luggage didn't make it?"

"Are you kidding? I would have planned to have a nervous breakdown! But at least I'm already wearing my boots, and I have my camera and toiletries in my backpack." She lifted the heavy pack. "Oh, and two changes of clothing."

Vince rummaged through his own backpack and pulled out a portfolio of travel documents. "I have a few things in here, but all my cold-weather stuff is in my Summit bag. It says here to call this number if you run into any problems. Maybe I should go do that."

For the third time, Mary Kate checked her itinerary to confirm that the shuttle bus would pick them up in a half hour, at 4:45. Gradually, more people filed into the small

café, including a young couple who carried Summit bags like hers. Mary Kate waved them over.

"Hi, I see you're with the Summit group too." Shaking hands with the tall man, she introduced herself. "I'm Kate Sasser."

"Hi, Kate. I'm David Kuentzel, and this is my wife, Kako."

"How do you do?" the woman asked politely, her Japanese accent very pronounced.

"I'm fine. It's good to meet you both." Mary Kate's own southern accent was also quite prominent. "Are you going up tomorrow or Monday?"

"Tomorrow," David answered. "There are supposed to be five of us."

"I go Monday. That guy over there in the green t-shirt is supposed to go with you guys tomorrow. But his bags didn't get transferred in Atlanta, so he's calling Summit to figure out what to do."

"Man, that sucks!"

Vince slung his heavy backpack over one shoulder and ambled toward the group. "They said I could get a sleeping bag at the hotel, and maybe a jacket or something. Then if my bags come in on Wednesday, they'll have one of the porters run them up to Karanga Valley."

"Sounds like a plan," Mary Kate enthused. Vince didn't need to face the question of what would happen if his bags didn't arrive on the next flight.

"So you guys came from Atlanta?" David asked.

"I'm from Kansas City, but I flew Delta into Atlanta and we were late getting in. We changed in Johannesburg to Air Tanzania," Vince clarified. "You guys must have come from Amsterdam on KLM."

"Yeah. Seattle to Detroit to Amsterdam to here. We thought it was going to be awful, but it was actually a good thing that we had a chance to walk around between flights. We left on the redeye Thursday night."

"Well, right now, I'm wishing I'd come that way too. At least they have three flights a day into here," Vince lamented.

A white Toyota bus pulled into the circle in front of the café, its faded paper sign reading "Moshi," the village that would serve as their base for the climb. At once, two young men dressed in ill-fitting workpants and wide-collared short sleeved shirts exited and began loading the duffle bags onto the roof of the bus. As soon as she'd seen her bags secured on top, Mary Kate boarded the bus and sat next to her new friends.

The trip to the hotel took them by large open fields, dotted with small dome-shaped huts.

"Masai," Kako explained. "They were warriors; now they herd cattle, which are sacred to them. Most of them wear the traditional red cloths. They are very noble."

"Have you been here before Kako?" Mary Kate wondered how the woman knew so much.

"No, David and I have heard the stories from Tom Muncie." Muncie was the owner of Summit Trail and Safari Company.

"He has an office in the building where I work," David explained.

"You're kidding! You mean to say that a guy whose main business is in Africa has his office in Seattle?" Mary Kate was astonished at the realization that it really was a small world for some people.

"That's right. That's why we decided to do this trip. Tom told a bunch of us about it at a Christmas party last year, and I think we're the fifth or sixth couple from my building to do it."

"So what's he like? I mean, in the brochure he looks like a real party guy," Vince observed.

David laughed. "Well, let's just say that the picture in the brochure is a pretty old one. I think Tom has partied out, if you ask me. He only comes over here about once a year, and he hasn't done Kili since 1994."

"I talked to him a couple of times on the phone. I was kind of hoping he'd be here." Mary Kate had wanted to hear the tales of Tom's adventures. "What made you decide to do this, Vince?"

The young man smiled pensively. "Well, it's like this. I'm getting married in September, and it was my job to plan the honeymoon. So I went to see a travel agent and they had this big poster in the window, you know, with the giraffe standing in front of the mountain. I tell you, it just sucked me right in," he chuckled. "But since Brandy isn't exactly the outdoors type, I had to get this over with before the wedding, you know. She had something a little more...civilized in mind for our honeymoon."

"Well imagine that," Mary Kate joked.

"So how come you're here?" he countered.

Mary Kate told the group about seeing the special on television, and how she was drawn to the challenge. Her story was interrupted by a speed bump that sent them all sailing out of their seats.

"*Samahani*," called the driver.

"That must be Swahili for 'sorry,'" David suggested.

"Yeah, or 'bite me,'" Vince offered.

After almost an hour of bouncing over the rugged paved road, the bus finally entered a roundabout in what looked to be a small town. The structures weren't exactly modern, but compared to the huts they had passed on the way from the airport, they were castles. Some of the small buildings were wood frame, but most were made of cinderblock. They were purple, bright blue, orange; obviously, there were no neighborhood associations in Moshi dictating what colors one might choose to paint a home or business.

"Who goes to Keys Hotel?" the driver asked.

"That's us," Mary Kate spoke up, pointing to herself and her three companions.

"You change here to other bus," he gestured.

The foursome climbed out and waited while the two riders climbed to the top and passed down their gear.

"Wait! I have one more bag, a green one."

The driver called up to the men on top, and they rummaged through the bags in search of hers. After a fruitless search, the driver proposed a solution.

"We will take the others to their hotel, then bring your bag to Keys."

The idea of separating from her cold weather gear was one she wouldn't consider at all. "No, I'll find it." Before he could stop her, Mary Kate climbed the ladder on the back of the bus, crawling through the bags until she spotted hers on the bottom of the pile. Gesturing to the men on top, they extracted it and passed it down.

"That was pretty gutsy, Kate," David congratulated her. "But for all you know, you just violated the most sacred laws of their religion."

"That's right," Vince added conspiratorially. "I think I read somewhere that women weren't allowed to climb anything that put them higher than men."

"Oh, stop it!" Mary Kate said, swatting her new friend playfully on the arm.

"And then you went and hit me! I swear, Kate, they're going to haul you off to jail," he teased.

"Gosh, could you imagine what a jail would be like here?" David mused.

"No, and we're not going to find out." Mary Kate was adamant, lugging her bags onto the second bus.

Vince reached over and picked up her Summit bag. "You know, I should have pointed to one of the other bags up there. Maybe he would have thrown it off and nobody would have known the difference."

"Yeah, but with your luck, it probably would have been full of women's underwear," the blonde woman joked.

"And that would have been bad because...?"

A short trip on the second bus landed them in front of the Keys Hotel, a family owned inn, with a bar, a restaurant, a row of rooms upstairs, and cottages out back. The lobby was appointed in red velvet benches and chairs, with rich ebony wood floors and a long mahogany counter. As was the case in most public buildings, a portrait of Tanzania's president was displayed prominently. Triple-A might have given the place two stars; but here in Tanzania, it was one of the finer establishments.

The new friends agreed to meet for dinner in one hour, and headed to their rooms to shower and change. Electricity was available until 10 o'clock, and only then if they were lucky.

Assigned to one of the rooms upstairs, Mary Kate was momentarily taken aback by the sight of her room: the twin beds were pushed together and completely enclosed in white mosquito netting. *Well, of course.* Malaria was a problem in East Africa, and one of the Internet reports she'd read told of swarming mosquitoes in some of the hotels. A small shelf provided a space for her two duffle bags and the backpack. When they left for their hike, she would have to repack the essential items in only one bag. But for now, the first order of business was a hot shower.

Or just a shower, she would find. Hot water was scarce, given the restrictions on electricity. She could wait while the water warmed a bit, or hurry through and get dressed. Opting for the latter, she hoped to have a little time before dinner to organize her things.

David, Kako, and Vince were already seated when Mary Kate arrived at the restaurant. Dinner was buffet style, and featured standard Western fare: roast beef, noodles, and tomatoes. Tom had warned everyone off the raw vegetables early in their trip, so the salad bowl was left untouched; but he had encouraged them to try the *ugali*, a local dish prepared with grain.

"Did you guys remember to take your Larium today?" Vince asked.

Larium was prescribed as a guard against malaria, and most doctors recommended the once-a-week dosage be taken on Saturdays. Mary Kate had taken hers last week, and again at the airport in Johannesburg. She would continue the treatment for three weeks after returning home.

"Yeah, I can't wait to see what kind of dreams I have tonight," quipped David. The medication was notorious for launching the most bizarre dreams. "Last week, I dreamed that my dog went with me to work."

"What's so weird about that?" Mary Kate asked.

"He drove."

The Keys Hotel in Moshi

"You guys have to come look at this," Vince said excitedly, coaxing his friends from their breakfast. They all hurried outside into the street, where they had their first clear view of the awesome mountain. Since they'd descended below the cloud cover yesterday, the peak had been obscured, but the clouds were gone today, at least for the moment.

"Just think, Vince. By the end of the week, you'll be standing at the top," the blonde woman said.

"I hope so," he answered. "I have to tell you, I'm worried that I'm not going to last long without warmer clothes. If it gets too cold up there, I'll have to come back down."

An hour later, Vince, David and Kako – their two travel mates had been delayed – assembled their packs on the front porch, waiting for a ride to the Machame trailhead. Mary Kate came down with a small plastic bag.

"Vince? Listen, I packed three pairs of long johns. This pair is the biggest – I got it to wear over the other ones."

"Hey look, I'm not going to take your clothes. You'll need those," he protested.

"Sure you are. I can get by on two. And here's an extra pair of socks in case your feet get wet, and a long-sleeved t-shirt. Did you get a coat?"

"Yeah, they had a fleece jacket. It ought to do me until Wednesday."

"Well good luck. And wave to me from the top. I'll be at Barranco," she laughed.

"Thanks, Kate. Good luck to you too. Hey, I'll leave this stuff here at the hotel when I get back."

"That's alright. If you end up wearing them for three or four days in a row, I doubt I'll want them back," she said, scrunching her nose with mock distaste. "Just leave me a note when you get back, okay?"

"Yeah, I'll probably have to wear them all the time to keep them from walking down on their own. I'll leave some cash, okay?"

"Stop it! Take them. Just get to the top, okay?" Mary Kate turned to the Kuentzels.
"Good luck to you two. Take care of yourselves. I'll be right behind you."

The hikers climbed into a Toyota Land Cruiser and headed out. Their adventure was officially underway.

Mary Kate considered going back upstairs to bed, but stopped herself, worried that she might not be able to sleep that night. It was important to get acclimated to the new time zone. Instead, she changed into her long pants – actually, they were convertibles, the pant legs unzipping to make shorts – for a walk into the village. It was considered disrespectful in Tanzania for women to wear shorts in most public places, but the hotel staff assured her it was okay at the hotel as long as she stayed on the grounds.

Moshi was a bustling village, with a considerable amount of street traffic near the roundabout. Open vans that overflowed with passengers stopped frequently to allow people to jump on or off. Mary Kate couldn't imagine what kind of currency governed this form of public transportation, as there seemed to be no exchange of coin.

Obviously, the merchants were accustomed to the hiking crowd; several of the stores sold t-shirts with the giant mountain's image. Also available were ebony carvings of elephants, giraffes, and lions; and beads of every size and color. The blonde woman reminded herself to start a list of what kinds of gifts she should take back to her friends and family.

Mary Kate smiled as she saw the first evidence that the 21st century had indeed reached Moshi: a sign up ahead beckoned all into the New York Internet Café. Entering the crowded shop, she was ushered to an open terminal, where she immediately accessed her email account. Most of her messages were from friends who wished her luck on her climb. The last one was from Bobby, who hadn't entered her thoughts once all day.

Hi sweetheart!

By the time you get this, you'll be back in my arms, fresh from "conquering" that big old mountain in Africa. I wanted to write this note so you'd be able to see how soon I started missing you.

I wish I was with you right now. You must know how I worry for your safety. These are scary times, especially in other parts of the world. Maybe the next time you decide to go off on an adventure like this one, we can find something we'd both like right here in the good old US of A.

I can't wait to hear all about your trip. I'm sure you'll make it to the top, but if you don't, please know that I'll love you anyway.

Always,

Bobby

Mary Kate shuddered at the intonations. The little quote marks around the word conquering were Bobby's inside joke, a patronizing gesture that only he found funny. The hours on the plane had hardened her resolve. She and Bobby Britton were finished.

Too bad it wasn't that easy. Mooresville was too small a town to just blow him off and move on. Everybody and their little sister would have to weigh in on what a fool she was. Mary Kate sighed deeply and hit the reply key. This disengagement was obviously going to take a while longer, especially since Bobby seemed clueless that anything was amiss in their relationship. As soon as she got home, Mary Kate would begin to spell things out more forcefully; but for now, she'd just placate him with a friendly note.

Dear Bobby,

Greetings from Tanzania!

Would you believe I found an Internet café in this little village! It's so interesting to see all the young people crowded into here, all looking things up and reading the news about the rest of the world.

The mountain looks enormous from here, and the glacier on top makes it seem so far away. The first time I saw it was from the plane, and it just took my breath away. I'm really excited about the climb. I met some other climbers but no one from my group. I should meet everyone at dinner tonight, since we leave first thing tomorrow morning.

Would you please let Mom & Dad know that I got here okay, and that everything is going fine so far? I'll try to write again when we get back down next Monday.

Love to all, Mary Kate

More than anything, Mary Kate wished her friend Deb had been able to come along. This was just the sort of thing that both of them would have enjoyed, and both would have been confident that the other would be there for her no matter what. There wasn't another person on earth that made Mary Kate feel so secure.

Dear Deb,

Hey girl! I just wanted you to know that I'm here in Tanzania looking at this ENORMOUS mountain, wishing like hell you were here to climb it with me. I'm going to think of you a lot on this trip, and I want you to start saving your nickels. If I don't make it to the top, I'm going to try again, and if I do, then I still want to do it with you!

I've been thinking a lot on the way over about Bobby, and I've decided that when I get home, I'm going to break up with him. I just wanted to let you know in advance, because when word gets out, you'll probably be the only one in Mooresville still speaking to me.

Love you lots, Mary Kate

At seven that night, Mary Kate wandered down to the restaurant for dinner, hoping to finally meet her hiking companions.

"Your new friends are there," the waiter said, pointing to a table set for 10; eight others were already seated.

"Hi, I'm Kate. You're all with Summit?"

Amid a chorus of "hellos," Mary Kate moved to an empty seat at the end of the long table. One by one, the others introduced themselves, but everyone conceded that it would take them a day or so to remember names. Tonight's casual dinner was a good opportunity for breaking the ice.

Tammy was a senior art major at the University of Missouri. From photos, she had been painting water colors of wild animals and African terrain. Finally, she thought it was high time she saw things up close for herself. Noticing that the girl had said a quiet blessing before dinner, Mary Kate made a mental note to try to watch her language around Tammy.

Laurel and Kendra were sisters, originally from Pittsburgh. Laurel still lived there, working as an administrative assistant for an automotive manufacturer; Kendra had moved to New York, where she managed office space for a realtor in Manhattan. The sisters were close, but hadn't had much time together over the last few years because of their jobs.

Jack was Laurel's boyfriend, and the three seemed to have an easy rapport. Jack was an attorney – a confessed "ambulance chaser" – and he seemed like a really nice guy.

Another couple, Trevor and Leah, were longtime friends of the two sisters. All four of them had attended college together at Penn State. This trip was a reunion, a last chance to get together before Trevor moved to Tokyo to start a new job. Leah hoped to follow if she could effect a transfer within her company.

Ann was from St. Paul, a 45-year-old mother of three teenage boys. She shocked her entire household when she announced last February that they were on their own for summer vacations this year. She was going to Africa!

The last one in the party was Drew, who moved his seat so he could join Mary Kate at the end of the table. Drew was from San Diego, a financial analyst for the biotech industry. He was thirty years old and quite friendly, maybe even overly friendly, the blonde woman thought.

"I thought there were supposed to be 10 of us," Trevor said.

"I've got the paper with me," Kendra answered. "Let's have a roll call."

Laurel looked over her sister's shoulder. "That's who's missing. Kristin Addison, from Bloomington, Indiana."

Mary Kate immediately recognized the name of her safari companion. Since she was traveling on her own, she'd consented to be paired with someone else at the safari lodges so both could get the double occupancy rate.

So if she doesn't show, will I have to pay extra?

The tall brunette stalked back and forth in front of the now-closed airport café. Her plane from Amsterdam had arrived an hour late and she'd just missed the shuttle's next to last regular run.

"Are you sure that shuttle bus is the only way to get to Moshi?" She had enough cash to hire a car.

The airport attendant nodded. "But it come back in one hour," he cajoled.

Kristin Addison checked her watch: a quarter past nine. She had missed dinner, and would probably not get to bed before midnight, since she had to sort her equipment for the climb.

Cyn Richards, a fellow PhD student at Indiana University, had advised her on what to pack for the trip. Cyn and her partner had climbed Kili two years ago, and encouraged her to give it a try.

"You need to clear your head, Kris. You've done nothing but work 18 hours a day for the last two and a half years. I tell you, it's a spiritual experience. It'll put everything in perspective for you."

The stress had been growing steadily in Kristin's life. It wasn't just the demands of her clinical psych program, though her dissertation and counseling sessions with couples and families tied her up for almost 80 hours each week. It was also the self-imposed isolation, Kristin's response to being burned by her lover Rebecca, then spurned by their mutual friends. That was over a year ago, but she had put her personal life on hold for now, reasoning that she had little to offer while she was totally absorbed in her work. Her circle of close friends included just Cyn and Andrea, and she saw them only when they wouldn't take no for an answer, about once a month.

Andrea pulled out the pictures of their trek to tempt their friend.

"It really does look beautiful," Kristin conceded.

"The pictures don't do it justice." Cyn told her. "And it isn't just the 'man against nature' thing. It's about teamwork, and friendship, and

support. There really are some great people out there. And I think in a situation like this one, you'll see them all at their best."

*"And you'll have to do the safari thing too," Andrea encouraged.
"Seeing the animals in the wild will just take your breath away."*

And so it was, Kristin was finally in Tanzania, ready to start her relaxing adventure. She was also going to give this teamwork-friendship thing a try too, she'd decided. Cyn had kidded her about her tough "I don't need anybody" attitude, but the real truth was that she had been disappointed in the past when she allowed herself to depend on people. Erin had chosen escape over their friendship; Pilar had chosen the closet; and Rebecca had chosen someone named Tiffany.

Kristin's new philosophy was that friendships – and more intimate relationships, as well – were all about managing expectations. If you don't expect them to endure, you're less likely to be disappointed.

And speaking of those more intimate relationships, the tall brunette had convinced herself after Rebecca that she didn't need that right now. Not a solitary person by nature, she liked sharing things with someone special, but she hadn't met anyone lately that she wanted to spend a lot of time with. That was just as well, considering that no one seemed to feel that way about her either.

Glancing at her watch again, Kristin had an idea about how to make the most of the time she would spend waiting. Using three of the small tables in the deserted café, she began sorting her gear, loading everything she would need in her backpack and the bright yellow Summit bag. Five minutes after she'd finished, the shuttle finally arrived.

Day 1 – Mti Mkubwa

Cute! Kristin was mesmerized by the laughing blonde at the long table. Too bad about that guy she was with; grudgingly, she admitted to herself that they looked good together.

"Excuse me, miss. That is your Summit group," the waiter told her.

Kristin picked up her plate of sticky pastries and moved to join her fellow hikers, automatically gravitating to the petite blonde. "Hi," she said, almost shyly. From the animated conversations, it was apparent that everyone else in the group knew each other already.

Mary Kate turned to greet the new arrival, startled by the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. "Hi yourself," she said. "I bet you're Kristin Addison."

"That's right," Kristin answered, infinitely glad that the cute woman with the most *charming* southern accent already knew her name.

"I'm Kate Sasser, and if you couldn't tell already, I'm from Georgia." Mary Kate couldn't tear her eyes away from this tall brunette. With her angular cheekbones and slim figure, she looked like a model.

Ping! There was something about Kate Sasser that jumped out at Kristin...something captivating. Unless she was totally off-base, the *cute* little blonde had just checked her out.

Mary Kate was pinned in place by the blue eyes, and more than a little intrigued by the crooked smile. "I'm glad you made it. We missed you at dinner last night."

"My plane was late," she explained, still smiling, glad to know she'd been missed.

The blonde shook off her unexpected fascination. "So, let me fill you in on the rest of our motley crew. This is Drew, from San Diego."

Drew stood up straight, feeling it important to demonstrate that he had at least an inch or two on this towering beauty. "Really nice to meet you," he said with his best smile.

"And this is...no, wait, I can do this! This is Ann, from Minnesota." Mary Kate mocked the upper Midwestern accent, just as they had all playfully mocked hers. "And this is Laurel, and her sister Kendra. They are from Pittsburgh, as is this hilarious man next to them. He is Jack, and he belongs to Laurel."

"In his dreams," Laurel joked, but she grabbed his knee under the table just the same.

"And this is Trevor and Leah, from Philadelphia, who appear to like each other very much, if you catch my drift. Trevor and Leah and Laurel and Kendra all went to Penn State together. They seem to think that makes them *special*." Mary Kate invoked the voice of the Church Lady. "And this is Tammy, from Columbia, Missouri."

Everyone at the table applauded Mary Kate's successful recitation.

Kristin nodded to each one, and finally introduced herself. "And I'm from Miami, but right now, I'm in grad school at Indiana University."

"What are you studying?" Tammy asked. At least she wasn't the only student in the group.

"Clinical psychology."

"Well that will probably come in handy on this trip. You can manage the psych evacs," Mary Kate quipped.

"The what?"

"You know, the evacuations off the mountain for *psychological* reasons."

"I see. Well, I hadn't exactly planned on this being a working vacation, but I'll be happy to help out where I can." Kristin was falling easily into the banter of the group. Clearly, everyone got along already, and unless she was mistaken, this very cute blonde was paired with her on the safari.

After breakfast, the hikers returned to their rooms for their gear. Each person was allowed only the Summit bag and a personal backpack. Everything else would be locked in a room at the hotel. Valuables – passports, airplane tickets, extra cash, credit cards, and jewelry – were itemized and inventoried, then stowed in the hotel safe in sealed envelopes.

Mary Kate waited patiently at the hotel counter for an extra pen while the tall brunette filled out her list. The woman's colorful keychain caught her eye as she slipped it inside the envelope. Deb Demers had one like that, a rainbow flag. Most of the folks in Mooresville were clueless as to its symbolic nature, but Mary Kate knew what it meant, and the realization sent a rush through her that was both exciting and unnerving. Kristin wasn't anything like the lesbians at Savannah College.

At last, the party was ready to go. A rugged Toyota bus – the Japanese auto manufacturer had done well in Tanzania – waited at the front porch, and a tall, muscular black man exited to speak to the group.

"I am John. I will be your trail guide for the trip to the top of Kili. Today, we will drive for three hours to enter the park at Londorossi Gate. Everyone must have the passport number written down. It is required to enter the park. When we reach the trail, we will hike through the rainforest for four hours to Mti Mkubwa – which means to you Big Tree – where we will camp for the night. You will be tired tonight. Do not forget to drink water, even if you are not thirsty – three liters each day."

Drinking lots of water was prescribed as the best defense against altitude sickness. The reduced air pressure and the thin air at higher altitudes combined to interfere with the body's normal exchange of oxygen at the cell level. The increased water intake would help the exchange; and a slow, gradual ascent would give the body time to adapt.

Altitude sickness was the number one reason most people failed to conquer Kili. Depending on one's own conditioning and physiological makeup, higher altitudes could cause headaches, nausea, diarrhea, disorientation, or even chest pains. These problems might range in severity, but most were easily remedied by returning immediately to a lower altitude. In more serious cases, hikers would have to be evacuated by stretcher, unable to continue under their own strength. In rare instances – but often enough to impress upon hikers the importance of drinking water and taking it slowly – the symptoms would lead to death.

As the gear was loaded into the back of the bus, Mary Kate made one last trip to the small store located near the bar. Now bag in hand, she climbed on board. Ann and Tammy were sitting together, already deep in conversation. Trevor and Leah sat together, and Jack sat alone, leaning forward to squeeze his head between his girlfriend and her sister. Just as she moved to take the empty space beside Drew, the tall brunette suddenly picked up her backpack, gesturing toward the open seat.

"Thanks," Mary Kate answered, slipping into the front seat, her back to the now sulking Drew. She had hoped they'd get a chance to talk; Mary Kate wanted to know all about Kristin Addison. "I think we're supposed to be roommates for the safari, is that right?"

"Yeah, five days," Kristin confirmed. *Eat your heart out, Drew!*

"So what time did you get in last night?"

Kristin explained the delay, and they slipped easily into a discussion about their preparations and how they'd trained for the climb. Following Mary Kate's lead, she turned slightly in her seat so they could include Drew in their conversation.

"I tried to get my boyfriend Bobby to come, but he wasn't interested." For no reason she could understand, Mary Kate thought it infinitely important to tell both Drew and Kristin that she had a boyfriend, even if she really didn't. It was a "back off" sign to Drew, and a...well, a way of letting Kristin know that she was straight.

Must be some boyfriend, the tall woman thought. *If I had a girlfriend, we'd both be here*, or something would be wrong with their relationship.

An hour later, the bus turned off onto a side road, bouncing them out of their seats as they plowed over one rut after another.

"Wow, look at that." Mary Kate pointed to a group of young girls, all walking with large buckets of water perched on their heads. "I thought that was just a stereotype."

"Well apparently it isn't. Look at the little one! She can't be more than 3 years old."

"I wonder why it's only the women who carry the water," Tammy asked.

"There are very specific gender roles in most African societies," Ann offered. "Men are expected to be the wage earners and to tend the livestock. Women cook and carry the water. And have the children. And work in the fields. And clean up after the animals."

Kristin stole a glance at their guide, who smiled wryly without looking up. Obviously, Westerners would never understand.

After another hour, they turned again, this time onto a narrow dirt road that meandered through a part of the rainforest that appeared to have been clear cut, as only stumps remained. Here was stark evidence of the disappearing rainforest, this for the meager livelihood of some of the world's poorest people.

"I bet those people have no idea that there's a worldwide effort underway to save these trees they cut down," Drew mused.

"You're probably right," Kristin concurred, turning around in her seat to face the young man. He was definitely nice looking, and by all accounts, a nice guy. "So what did you do to train for this, Drew?"

"Actually, I hike quite a bit. I climbed Mt. Whitney on Memorial Day Weekend. I did Half Dome in Yosemite in April. But I'm on the road a lot for my job, so mostly I just run."

"That's what I do, too," Kristin said.

"We run too," Trevor offered, waving a finger between himself and Leah. "We did the New York Marathon last year."

"Wow, I'm impressed," Mary Kate said, suddenly feeling as though she might not have trained enough. "I never liked to run, but I joined a gym and used their stair climber every day."

"I bet you're in great shape, then," offered Leah. "Who knows if being able to run on flat ground is going to do us any good here!"

"What do you think, John? How many in the group usually make it to the top?" Tammy asked. She had done a few weights for her arms and shoulders, and walked three miles every two or three days around the track on campus.

The guide thought for a minute, wanting to choose his words diplomatically. "I would say that half of you will reach the summit. But I do not know yet who. I can know more in...two days."

Half will reach the summit. Those were better odds than most trail companies gave, Mary Kate thought. But still, that meant that five of them wouldn't make it to the top. In all her preparations, Mary Kate had not thought at all about how she would deal with going home disappointed.

The bus lurched to a stop, where John got off and opened an iron gate. When they'd passed through, they pulled in front of a small cinderblock building and he jumped back onto the bus.

"Leave your things here," the guide commanded. "This is the ranger station. You have to see the ranger and write your passport number."

One by one, the hikers exited, walking to the open counter where two rangers directed them to sign the log book. Unescorted expeditions were not allowed on Kili, and every hiker was accounted for from start to finish.

Walking around the building, Jack was the first to find the latrine, a small room in the back with a door opening to the outside. It was totally dark, save a narrow screened window near the ceiling. The "toilet" was a mere hole in the floor, approximately six by eight inches, beyond which...no one wanted to think about.

Mary Kate was the last to go and she hurried, gasping for breath as she exited.

"Held your breath, didn't you?" Jack teased. "What if you had passed out, huh? Did you think of that? What if you'd just fallen on your face in there and your arm or leg had ended up getting stuck in that hole?"

"Stop it! That's disgusting." The blonde woman covered her ears.

"You want to know what's really disgusting?"

"Probably not, but you're going to tell me anyway, aren't you?"

"What's really disgusting is that..." Jack grabbed Mary Kate's arms jokingly in order to pull her hands from her ears. "...by this time next week, you'll be wishing for a bathroom as nice as that one!"

Everyone laughed at the playful twosome, as they grudgingly acknowledged the likely truth of Jack's words. Kristin envied the pair their jovial nature. Despite having known one another for less than a day, they were already acting like brother and sister. It usually took her quite a while to loosen up around new people, but she was going to make a special effort on this trip. If it didn't work out, it wouldn't matter – she'd probably never see any of them again anyway.

Back on the bus, Mary Kate reached into her backpack and brought out the two boxes of shortbread cookies she had purchased at the small hotel shop. One she tossed to the dozen or so porters who sat at the back of the bus. The second box made the rounds of the hikers, and in moments they were all gone.

"These are good. Did you get them in Moshi?" Jack inquired.

"No, actually...I found them on the floor in that bathroom."

Despite continued speculation that "the road cannot possibly get any worse," it did; but finally, the bus came to a stop at a small clearing in the lush rainforest. John indicated that each person should pick up one of the box lunches from behind the driver's seat and find a space to eat.

One by one, the 15 porters assigned to their group loaded up and disappeared into the forest, packing tents, food and other supplies, even a folding table and 10 camp stools, and all of the trekkers' gear except what each carried in a daypack. Mary Kate had to laugh at her own obsession with equipment, decked out in her Kenya convertible pants, a moisture-wicking polyester t-shirt, a lightweight Gore-Tex rain jacket, and \$200 boots. Most of the porters – who probably made this trip twice a month – were wearing worn sneakers without socks, cutoff pants, and t-shirts. In fact, Muncie's memo had suggested that they consider leaving behind extra clothing at the end of their trip as a gesture of thanks to the porters.

All 10 of the hikers were giddy in anticipation of the start of their trek. Someone suggested that they take "before" pictures, so all of the cameras were passed around and everyone posed. They had no way of knowing that this would be the last time they would be truly clean.

From where they were standing, the route was completely hidden. Only when John pulled back a large shrub was the narrow trail revealed, a muddy path that started up a

steep incline. In only five minutes, all of the hikers were winded and hot, peeling off their lightweight jackets in spite of the cool damp air.

"How high do you think we are?" Kendra asked the others.

Ann was a font of information. "Moshi was at 4,000 feet; I think the Londorossi Gate was about 65 hundred."

"And Big Tree is at 9,200, so that means we're climbing almost 3,000 feet today," Leah said breathlessly.

For this section of the trip, the group was escorted by an armed ranger. Elephants and buffaloes frequented certain areas of the rainforest, and were a danger if they charged.

"So how do you keep an elephant from charging?" Jack asked.

"Oh, gosh! I apologize for bringing along the guy with bad jokes," Laurel groaned, her voice intoning mock irritation.

That particular joke had made the rounds of Mary Kate's elementary school last year, but she thought it was pretty funny that Jack had brought it up in this context. "Okay, how do you keep an elephant from charging?"

"Cut up his credit card," the lawyer deadpanned.

The blonde smiled in appreciation, but Tammy let out an obnoxious snort. Showing no mercy, several others mocked her with snorts of their own. John simply looked at the silly Westerners and shook his head. He had no idea what a credit card was.

The sisters were behind the ranger at the front of the single-file line, followed by Tammy, Ann, and Jack. John walked in the middle. Behind him were Mary Kate, Drew, Leah, Trevor, and bringing up the rear, Kristin.

Mary Kate marveled at the surrounding landscape, a three-dimensional panorama of deep greens. Only occasionally did the sunlight seep beneath the forest canopy, and a fine mist wafted through the valley below. From time to time, Kristin would call out "Porter!" and everyone would step off the narrow trail to allow the crewman through. Despite their heavy loads, porters moved at a much faster pace, hurrying ahead to ready the camp for their arrival. The blonde couldn't help but wonder what a lone porter would do if charged by an angry beast.

"*Jambo! Asante,*" the porter said as he passed. *Hello. Thank you.*

"*Jambo,*" they all answered. Tom had provided them a list of basic Swahili expressions.

Kristin too was admiring the scenery, but paid a lot less attention to the plants and trees than to the small butt in the dark green nylon pants up ahead. They hadn't talked much about their lives back home, but Kristin was pretty sure that the blonde woman had checked her out at breakfast, even if she did have a "boyfriend." She didn't seem

all that interested in the guy from San Diego. He was definitely attracted to her, it appeared, but his somewhat flirtatious greeting at breakfast suggested he was looking for action wherever he could get it.

"We stop here for a break," John announced.

"Here" was a small clearing where 10 tired hikers quickly dropped their packs.

"Does everyone drink their water?" the guide asked.

Some nodded; others reached for their bottles.

"If you'll excuse me, I think I'm going to get rid of some water," Trevor informed the group, retreating back down the trail behind a large tree.

"I think I have penis envy," Leah grouched, looking about for a discreet spot. Walking ahead of the group, she ventured over a small rise where she was hidden from the others.

"I had penis envy when I was younger," the mother of three offered. "But my mother told me that as long as I had one of these, I could have all of those I wanted."

The women laughed; Jack conceded that she was probably correct. As usual, John did not understand.

Mary Kate dropped her pack and looked around. "I guess I should do that, too. Hey Leah, is there another spot over there...maybe something uphill from where you are?" she shouted. If you had to pee outside, it was best not to be downhill from someone else who was doing the same thing.

The hikers took turns using the makeshift men's and ladies' rooms, though Tammy had second thoughts when John cautioned them all to be on the lookout for the green mamba, one of the world's most poisonous snakes.

Once again, they were underway, winding through the rainforest. Unfortunately, none of the women realized that the trail switched back up ahead; as they rounded the curve, they were cautioned by a smiling guide to step over a small river of their urine. And Jack wasn't about to let something like that go.

"Ewww! Women can be so disgusting!"

A half hour later, John held up his hand to slow them as they walked within 30 yards of a tree that housed a family of black monkeys. It was fascinating to watch the creatures crawl from limb to limb, hanging upside down to reach out for leaves or to play with a sibling. Cameras came out as everyone logged this for their scrapbook.

As they walked along, Mary Kate began to wonder how they'd pair up in the two-person tents. Obviously, Trevor and Leah would share, and it seemed that Ann and Tammy were bonding quite well. The wild card was Laurel: Was she going to share a tent with her boyfriend or her sister? If she and Kendra doubled up, it was logical that

Jack and Drew would share. But if she and Jack went together, Drew would have to be paired with Kendra, Kristin or her. Mary Kate stepped aside and waited for everyone to pass.

"Kristin?"

"Hey, what's up?" *Wow!* The rainforest made those green eyes even more stunning.

The blonde woman fell into step in front of the long-legged hiker. "Listen, we're supposed to pair up when we get to camp, and I was wondering if you wanted to...you know, share a tent?"

Hell yes! Wanna share a sleeping bag too? Okay, that was rude, she scolded herself, but she couldn't stop the smile. "Sure, but I think Mr. San Diego has other ideas."

"Yeah, I know. That's kind of why I was hoping you'd say yes. I thought it might be awkward. He didn't seem to hear the 'boyfriend' part."

"Either that, or he figured it must not be too serious if you were here without him." *At least, that's what I thought.*

"Actually, it isn't, but that's a story for another day." Mary Kate wasn't sure why she'd decided to abandon the pretense with Kristin.

Ah-ha! The dark-haired woman welcomed the confirmation of her theory with guarded enthusiasm.

"We break here," John called again. Their gait so far had been quite slow, and after the initial breathlessness, everyone had managed to adapt, at least enough that they could talk while they climbed. Tammy was the only one still struggling.

"How much farther to the camp?" she asked.

"One hour."

Kristin dropped her pack and sat down on the hillside, hoping that Kate would hang back so they could have a quiet conversation. She did.

"Anyway, I get the feeling he's going to ask me to share a tent, and I just don't think I want to do that."

"Oh, I'd say he's going to ask alright," Kristin grinned.

"I mean, he's a nice enough guy, but I don't want to give him any ideas or anything."

"You mean you didn't come all the way to Africa to get picked up?" the tall woman teased.

"Exactly!"

Too bad again, although picking up straight women wasn't the tall woman's style at all. But nobody said she couldn't look.

"Sure, we can share if you want. But I should tell you something first, in case it would bother you...."

Noting her hesitation, Mary Kate finished the woman's sentence. "That you're gay?"

Kristin was startled. Most people were surprised when they found out. "Actually, I was going to say that I snore." Watching the horrified look on her new friend's red face, she thought twice about her cruel joke. "No, really. I don't snore, at least not that I'm awake to hear. But you're right, I am gay."

Mary Kate delivered a playful swat. "That was mean."

"Sorry, I couldn't resist. How did you know?"

"I saw your keychain back at the hotel. My best friend has one just like it," she explained.

"Ah.... Looking at my stuff, were you?"

"I was," Mary Kate confessed, nodding. With increasing seriousness, she went on. "And that's the real reason I wanted to share a tent with you. You had some really nice things, and I was hoping to be able to go through your bags while you weren't looking."

"I see," Kristin smirked. She was really starting to like this Southerner, getting the sense that she was a genuine, down to earth sort. Her sense of humor was disarming, and Kristin felt comfortable that they might turn out to be pretty good friends, at least while they were on this trip.

"In fact," the blonde continued, "the real truth is that I was thinking I would look really nice in your clothes...especially your long pants...." To make her point, the petite Mary Kate sat alongside the much taller woman and stretched out a leg that barely reached the other's ankle.

The blue-eyed woman stifled an incredulous laugh as her new friend leaned forward to whisper more.

"...and that by wearing your most fashionable attire – which obviously would fit me perfectly, since we're exactly the same size – I would be even more attractive to Drew. Nay, I'd be more attractive to all the men in our group, and to the porters as well!"

By this time, both women were rocking with laughter. "I think we have our first psych evac!" Kristin shouted to the group, which turned in unison to find the women sprawled in laughter on the hillside.

"I want some of what they're smoking," Jack said.

John just shook his head again, and bent to pick up his pack. That was their signal that the break was over.

"Ouch!" Mary Kate screamed. Her hand was on fire! "What the hell was that?" The burning intensified as she waved her hand back and forth.

The guide hurried back to where they sat. "Nettles," he said simply, his face visibly relaxing.

"Oh, those are supposed to be painful," Ann said.

"Well they are! What the hell are nettles?" Mary Kate was staring at her hand, looking for stingers or bite marks that would account for this excruciating pain. "Ow!"

John pointed to the plant that was near where she was sitting. "These are nettles."

"They've got tiny prickles, with some kind of stinging substance," Ann explained. "The sting only lasts about seven minutes, then it's gone."

"Seven minutes!" Mary Kate nearly screamed. The pain was growing worse by the second. It was going to be a very long seven minutes.

"Here, I've got some first aid cream." Kristin took off her pack and dug inside. In moments, she was holding the smaller woman's hand, gently applying the soothing mixture.

Mary Kate eventually relaxed, grateful that her new friend had reacted so quickly. The cream was helping, and Ann was absolutely right about the time frame. When seven minutes had passed, the pain was completely gone. But everyone now knew not to touch that little green plant called nettles.

An hour later, the weary hikers arrived in camp, thrilled to see that the tents had already been set up. Their brochures had said they would have to do that themselves.

Kristin noticed right away that Drew had stopped in the middle of the camp, obviously waiting for Kate to catch up. "Which one do you want, Kate?" she called loudly, thinking it best just to head off an awkward moment.

"Let's take that one over there," she answered, pointing to a small yellow and blue tent on the edge of the campsite. It was farthest from the latrine; but then again, it was farthest from the latrine.

The latrine was a tall wooden structure, about five feet square. The "door" was actually just an entrance, the right half of the structure; at the back of the entrance was an opening that led to the left half, where a hole was cut into the floor. Extreme care and concentration were required, as the hole was no larger than six inches by 10 inches. There were no words – nor would anyone want the words – to describe the smell.

Porters had stacked the 10 yellow Summit bags in the center of the campsite. Already, they were smeared with fine black dirt. There were two large tents that were obviously for the guide and the 15 porters. With the flaps open, the hikers could see very few blankets. Evidently, the young men who were carrying their equipment and bags were planning to rely on body heat from one another to get through the night.

Beside the renowned Big Tree was a large tent with screens on all four sides. Inside were 10 camp stools around a long folding table. Two thermoses sat next to tin cups; assorted flatware lay across a stack of tin plates.

"Hot tea, hot water," the porter known as Gilbert gestured toward the dining tent as he scurried into what was apparently the cooking tent, which housed a small camp stove. In a few moments, he emerged with a five-gallon yellow container filled with warm water. Pouring some into a shallow pan, he rubbed his hands together to show everyone what it was for. Then he laid a funnel atop the container. "To drink tomorrow."

Jack pulled the Camelback water bladders from the sisters' backpacks as well as his own. The Camelback was the easiest way to both carry and drink water, since the hiker had easy access to a tube that clipped to the shoulder. Most of the Camelback models held two liters. "Who needs a fill-up?"

The others crowded around, toting their Camelbacks and water bottles, all readying for the hike tomorrow. Using the funnel, Jack poured from the large jug into Ann's clear one-liter bottle.

"There's stuff in the water," she grimaced. "Tom's brochure said the water was supposed to be pure."

"It gets better at the higher elevations, but we should probably filter that and drop in some iodine tablets," Kristin explained.

"I didn't bring any iodine," Ann grumbled. "And I didn't bring any toilet paper either, because Tom said that would be provided too. But Gilbert just told me they didn't have any."

"You're kidding me!" Laurel exclaimed.

"Actually, that would be 'you're shitting me,'" laughed Jack, earning him a glare from his girlfriend, but raucous laughter from everyone else.

"I've got plenty of iodine tablets for everyone," Kristin offered, "but you better be sure you aren't allergic. That would be nasty." Luckily, Cyn and Andrea had prepared her for both of those needs, but she wasn't about to offer her extra toilet paper. "And I brought some cheesecloth to catch the bugs."

Starting over, Jack poured bottle after bottle, all through the finely woven filter. To each liter, Kristin added one tiny tablet. After a half hour, everyone's supply was replenished and readied for the hike tomorrow.

Gilbert had started to bring food to the table inside the dining tent. "Eat now," he instructed.

Three steaming dishes sat on the table: one was a bowl of boiled potatoes; one was shell pasta; the other appeared to be something resembling cabbage, but it tasted more like a cross between that and onions.

"I can't believe you guys are eating that," Kendra said. "I read that you shouldn't eat anything out of the ground."

"Those potatoes are out of the ground," challenged Drew.

"But they had a skin, which was peeled off. You guys go right ahead, but don't come crying to me when you get the runs," she taunted.

"And don't you come crying to us when you get clogged up," he countered jokingly.

"And to think, just this morning, we were all being sweet and nice, asking where everybody was from," Mary Kate interjected sweetly. "Now it's 10 hours later, and we're talking about bodily functions at the dinner table."

"I don't even want to think what we'll be talking about by Sunday," added Ann, who thought to herself that it was a lot like living with her three teenage sons.

"What's this stuff? Milo." Leah popped the top on the small can and sniffed. "Smells like chocolate. I guess that's what the hot water is for."

Gilbert entered again with a pan of...brown stuff, with...stuff in it.

"What's that?" Trevor asked.

"Sauce," the porter answered, as if that was sufficient explanation.

"Now *that* I'm not eating," Mary Kate announced to an echo of female voices. The three guys were more adventurous, cleaning the bowl as Gilbert reappeared with watermelon slices.

"If there's anyone who doesn't want their dinner napkin, I'll take it off your hands," Leah offered demurely.

"Yeah, right," Jack chided. "I have a feeling we're going to be using dollar bills on our butts before the end of the week."

As darkness fell, so did the temperature. Here at the equator, the sun went down at six, and rose at six. These were the long nights Mary Kate had read about. Hopefully, she and Kristin would continue getting along well, since they'd probably be spending some long nights together in their tent.

One by one, the hikers journeyed to the latrine then disappeared into the small tents. Mary Kate and Kristin pulled their Summit bags under the rain guard, but agreed that

their backpacks – which held cash, sunglasses, and other things of value – would be safer inside the tent. Both had followed Muncie's advice and brought self-inflating air mattresses and sleeping bags good to 20 degrees.

"I think I'm going to sleep in my long johns," Kristin said. "What about you?" She dug them out of the Summit bag and began to undress in the darkened tent.

"I was thinking I'd just wear shorts and a t-shirt, but I didn't know it was going to be this cold."

"Yeah, and just think – this is probably our warmest night!"

Mary Kate changed in the dark, realizing as soon as she lay down that the tag on her long johns was in the front, instead of the back where it belonged. Fixing it meant unzipping the bag, and it was way too cold to do that. Besides, she was quite surprised to find herself incredibly sleepy, and it wasn't even eight o'clock yet.

"Kristin?"

"Yeah?" The tall brunette was squirming in her bag, trying to find room for her feet at the bottom of the tent.

"Thanks a lot for the first aid cream this afternoon...and the iodine. That's really nice of you to share with everybody."

"I'll let you in on a secret if you promise not to tell anyone else."

"I promise. What?"

"I brought toilet paper, too. I didn't bring enough for everyone, but I've got plenty for the two of us," she whispered. The thin tents didn't afford much privacy.

"God, you're my best friend in the world," Mary Kate sighed.

"Hey, if we're going to share a tent, it's in my best interest to make sure you stay clean," she laughed.

"Well, I brought a couple of things I can share, too."

"Tell me. I can't have my partner holding out."

"I have three dozen Cliff bars, a box of wet wipes, and a bottle of hand sanitizer."

"Woo-hoo! That's great! And I have a bar of camp soap."

"What's that?"

"It's soap that doesn't hurt the environment. We can use it to wash up, and to wash our clothes if we need to."

"Why are you wiggling so much?" the blonde demanded.

"Because I don't have room for my feet," Kristin complained. "I'm going to have to set my backpack outside."

"Just put it by mine. There's room."

"But then it'll be in your way."

"Oh yeah, like I'm going to grow overnight. Go ahead, move it over to my side."

Kristin did as she was told, and was thrilled to find that she now had plenty of room. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

The shivering slowed as their bodies heated the air inside their sleeping bags. Soon, both hikers were sound asleep.

Day 2 — Shira 1 Camp

"Who's the moose?" Mary Kate demanded, entering the dining tent for breakfast.

"Drew!" answered Jack, Laurel, and Kendra in unison.

The sheepish man ducked his head in embarrassment. One of his former girlfriends had cited his snoring as the main reason for their breakup. "I can't help it," he answered. "I'm supposed to have surgery this fall to fix it."

"What were they going to do? Maybe we can just do it here and save you some money," Jack joked.

Kristin grabbed a piece of bread and smeared peanut butter and honey on it. That with a cup of hot tea was perfect. The others drank Milo as they waited patiently at the table for scrambled eggs, tomatoes and mangos. As the campers ate, the porters efficiently dismantled the camp, folding up the tents and cooking equipment.

After a last trip to the latrine, the hikers packed their belongings and stacked the Summit bags in the center of camp. The air was crisp and damp, and by nine o'clock, they were back on the trail.

Mary Kate fell in behind the ranger today, followed by the ever-present, always talking Drew, then Ann and Tammy. Kristin had decided to stick close to John in the middle, hoping to be able to ask questions and get some of his insights on the mountain. Trevor and Leah were behind her, and Kendra, Laurel, and Jack brought up the rear.

Kristin learned that John had been working for Summit for over five years, and this was his 53rd trek to the top of Kili. He had reached Uhuru Peak all but seven times; in each of those failures, he had to return to the base camp with an ailing climber.

John wrote meticulous notes in a journal about each of his treks, and had made adjustments over the years to improve the chances of the climbers in his group reaching the summit. For this, he was Tom Muncie's best and highest paid guide.

On every trek, John studied the hikers carefully, unobtrusively keeping notes on how much they drank and ate, observing their conditioning level, including how they rested during the breaks. He also assessed their confidence and determination, along with how they interacted with others. With almost perfect accuracy, these traits showed him who would have the best chance at getting to the top.

John loved this mountain, and every step along the way to the top. If his hikers went home with some of the same reverence and appreciation he had for this majestic peak, then he would feel he had done his job well. Gradually, he'd grown quite tolerant of the silly Westerners, knowing that if they had fun they would tell their friends, who would also come. It was still difficult to accept women who acted as though they were equal to the men, but Tom had prepared him for that. Strangely, more of the women usually made it to the top.

After an hour and a half of winding through the lush rainforest, it suddenly ended. There was no gradual thinning of the thick green vegetation; it was as though they had simply walked through a door into another room of the great outdoors. The accompanying armed ranger turned back and John took the point.

The brush was still relatively thick on this new terrain, but it was dry, and only a few of the trees reached higher than 10 feet. The canopy that had protected the hikers from the morning sun was gone, and at the first break, most of them peeled off their jackets and unzipped the pant legs on their convertibles. Mary Kate couldn't help but laugh at herself again; she'd thought she was so smart finding this stuff on the Internet, and everyone else had managed to find the exact same things.

Late in the morning, the group stepped over a low ridge to discover their dining tent erected in a clearing, with the table and camp stools already set up. Gilbert and the porters had hurried ahead to prepare lunch, which was more peanut butter and bread, boiled eggs, bananas, carrots, tomatoes, and cucumbers. Ever present was the hot tea, which Kristin had all to herself while the others fought over the Milo.

"I bet that stuff has cocaine in it. That's why you're all craving it," she quipped.

"Speaking of drugs..." Drew started.

Kristin bristled, hoping he wasn't about to stupidly tell everyone that he'd brought something with him.

"...are any of you taking Diamox?" Diamox was a medication that mimicked the body's acclimatization to altitude. In other words, it facilitated the oxygen exchange

between cells even if the body hadn't yet adapted. The jury was still out on its effectiveness, but climbers had used it for years.

"I brought some, but I haven't taken it yet," answered Mary Kate. "I haven't really noticed any effects of the altitude."

"We started it as soon as we got to Moshi," Laurel explained, indicating her sister and friends. "My doctor said it needed to be in your system two days before it would take effect, so you might want to go ahead and start."

"What are you going to do, Kristin?" The Southerner trusted her new friend's judgment, but she'd gotten the prescription to give herself the added ammunition to reach the summit.

"I hadn't planned on taking it. I was hoping the water would be enough."

"Same here," Ann said.

"I'm taking it already too," Tammy spoke up. She'd meant to read the label at first light to see if that could possibly explain why she'd had a headache all night.

When they set out again after lunch, John promised them a beautiful sight before the next break, but would give no further clue of what lay ahead. The hikers shuffled their order again, with Tammy and Ann moving to the front of the line. Mary Kate dropped back behind Drew so she could also talk with Kristin. The five friends from Pennsylvania again brought up the rear.

The tall woman was quiet though, angry at herself for the near rage that had erupted inside her when she'd mistakenly gotten the wild notion that Drew had brought along drugs. Given her chosen profession as a family counselor, Kristin had dealt with the fallout from people who used drugs, and had no tolerance at all for it; but that was no reason for her to rush to judgment of people she barely knew. Besides, if she were really honest with herself, she'd have to admit that thinking the worst about Drew had more to do with his obvious attraction to Kate than to what he'd actually said. But who could blame him for that? Kate was likable, and so was Drew, and he didn't deserve her scorn. Luckily, she had managed not to react out loud, so she didn't need to apologize. But she should make an effort to be nice.

"Say, Drew? Who do usually hike with back in California?" *Cyn and Andrea would be so proud of me*, she thought, mentally rolling her eyes.

"I usually go with the Sierra Club. We try to do something every month."

"Have any of your friends done this?"

"No, and they're all jealous as hell. But I have a feeling several of them will put it on their list. It's a pretty expensive proposition for the average Joe."

"No kidding!" Mary Kate jumped in. The trip — including the safari — was costing her in the neighborhood of \$6,000, most of which was money she'd been saving for a

down payment on a house. Her grandmother had slipped her \$2,000, extracting a promise not to say anything to the 19 other grandchildren. Mary Kate suspected that her grandmother had acted on the sly for all of her cousins at one time or another, and it was great to have the Sasser matriarch behind her on this quest.

"Everyone stop!" John commanded. When he had their attention, he turned and pointed to the top of the ridge they were climbing. Along its crest was a slim band of white. "The mountain," he said simply.

Ten backpacks hit the ground as the hikers reached for their cameras. Beyond that ridge, the entire mountain would be in plain view, but here, only its snowcapped peak was visible. It was tantalizing.

As they walked to the top of the ridge, the mountain grew exponentially larger as it revealed itself. Now standing atop the ridge that afforded their first full view of Kilimanjaro, they were awed again. For Mary Kate, it was simply the most spectacular sight she had ever seen. The uniqueness of Kili was that it rose up as a singular peak, not as part of a chain of mountains. In fact, it was the tallest free-standing mountain in the world.

From where they stood, it towered nearly 10,000 feet above them, still about 18 miles away. Completely devoid of vegetation, the mountain appeared to be gray, its glacier top looking like icing on a cupcake.

"And that is our camp. See?" John pointed to a cluster of colorful dots about a mile ahead on the plateau.

"That's Shira 1?" Tammy asked. She hoped so; she had to go to the bathroom bad and John had her spooked about the snakes!

"Shira 1. It is 12,000 feet."

The hikers entered the open flat camp before three. Ann admitted to being more tired today than yesterday. She hadn't slept well last night, still adjusting to the nine-hour time change from Minnesota. Tammy offered to fill her water bottles if she wanted to rest.

The first order of business was to spread the sleeping bags across the top of the tents, as last evening's condensation had left everything damp. Next, Gilbert proudly presented the group with freshly popped popcorn, which disappeared almost as soon as he set down the enormous bowl. Retreating to the cook tent, he fired up the stove to make more.

"Man, that water's freezing!" Trevor said, rubbing his hands together briskly as he returned from the creek that crossed directly between their campsite and the mountain.

Water? Kristin hurried to her Summit bag, taking out a small towel, washcloth, the camp soap, and a complete change of clothing. "I don't know about you guys, but I'm feeling a little grungy. I think I'm going to try to find a wide spot in this creek — out

of view from your prying eyes!" The latter point was directed at the three men who sat filtering water.

"Wait!" Mary Kate jumped up from where she'd been filling her Camelback. "I'm coming with you."

"Me too!" Ann shouted, poking her head from her tent.

Tammy and Leah followed suit.

The sisters exchanged looks then quickly scrambled to get their things.

"I wanna come too," Drew whined. "I'm grungy too."

"That's right," Jack chided. "You stink and you snore. And the naked women don't want anything to do with you."

Drew slumped dejectedly. "Story of my life."

Ten minutes downstream, the seven women found the perfect spot: a clear shallow pool about 10 feet across fed by a small waterfall above, and emptied by a second waterfall at the bottom. The sloping sides gave them a place to sit as they washed, without having to be fully submerged in the icy flow.

Kristin went first, pulling off her boots, socks, pants, and shirt. To that pile, she quickly added her panties and sports bra, squatting tentatively to slip waist deep into the water's edge.

Look at those ripply muscles, Mary Kate thought as she eyed the woman's beautiful body. Not an ounce of fat anywhere. Now if I were ever going to be attracted to a woman, she'd definitely be my type. No sirree....the lesbians at Savannah College didn't look like Kristin Addison.

The others began to undress as well, slipping wide-eyed and gasping into the icy pool. Bravely, Mary Kate followed suit, shedding all of her clothes and taking baby steps down the slippery rock so that she wouldn't...*splash!*

"Oh, shit!" she screamed, gasping to draw breath into her frozen lungs. The slippery incline offered no traction as she tried frantically to pull herself out. Reaching out, she took Kristin's outstretched hand, but not without noticing that the woman's other hand was covering her mouth. "Don't you dare laugh! Not one goddamn one of you!"

But it couldn't be helped.

Unable to sleep, Kristin and Mary Kate talked into the night. The plateau was much colder than the rainforest had been, and the women were burrowed deep into their sleeping bags, zipped high so that only small holes allowed them to breathe and see out. Both were feeling refreshed from their bath; it was amazing how dirty one could

get in only two days. But since Kili was an ancient volcano, the soil surrounding it was black silt, and it seemed to find every human orifice, clinging like soot.

Kristin was feeling a little guilty for sneaking a peek at her naked friend down at the creek. But it was pretty hard to resist, especially with her flopping around in the water trying to climb out. At least now she had something glorious to envision when she walked behind Kate on the trail.

"So you're going to finish school this year?" The innocent voice interrupted her prurient thoughts.

"Yeah, probably by December. My dissertation's almost finished."

"What's it on?"

"It's kind of morbid, actually. It's about young women and suicide tendencies. I did interviews with about 300 college women, trying to identify feelings and events that trigger thoughts of suicide."

"Wow, what'd you find?"

"Different things. Usually, there's some kind of perceived failure."

"It must be hard talking to people about things like that. One of the kids in my class lost his mom to suicide. It's very sad, and it leaves behind such pain."

Kristin sighed heavily, not sure if she should continue. She hadn't talked about Erin in a long time. "Yeah, it really does. My best friend from high school killed herself when we were seniors."

"Oh, my god! Kris, that's awful."

"Yeah, it was pretty bad."

Mary Kate thought she'd heard a snuffle.

"She struggled a lot with her family. Her brother was really smart and athletic; everybody liked him, and her parents were always asking her why she couldn't be more like Todd. And if that wasn't bad enough, her little sister Shelley came along and she couldn't do anything wrong either. Erin was a spirit who liked to have fun and she just never measured up in their eyes."

"That sounds so hard." Actually, Mary Kate thought it sounded familiar. Just change Todd to Randy and Shelley to Carol Lee. Her older brother and younger sister had hung the moon.

"When she didn't get accepted at Gainesville, everything just went all to hell. One day she didn't show up at school and they found her sitting in her car in the garage. She'd closed up and left the motor running."

"That's so sad. It must have been awful to deal with."

"Yeah, it was hard. I just wish I could have seen it coming and said or done something to stop her. At least with the work I'm doing now, I feel like I might be able to make a difference with somebody."

Mary Kate lay silent, trying to think of something comforting to say that didn't sound trite. The only personal loss she'd ever known was her grandfather, who passed away two years ago.

"Sorry, even after 12 years...."

"Hey, I understand. That's really quite a story." The women lay quiet for a while, Mary Kate admiring the fact that her new friend had been able to turn such an awful thing around into a positive direction for her life. She was about to say so when Kristin continued.

"So what about you? You teach special ed, right?" Kristin hoped her morose tale hadn't thrown a wet blanket on their conversation.

"Yeah, emotionally handicapped." Mary Kate went on to explain her job. She had eight students — all boys — in her small classroom, most landing there because they were behavior problems in their regular classroom. She liked the work; she loved the kids; but she wished she were at a different school.

"What's wrong with your school?" Kristin asked.

"Nothing really. I mean, it's a nice building, and all of the teachers are really nice. I went to school there myself 20 years ago. It's just that my boyfriend — my now ex-boyfriend, that is — is the assistant principal," she explained.

"Ah, I see. So why don't you transfer to another school?"

Mary Kate chuckled. "That might be an option in a place like Miami, but there are only two elementary schools in all of Hurston County. Jobs don't come open very often; people tend to stay for life once they get tenure."

"So why do you have to stay in Hurston County?" That actually came out more challenging than Kristin had intended.

"I don't, but I have to stay for at least another year. See, we have to sign a letter in February saying whether or not we intend to be back the next year. At the time, it just seemed like the right thing to do. Things hadn't fallen apart yet, so I signed."

"And what happens if you change your mind?"

"Well, nothing really. It's not like they can make you teach there if you don't want to. But it won't look good if you apply to teach somewhere else." The real reason, though, was personal. "Besides, the way I look at it, I signed a commitment, so I need to honor it."

"I think that's admirable, Kate. I don't think most people would have any qualms about breaking a contract, especially under your kind of circumstances. You don't think he'll make it hard for you next year, do you?"

"I don't have a clue what he'll do. If the past six months are any indication, he won't even know we've split up," she muttered. "I can tell you right now he's going to think it's right out of the blue. Then he's going to blame me for going off to Africa and ruining everything. But the hard part's not going to be dealing with Bobby. It's going to be telling my family. As far as they're concerned, us getting married has always been set in stone. It's like it's part of the Great Mooresville Master Plan or something."

Kristin chuckled, wondering if there might really be such a thing. "Well, you can't let somebody else decide that for you."

"Believe me, I won't. But they're still going to be disappointed. See, our family's really close. Not close like emotionally close, more like...physically close."

"Oh yeah? Do I really wanna know about this?" The tall woman joked. At least she hoped it was a joke.

"Not that! I mean that everybody lives close together. Everybody knows everybody's business. In two years, Bobby and I have never once stayed the night at each other's apartment, because if we did, half of Mooresville would know it by eight o'clock in the morning! And that wouldn't be good for either of our jobs, especially his."

"So...you end all of your...romantic evenings by one of you getting up and going home?"

"Right! And it's usually me, because I can hardly ever get him to come to my place. I think he just feels more comfortable in his own territory, you know?"

Kristin understood that, though her experience had been much different. Pilar had been territorial as well, rarely wanting to venture together outside of her high-rise condo on Brickell Avenue in Miami. For a while, that had been more than acceptable, as they had spent most of their hours together in bed. Eventually though, Kristin had wanted more from her much older lover than just their secret moments. But the public acknowledgment had been too much to ask of a woman who had been raised in a conservative Venezuelan culture, and in the end, Kristin had forced herself to walk away.

Kate interrupted her memories of her first love. "I really just don't think I'm cut out for small town life, you know what I mean?"

"Have you ever lived anywhere else besides Mooresville?"

"I lived for four years in Savannah while I was in college. It wasn't exactly Gotham, but I felt more...I don't know, anonymous."

"So why did you go back? After college, I mean?" Kristin loved her hometown of Miami, and as soon as she finished at IU, she planned to return. There were dozens of places where she could work, or she could always set up her own counseling practice.

"I don't know. I wish I hadn't. But you have to understand how things are done in small towns. Not many of the kids from my class went to college, and most of the ones who did go didn't finish. They left, got homesick, and came back. And what happened to me is that my mom — she teaches biology at the high school — talked to the superintendent, who talked to the principal at my school, and he called me in Savannah *my sophomore year* to tell me he'd have a job waiting for me when I finished. And the next thing I knew, everybody had everything all worked out."

"But it hasn't worked out for you, has it?" Kate's voice had gone melancholy, Kristin thought.

"No. If I can just get through the next year...."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know, maybe I'll try for a job in Charlotte." Her college roommate Jessica lived in Charlotte. Mary Kate had been maid of honor at Jessica's wedding their senior year. Now three years later, Jessica was divorced and living back home with her parents. Maybe they could even get a place together.

"I have a feeling things will work out for you," Kristin said in support of her new friend. It would be awful growing up under the expectations Kate described; and worse having to deal with the same things as an adult, as though you were incapable of making your own decisions. She pushed her hand through the opening in the sleeping bag and stretched it out to squeeze the woman's shoulder. "From what I've seen in just two days, I'd say you're a determined sort."

"Thanks." Her own small hand snaked up and clutched the larger one. "Would you believe I have to pee?"

"Me too. God, I hate this part!"

In unison, the women unzipped their bags and slipped out into the freezing air inside their tent, poking their feet through the bottom to pull on their boots. Both donned their fleece jackets and Mary Kate grabbed the flashlight, which was essential to locate the small hole in the latrine. Together, they walked in the bright moonlight, their white long johns standing out like neon skeletons.

Day 3 — Shira 2 Camp

Ann took charge of breakfast, spreading peanut butter and orange marmalade on bread, sending it around the table until it found a home. The mother of three was the

only camper who had gotten much sleep, it seemed. Mary Kate and Kristin stopped talking when they returned from their second trip to the latrine around 3:30, and each thought the other was asleep. Drew and Jack dozed only in the early morning hours. Tammy and Trevor were nursing powerful headaches, and Kendra had been up all night throwing up.

The sleeplessness, headaches, and nausea were all related to the altitude, John said, but he assured them that this would be an easy day — a hike of three and a half hours, with an altitude gain of only 700 feet. The good news was that they would reach Shira 2 by lunchtime; the bad news was that Shira 2 wasn't exactly the most hospitable campsite.

Mary Kate's maladies this morning went well beyond a lack of sleep. She decided after their conversation yesterday to begin taking the Diamox, reasoning that it wouldn't hurt to have an extra hedge against altitude sickness. But now, she had numbness in her groin, face, and hands, the latter so bad she had trouble holding onto her bread. Clearly, she wasn't going to be able to continue with the medicine.

Kristin suggested they walk close to the front today, falling in behind Tammy — who had claimed for her own the position right behind John. The women talked about their studies, the careers they'd planned, and then their experiences so far on this trip.

Kilimanjaro was an artistic quest for the young student from Missouri; she had taken three times as many pictures as anyone else, and was capturing details no one else even noticed. No doubt, that eye for the unique would serve her well when she returned to paint. Unfortunately, she hadn't really prepared for the physicality of the expedition, and was struggling with nearly every step.

John recognized that Tammy's lack of conditioning, coupled with the headaches she was having from the altitude, made her a long shot to get to the top. He would have to watch her very closely, or she might push herself further than her body could go.

If there was any bone of contention among the hikers, it was the realization that — despite the rigorous training regimens they had undertaken to prepare for this trip — it was Tammy's fitness level that was setting the pace for the entire group.

"We break," John announced.

Kristin dropped her backpack and turned her attention to seeing how Kate was doing. From the corner of her eye, she saw Tammy collapse tiredly in a heap.

"So how are you feeling?" The tall brunette eyed her pallid friend.

"Well, the good news is that I've gotten the feeling back in my hands, and the rest of me has finally stopped tingling."

"And the bad news?"

"I'm so tired that I ache all over. I think that's jet lag," Mary Kate muttered.

"I think I have that too. I've got some aspirin if you want it."

"Yeah, maybe I should. I'm glad today's a short day. Maybe a good night's sleep will help."

Kristin pulled a small bottle of aspirin from her backpack and handed it to her friend. "You know, you didn't eat much this morning. Maybe you ought to have one of those Cliff bars you brought."

"Good idea. You want one?" Altitude had a way of stealing one's appetite. All of the hikers would soon have to force themselves to eat.

"Sure."

As they munched on the snack, it occurred to Mary Kate that Kendra was probably starving, since she'd skipped breakfast after throwing up all night. Reaching again into her bag, she brought out a handful of the precious energy bars. "Anybody want a Cliff bar?"

At that generous offer, several others pulled out their own snacks, though no one had thought to bring as much as Mary Kate. But the blonde had plenty for those who hadn't packed any extra nutrition, including the two sisters and Jack.

Laurel was glad to see her sister take one. "I don't know about you guys, but I'm kind of pissed that Tom didn't prepare us all better for this with the stuff he sent out. I mean, he gave this long list of things people should bring, but then he kept reminding everyone to pack light. I don't know if I've brought enough clothes. I nearly froze to death last night, and we're just at 12,000 feet."

"I think we're going to have to wear the same clothes the whole time we're out here, just adding something else every day. By the time we go to the summit, we'll probably have to wear everything we brought all at the same time," Drew said.

"Just imagine what you'll smell like by then," Jack quipped. "I hope you at least brought enough underwear to change every day."

"Nah, just half as much. I've just been turning them inside out on the second day."

"Gross!" Kendra said. "That's way too much information, Drew."

"And you wonder why you're still single," Trevor admonished teasingly. "Get a clue, man!"

At the front of the line, John picked up his pack and turned toward the mountain. He had made notes at the break. Tonight, he would tell each one what they might expect on the rest of the trip.

One hour later, the hikers climbed onto a rocky mesa, so small that the tents were erected with only a yard between each. Kristin chose the tent in the center, figuring that the other tents would buffer the frigid wind on this exposed ridge.

Again, they spread out their sleeping bags to dry, this time securing them to the tent wires so they wouldn't blow away.

"Whose tent is this one?" Trevor yelled, opening the flap to find two Summit bags already under the rain guard.

"That one's ours," a voice called from the dining tent, where two figures sat huddled against the stiff breeze.

The hikers converged on the tent, surprised to be meeting new arrivals on this, their third day on the trail.

The older man stood, offering his hand. "I'm Bill, and this is my son, Brad. We were supposed to go up with a group on Sunday, but I got delayed with business in London, so Summit switched us over to your group. Hope you don't mind a couple of extras."

"Not at all," Mary Kate answered. "So you came up the Machame trail, right?"

Brad spoke up. "Yeah, we've been here since yesterday waiting for you guys. Thank God I'll have somebody new to talk to besides this old guy!" The teenager stood up and put distance between himself and his father. It was not cool to be pals with your old man.

Bill raised an eyebrow, but otherwise let the remark slide. His son had just graduated from high school in Richmond, where he lived with his mother. This was to be an opportunity for the father and son to bond, and Bill had hoped the boy would lose the attitude once they met up with the others in the group.

"Excuse me, did you say your name was Brat?" Jack blurted out what was already on everyone's mind.

"Brad!" the youth answered indignantly.

"Well *Brad*! What makes you think we're going to want to talk to you?" Ann sneered menacingly. Raising her own three boys had more than prepared her for this.

Everyone laughed as the youth's face turned as red as a match head. Finally, he let out a small grin. In less than five minutes, these guys got his number, and it looked like he was going to be at their mercy for the next five days.

Gilbert became the man of the hour when he suddenly entered carrying a pan of hot cream soup. After lunch, the campers retreated to their tents to escape the relentless wind. Mary Kate pulled out her journal. It had been two days since she'd written anything, and she wanted to make notes while her memories and impressions were still fresh. First, she summarized the walk from Big Tree to Shira 1, describing the thrill of her best view yet of Mt. Kilimanjaro. Next, she wrote of her unfortunate bathing experience, along with the exhilaration at being momentarily clean.

Wow, that was only last night, she lamented, noting the thick black dirt underneath her fingernails.

Finally, she began to write her impressions of the group.

Drew is a very nice and interesting guy, especially now that he seems to have gotten the message that this is not a date. He's very knowledgeable about climbing, probably with more experience than everyone in the group combined.

Trevor and Leah make an interesting couple. Both seem like over-achievers, but in a real down-to-earth way. They just seem to belong together. I hope Leah gets her transfer to Tokyo — it would be shame for them to have to live apart.

Kendra and Laurel are really close. It's clear that they miss each other a lot with Kendra in New York now. Jack is hilarious! I don't think I've ever met a more easygoing guy than him, and he's so quick with his stupid jokes and one-liners.

It's great having Ann along on this trip. I expected her to be more old-fashioned, I guess because she's older. Instead, she's as much of a cut-up as everybody, but probably with a more level head. She and Tammy have gotten to be pretty good friends already.

Speaking of Tammy, we've all been kind of worried about her. She's been having headaches from the altitude and it's clear that she hasn't conditioned well for this trip. No one has actually said anything, but by the looks on everyone's faces, I'd say people are losing patience with walking so slowly and having to stop so often for breaks they don't really need.

It looks like Kristin is definitely going to be my best friend on this trip. We don't really have all that much in common, but she's just so easy to talk to. Of course, that's probably just because of her counselor training, and here I am thinking we're getting to be great friends. I bet everybody else thinks she's their best friend too.

She's really interesting, and from the very exciting city of Miami, which she loves. She's also manages somehow to stay beautiful, even though she's filthy like the rest of us. We'll be doing the safari part together, which will be fun, at least for me. Let's hope I don't drive her crazy with my lack of sophistication.

On the other side of the tent, the brunette was also recording her thoughts. Kristin though wasn't writing her impressions of their ensemble cast of climbers. Rather, she focused her thoughts on the blonde who shared her tent.

I feel like I'm making a real friend in Kate Sasser. Note to Cyn and Andrea: I told you I wasn't defective!

Kate's a really interesting person. It's fascinating that someone from her small town background would venture out on a quest like this,

especially alone and without much support from her family and boyfriend. Right now, she plans to ditch the boyfriend as soon as she gets home, but who knows how she'll feel when she actually gets there. I find myself hoping that we stay in touch after our return so I'll know how it all turns out.

"I think I hear Gilbert. Are you hungry?" Mary Kate wasn't looking forward to going outside again, but the sooner they finished dinner, the sooner they could settle in for the night. She was pretty sure that sleep would not be so elusive this night, as she and her tent mate had now logged almost 36 waking hours.

Dinner was more soup, mashed potatoes, a very popular beef and vegetable stew, noodles, and orange slices. Everyone ate hurriedly, eager to get back inside where it was warm. John came into the dining tent as they were finishing.

"Tomorrow is our longest hike, about seven hours. We go to Barranco Hut, which is our most beautiful campsite. I said I would tell you after two days how I think you will do on the hike. If you do not get sick from the altitude, I think all of you will reach the rim of the crater, at 18,700 feet. That is Stella Point. It is one or two hours from there to Uhuru, but many people do not go further." Unbeknownst to the climbers, this was John's standard speech, which seldom varied, no matter who was in the group. His assurances were important, he knew; besides, he considered it his job to get everyone in his party to the crater rim. At that point, he was reluctant to push them to go higher than they wanted, watching each climber very closely to ascertain any serious problems.

Mary Kate crawled into their tent shortly after dinner, very much encouraged by John's predictions. If she could reach Stella Point, she was certain to persevere to the summit, no matter how exhausted she was. Her reasoning was simple: If John thought Tammy could make it to the crater rim then she was sure that she herself could go well beyond that. At this point, the only real obstacle was the altitude, and who knew how that would play out?

"You feeling okay?" Kristin asked as she shed her boots and scooted backwards toward her sleeping bag.

"I'm much better, thanks. How are you doing? Do you have any symptoms at all?"

The tall woman thought for a minute, then shook her head. "No, I don't think so. I keep wondering if it's just going to hit me all of a sudden, but nothing has so far."

Mary Kate rummaged in her bag for her long johns. "You know, when I packed for this trip, I made up this thing called a 'two-day rule' in which I'd wear everything in my bag for two days. Now you've probably noticed that I've had on the same pants since we started, but I wanted to assure you that I've been changing my underwear every day, so if I should be in an accident, I'll want you to let my mother know that."

Kristin laughed at her friend. "A 'two-day rule' huh? Looks like you've already expanded it to three."

"Wait till tomorrow. I have a feeling it will be four," the blonde woman grinned. Hurriedly, she pulled off her fleece pullover and t-shirt and slipped on the long johns over her sports bra. Just as quickly, she put the pullover back on, now focused on repeating the procedure with her pants. "At least if I have to get up in the night — what am I saying? *When* I have to get up in the night — I'll be fully dressed."

"Yeah, we need to be really careful if we go out. These tents are so close together. Somebody's going to trip over the stakes, I bet."

It happened just as Kristin predicted, about two a.m., when Brad the Brat ventured out to relieve himself. Unfortunately, it was their tent that caught the sprawling teen, jarring them both from a much-needed restful sleep. When half the camp woke up to check out the commotion, they discovered a still sick Kendra, and her very worried sister.

When the activity died back down, Kristin and Mary Kate found themselves wide awake, the six hours of sleep seemingly sufficient.

"So what are we going to talk about tonight?" the blonde asked through the small hole in her sleeping bag. Despite the close proximity of the tents, they didn't have to worry about keeping their voices down, as the howling wind drowned out everything.

"Why don't you tell me about your friend, the one who has a keychain like mine?"

"Deb," Mary Kate smiled as she thought of her longtime friend. "She's been my best friend since we were in second grade. One day on the playground, she just beat the shit out of some boy who was picking on me."

Kristin laughed. "Sounds like something I'd do."

"Well the funny part is that it was Allan Britton, my boyfriend's little brother. And to this day, it's always awkward for Allan when he and Deb get in the same room, like he's afraid she's going to do it again."

"Sounds like a wuss."

"Yeah, Allan's a wuss, alright. And Deb is not somebody you want to mess with, let me tell you."

"So is she out?"

"Not really." Mary Kate paused, unsure how much of the story she should tell. She hadn't talked about this since they'd shushed everything up in high school. *Oh, what the hell*, she thought. It wasn't like Kristin was going to go back to Mooresville and blab. "It's kind of a complicated story."

"Coming out stories usually are."

"Well, see...we used to do everything together. You know, we stayed over at each other's houses, we shot hoops together after school...."

"You played basketball?" Kristin had played in high school as well, and enjoyed the occasional pick-up game at IU.

"Yeah, I was the two-guard on our high school team, and Deb was the small forward. She had a few inches on me — like who doesn't, right? — but I always gave her a good game. Anyway, a couple of the girls on our team decided that we spent too much time together, and they started a rumor that Deb and I were lovers. It got all over school, and since my mom taught there, she heard it one day in the teacher's lounge. Of course, she assured everybody that it wasn't true, but then I got the lecture about how all the other girls my age were dating, and that people wouldn't be saying stuff like that if I went out with boys. So I did, and Deb and I really cut back on the time we spent together. It's kind of funny that we had to start sneaking around to see each other like we really were lovers," Mary Kate was still pretty bitter about all of that, not to mention ashamed of the way she'd treated her friend in the fallout.

Kristin couldn't imagine what that would have been like. There were several gay teens in her high school, and most people thought it was pretty cool to have gay friends. Of course, she hadn't exactly known she was gay back then, so it might have been different, but she didn't think that people would have cared one way or another.

"Then when we were seniors, I had this boyfriend, Craig. We...went all the way after a party and a month or so later, I thought I might be pregnant. There was no one I could talk to except Deb, and..." Mary Kate always felt so bad when she remembered this, "...and when I told her, she just...started crying. She wouldn't tell me why, though. I just thought she was worried about me."

Kristin thought she knew exactly where this story was going. She'd gotten that sick feeling in her stomach when Erin told her about sleeping with Ben.

And then later when everything worked out — I just got my period late — she finally told me what it was. She said that...she just hated to think about somebody else touching me like that." Mary Kate sighed at the memory. It was one of hardest moments the two friends had shared, but it bound them even to this day.

"So Deb was in love with you." It was a statement rather than a question.

"Yeah."

"How did you feel about that?"

"Mostly, it was just kind of sad. I loved her too, more than anybody else in my life, just...not that way."

"I imagine that was pretty sad for both of you, then." Kristin had never told Erin how she'd felt. "Have you managed to get past that?"

"Yeah, actually it wasn't all that hard because we were such good friends. That afternoon, we both just cried for about an hour, then I started hiccupping, then we both started laughing, then Deb peed in her pants and by that time we were way past

anything serious," Mary Kate laughed as she recalled that day. "But we were closer after that, and I was really glad when she met somebody in college."

"So she has a girlfriend?"

"Not anymore. But they were together a couple of years and I think it did Deb a lot of good. You know, it boosted her self-esteem."

"That's a really cool story, Kate. And Deb sounds like somebody I'd really like."

"Everybody likes her, except Allan and Bobby, of course," she laughed.

"What's Bobby got against her?"

"I don't know, maybe it's just loyalty to his brother. Or he resents how much time I spend with her. Either way, it's mutual. She never cared for him either, but she was always polite. I couldn't say the same for Bobby."

"Pardon me for asking, but why did you stay with this jerk so long?" Bobby sounded like someone with big time control issues.

"You know, I make him sound like he's awful, but he's not a bad guy really. Bobby's usually nice to everybody, and he helps out a lot in the community. He even got up at a council meeting once and argued that not enough tax dollars were being spent in the black neighborhoods. And believe me, in a place like Mooresville, saying something like that won't win you many friends."

"But he's not for you?"

"Right."

"So why haven't you broken up?" Kristin question wasn't challenging, just curious.

"Because I'm a big chicken, I guess." Mary Kate rolled over in her sleeping bag so that she was facing her new friend. "The sad part is that once you throw out Bobby Britton, there really isn't anybody left."

"What about...Deb? After all these years, are you sure you don't feel something there?" Kristin knew that she was running a risk with that question, but Kate had been very open so far in their talk.

"Yeah, I'm sure. But sometimes...it's almost like I wish I did. I mean, I wish I could have a relationship with somebody that was as easy as ours is. We respect each other; we always have. I just don't feel any...physical attraction to Deb."

"Is it just Deb, or...is it women in general?" Nothing subtle about that.

Mary Kate laughed nervously, suddenly feeling that Kristin had somehow seen a part of her that no one else did. "It's.... Boy, you ask hard questions!"

"You don't have to answer."

"No...I've come this far, and you can't see me blush in the dark anyway," she laughed. Mary Kate felt the anxiety welling up inside. She had never told a soul what she was about to tell Kristin, a woman she'd known for three days. "When I was in college, I developed a serious crush on my roommate Jessica. She just...I don't know, fascinated me. I just felt so lucky that we were friends. Then she met Bill Jones. I swear that's his real name. They got married during spring break our senior year, and it just broke my heart."

"Did you ever tell her how you felt?"

"No! Are you kidding?"

"Why not? How would you ever know if there was a chance for anything?"

"Because it was just a crush! I just knew that I loved her and I figured that meant wanting her to be happy. And she was happy with Bill," Mary Kate explained. "Of course, they got divorced last year, so I guess she wasn't that happy," she added.

"So the truth outs! Is that why you're thinking about moving to Charlotte?"

"God, you've got a mind like a steel trap!" The Southerner had forgotten that she'd given that bit away. "I've visited there a few times, yes, and I like the city. It just seems like it would be a nice place to live."

"Uh-huh, whatever you say. Are you and Jessica still friends?"

"We're not close anymore, but if I moved there, I'm sure we'd do things together."

"What kind of things?" Kristin's tone was now teasing.

"Now you're being bad," Mary Kate scolded playfully. "I'm not telling you any more of my secrets."

"You mean you have more secrets?"

"I didn't say that."

"But I'll tell you my secrets."

"I bet you don't have any secrets," Mary Kate challenged. "I bet you're an open book."

"Oh yeah?" Was Kate right? "Well if that's true, then...then...then I guess we should try to go back to sleep."

"Okay, but I have a hard time sleeping when I think about having to go to the bathroom. How about you?"

"Bitch!"

Day 4 — Barranco Hut

"Sorry, guys," Kendra moaned. "I hate that I'm holding everybody up."

Kendra and Laurel had made the difficult decision this morning to descend. The New York property manager seemed to be getting worse, her nausea compounded by a headache that kept her awake for the second night in a row. Over her vehement objections, Laurel was accompanying her off the mountain. Jack, on the other hand, would continue with the group, meeting them back at the Keys Hotel in five days.

Park rules required that hikers be escorted at all times, so John had radioed for a ranger to meet them at Shira 2 to escort the women from the park. A rutted road came within two miles of their current position, and a vehicle would wait there to return them to Moshi.

As John was ultimately responsible for signing each hiker out of the park, all of the hikers had to wait until the transfer was effected. And it was very, very cold this morning at Shira 2. To make matters worse, the tents had been broken down during breakfast, so the porters could hurry ahead to get the best campsite at Barranco Hut. Consequently, the hikers were exposed on the ridge to a piercing wind that seemed to come from all directions.

At Barranco, the Shira and Machame trails merged with the Umbwe Route, a popular route for more experienced climbers. That meant that tonight, they would be sharing their campsite with several dozen additional campers. While it was too bad their tents had been packed up already, everyone agreed that it was important to get a good location at the next site.

The good news — no, the great news — was that their hike today would take them onto the mountain itself, and they would be shielded from the fiercely cold winds that had plagued them here at Shira 2. Kendra and Laurel distributed their cold-weather gear and extra supplies to their friends, and wished everyone luck.

"Just think about us over the next few days. While you're out here freezing your asses off, we'll be back at the bar in our shorts drinking beer."

"Kate?" John surprised her as he called out her name.

"Yes, what is it?"

"I was asked to give you a message from the other group of Summit hikers."

"You've talked to them?" Mary Kate was excited.

"Yes, and I was to tell you that the man's luggage did not arrive yesterday."

"Oh, no! Poor Vince! He must be freezing!"

"He is very cold, yes. But the others are sharing their things and he continues."

"What a guy! I can't imagine not having my stuff with me. That's so amazing that he's still climbing."

"It is the spirit of people on the mountain," the guide explained. "Everyone helps everyone else. That is why I know that all of you will reach the crater rim. Because I have watched how you help each other."

John's words were warming to everyone in the group, even if the cold wind wasn't. All of the climbers took quiet pride in his observation, each ticking off the ways they might be able to lend a hand to the others. John was very good at his job.

Almost as soon as they left the plateau, they left behind nearly all of the significant vegetation. This new terrain was like dessert, with only an occasional shrub to decorate the mountainside. Within an hour of slow uphill hiking in the brilliant sunshine, everyone was warm again, running behind the rocks at the first break to pull off their pants and shirts so they could remove the long johns they had on underneath.

Mary Kate started out the day walking with Bill, learning all about his success as a software entrepreneur. A millionaire many times over, he was looking forward to retirement soon from the corporate world so that he could turn his attention to developing tools for charities and non-profits.

"I wish Brad had a little more drive," he lamented. His son would start his freshman year at Old Dominion next year, but for a long time, it had been touch and go on whether he would even be accepted. "He's a really good kid, but he doesn't put out a lot of effort, and doesn't really like to be challenged. It took me forever to convince him to come on this climb."

That was odd. Mary Kate had gotten the impression earlier that this trip had been Brad's graduation present; she just assumed it was something that he wanted. Now the boy's reactions made more sense. He probably didn't want to be here at all. Still, it was too bad they had come all this way together and weren't even talking to each other.

Little by little, the hikers spaced themselves on the trail, shelving conversation for the moment as they became caught up in the majestic landscape. It was a beautiful hike, as they picked their way three times over steep crests, then down into broad valleys. In the third valley, they found to their delight the now familiar dining tent. Gilbert waited with a cream soup made with potatoes, carrots and soft green peppers. No soup had ever tasted as good to the hungry climbers.

The lunch break was shorter than usual, since they were two hours behind schedule today. After only 40 minutes, they were climbing again; glad to be making progress toward their goal.

"Hey Kris, are you alright today?" Mary Kate thought her friend seemed subdued this afternoon.

"Yeah, I'm just thinking about stuff." Kristin was in fact marveling at how John had noticed the way everyone was helping each other along. At the last break, Kate had once again extended her offer of Cliff bars, while Drew and Ann were making sure they were all covered in sunscreen. Leah had offered to stand guard while the very shy Tammy found a private place behind a rock, and Drew and Bill volunteered to fill the water bottles when they reached camp. Trevor's good deed for the day was that he had not yet told Brad to shut up. The boy had talked non-stop, mostly about the Washington Redskins, since they left camp, but Trevor had humored him for going on six hours. He was certainly headed for sainthood.

"Here you go. You didn't eat much at lunch." Mary Kate shoved a Cliff bar into her friend's hand.

"It makes me ill to think about touching my food with these nasty hands." Like everyone else, dirt had gathered deep underneath her fingernails, and her hands hadn't been washed with soap since the bath at Shira 1 two nights ago.

The blonde answered by producing her small bottle of hand sanitizer, which smeared the dirt around, but hopefully killed the bacteria that were lingering. "It's not exactly a surgical scrub, but it's better than nothing."

"Thanks," Kristin said, taking a squeeze and handing it back. "So you suppose Gilbert's hands are clean?"

"I *sooooo* wish you hadn't gone there."

"I mean, he's handling all our food, right?"

"Stop. Stop right now. Don't say another word."

"Hey, I know what I'm going to do."

"What?" Mary Kate was almost afraid to ask, just in case this had anything more to do with the unsanitary state of affairs.

"When we get to Barranco, I'm going to ask Gilbert for my very own pan of warm water, and I'm going to go into our tent and take a sponge bath — with soap!"

"Aren't you smart? What a great idea!"

Kristin smiled smugly, her mind racing ahead a few hours when she would be clean again.

"Hey, I'm still on your list for camp soap, aren't I?"

"Sure, like I said, it's in my best interest to keep you clean too. In fact, what's that old saying? You wash my back and I'll wash yours." Kristin wiggled her eyebrows in

mock seduction. She'd be more than happy to make that exchange, and anything else that needed washing.

"Actually, I think it's scratch, not wash." *Is Kristin flirting?* Mary Kate found that idea...flattering as hell.

"Same idea, though. My back doesn't itch, but it's dirty." Kristin smiled and took a big bite of her Cliff bar. "By the way...that's the second time you've called me Kris."

"Oops, sorry."

"No, it's okay. Remember the other night when I told you about my friend Erin? The one who died?"

"Yeah."

"She always called me Kris. I liked it then too," she said seriously, a shy smile peeking out.

"Then Kris it is." Mary Kate matched the smile with one of her own. For the longest moment, the women held each other's eyes, both beginning to feel a bond that was surprisingly deep for their young friendship. Their conversation last night had brought them closer, Kristin feeling honored that Kate had opened up, and Mary Kate glad that she had finally had the chance to talk to someone about Jessica. She could have told Deb any time, she knew, but that would have surely hurt her friend.

"Oops, they're leaving without us," Kristin said, jumping to her feet and grabbing her backpack. With her free hand, she held Mary Kate's as the woman backed into the straps and secured them across her chest and waist.

Kristin Addison had an uncanny way of making Mary Kate feel important when they talked. *Probably her training*, the blonde woman thought again. It would be really cool if they could somehow stay friends after this trip. Miami wasn't so far away that she couldn't visit a time or two, and maybe they could meet sometime in Orlando. That idea prompted unwelcome visions of Bobby Britton.

Suddenly, Mary Kate realized that she wanted to know a lot more about her enigmatic friend. "So do you have a girlfriend back home?"

"No, not for a while. I have found that my dissertation committee can be very generous with my time," she laughed. "Until this trip, I hadn't really had a break in over two years. Even during the holidays, I always had so much reading and research to do."

"But when you finish, it'll all be worth it, right?"

"Yeah, I think so. At least I'll get to do the kind of work I want."

"So Kris?" Mary Kate had lagged back so that they were walking well out of earshot of the others in the group. "Did you always know you were gay?"

Funny, straight people always ask that, Kristin thought. Come to think of it, so did gay people. Some of her lesbian friends would turn the question around: *Did you always know you were straight?* But Kristin's answer actually made it a fair question, or so it seemed.

"No, not really. When I was in high school, I figured I was just like everybody else. I thought all girls got crushes on their friends and their female teachers. And I thought all guys were pretty lousy in bed," she laughed. "Then when I was 19, I met Pilar and she showed me everything as it should be."

"So who was Pilar?" Mary Kate encouraged. She was glad that Kristin felt comfortable enough with her to talk about such personal things.

"Pilar was 41 years old, the same age as my mother. She was Venezuelan, very beautiful and exotic. Our entire relationship existed inside her home, though, mostly inside her bedroom. She couldn't be public, and I was feeling like I'd just invented sex. I didn't want to be private anymore — I wanted to tell everybody."

"So you decided then that you wanted to be with women instead of men?" Deb had said once that the decision wasn't women or men; it was women or nothing. But maybe Kristin had a different experience.

"I knew. Because with Pilar, I felt like I'd found the key to intimacy. For me, it wasn't what someone said or did to arouse me or to satisfy me. It was what I could do to arouse or satisfy them. And ever since I've learned that, I've only wanted to be with women."

Mary Kate hadn't actually anticipated that Kristin would move their discussion to that level of detail. But since she had, the blonde woman wanted to know more. "So you enjoy touching women, but you don't enjoy touching men?"

"I guess that's right."

If pressed, Mary Kate would have to admit that she didn't enjoy touching Bobby. Nor did he seem to mind, as far as she could tell. He usually only wanted one thing.

"So have you ever been in love? I mean, with anyone since Pilar?"

"I had a serious girlfriend for a couple of years when I first started the grad program at IU. We lived together, but it didn't work out."

"What happened?"

Kristin chuckled at the memory. It honestly didn't hurt anymore, but it had been devastating at the time. "What happened was that Kristin Addison learned a very important lesson: When you steal somebody's girlfriend, you should expect to see them leave the same way."

"Oh, that must have been awful!"

"It was at first. But like I said, I learned not to go hooking up with girls who would cheat on their partner."

It was five o'clock when the party reached Barranco Hut. John was right about its beauty, and also about his prediction that it would be crowded. More than 50 colorful tents dotted the site, a large landing just beneath the intimidating 600-foot Barranco Wall. First thing tomorrow, they would scale that wall.

Kristin's idea was a good one, and though Mary Kate hadn't appeared with a reciprocal offer to wash her back, both women managed to get in private sponge baths before dinner. In fact, Leah, Tammy and Ann had followed suit, which meant that the dinner conversation centered on just how dirty the men in their group actually were. Leah had the inside track, as she was sharing a tent with Trevor.

For dinner on this fourth night, Gilbert had prepared oxtail soup, rice, cabbage, and chicken in tomato sauce. Brad gullibly whipped his head around to see the "lion" on the ridge, only to find that his chicken had disappeared from his plate. The same thing happened to his hard boiled egg at breakfast this morning. If he could just last for four more days without starving to death, he would consider this trip a success.

After dinner, Mary Kate took a few minutes to make some notes in her journal before turning in. She thought it would be fun to write her impressions of the Barranco Wall before climbing it, and then again later.

As before, her thoughts turned from the mountain to her companions, especially the dark-haired woman who shared her tent.

Kristin grows more and more intriguing every day. We talked a lot last night and I told her things I've never told anyone. And she told me a bunch of personal stuff too, so it's nice to know that she's as comfortable talking to me as I am with her. If I didn't know better, I'd say she made a pass at me today, offering to wash my back if I washed hers. I'm sure she wasn't serious, but she was pretty cute when she said it. Who knows? Maybe before this trip is over I will, and wouldn't that blow her away?

The moon was almost full, lighting the way for those midnight visits to the latrine. Now about those latrines.... At each camp thus far, there had been two, usually on opposite sides of the camp, and one was informally designated as the porters' latrine. Until this night, the Summit party had had each campsite to themselves. Now at Barranco Hut, there were more than a hundred campers and porters, and still only two latrines. Their condition simply defied description.

Though they were shielded from the wind, the night was bitterly cold, driving the hikers into their tents soon after supper. Mary Kate hated the idea of putting on the same long johns for the fourth time, but she wanted to save her others — the ones with the turtle neck — for the night they went to the summit. Kristen went on and on

without mercy about how clean she felt in her fresh long johns; that is, until she learned that Kate had given her third pair to the guy who didn't get his bags.

"I shouldn't tease you. That was a very kind gesture, considering he was a guy you didn't even really know."

"I know I didn't know him, but you know what? I knew his dream. It was just like mine. He saw this mountain and it called him here. I think I'd be willing to spend a couple of extra nights in dirty clothes if it meant he had a chance to get to the top. You know?"

"Yeah, and you're a better person than I am."

"Now come on! You'd have done it too, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah, I'm sure I would have. But sharing toilet paper...now that's special. I don't do that with just anybody, you know."

"And I appreciate it very much," Mary Kate answered. "So how come you knew all about what to bring?"

"I have two friends back in Bloomington who did this a couple of years ago. They went with Summit and said they had a really good time. Cyn made it all the way to the peak; Andrea made it halfway to Stella Point."

"What happened?"

"She got a cerebral edema. Basically, it's a severe headache, but it was so bad she had to turn back right away."

"Wow, I bet that was disappointing for her."

"Not really. Getting to the top was Cyn's goal. Andrea's goal was to come along so she could share the experience with Cyn. They both got what they came for, and they went home fulfilled."

"What a great story!" Mary Kate wished she weren't so focused on the summit, but there was no denying that she'd have trouble rationalizing her failure to get there.

"Yeah, they're really good friends of mine. I think you'd like them. I know they'd like you." Kristin was sure that her friends would approve of this petite Southerner.

Mary Kate dozed off, imagining what it would be like to spend time with Kristin and her friends. As long as it wasn't in Mooresville, it might be fun.

Day 5 — The Barranco Wall and Karanga Valley

If Mary Kate and the others were intimidated by the massive rock face before them, Tammy was terrified. She'd known it would be a bit of a scramble, but nothing she had read prepared her for the sheer drop-offs as they picked their way up the steep trail. As always, the art student lined up directly behind John, which was a particularly good idea today, since he would help her negotiate the tight turns and the leaps from one rock to another.

Mary Kate had started out in front of Kristin, but they found out early on that it was best for the taller woman to lead. That way, she could lean down and offer a hand to help her shorter climbing partner scale the taller rocks. A couple of times, Mary Kate returned the favor, giving Kristin's backside a push.

"Oooo, here's another big rock," the tall woman cooed so no one else would hear. "Will you put your hand on my butt again and help me up?"

"Oh yeah, I'll put my hand on your butt, alright!" she answered with a hard slap.

"A spanker! Be still my heart!"

Mary Kate could only laugh at her friend's antics. She hadn't felt this uninhibited around anyone. "You need to keep your mind on what you're doing," reminding both of them that the Barranco Wall was serious business.

The tricky part — besides the ever-present looming cliff — was the effect of the weight in the backpack. It was relatively simple to judge how much energy was needed to leap from one rock to another, how much "give" was required in the recovery, and how to maintain balance while climbing. But all of these mental calculations were thrown off kilter by the 30-pound pack riding — for the women anyway — above their center of gravity. Simple hops from one rock to the next became more adventurous, and the utmost concentration was required.

Comically interspersed in their precarious efforts was the near constant stream of porters, still in shorts, t-shirts, and sneakers, and still carrying upwards of 80 pounds each. The sure footed porters scrambled ahead, usually passing through the center the trail, but sometimes forging their own path on the adjacent, steeper rocks. All of the hikers stopped to laugh when a porter from the Umbwe group passed carrying a black Travel Pro roll-on, absurdly out of place in this rugged terrain.

One hour into the climb, the hikers were halfway to the top, sweating and sucking wind as they collapsed on a wide shelf.

"This isn't a 600-foot wall," Bill proclaimed breathlessly. "It's a hundred six-foot walls, and we've only done 50 of them."

"Remind me of that tonight. I'm going to write that in my book," Mary Kate wheezed.

Once again, the climbers went to work, helping one another up the wall until finally all 10 stood on the high ridge, now at 13,300 feet. The view behind them was majestic, as a thick cloud cover followed their tracks, totally obscuring the view of Barranco Hut and the entire plateau beyond.

"Mt. Meru," John nodded in the direction of a second peak more than 30 miles to the southeast, rising high above the clouds. Cameras came out to capture the scene. It was amazing to imagine that had they departed one day later, they would have traversed the mountain completely enshrouded in fog and rain.

The view to their left was absolutely breathtaking. At this altitude, the vast mountain terrain resembled one of NASA's moonscape photos. Here atop the Barranco Wall, they were directly beneath the towering glacier, topping out over a mile above where they currently stood. It was simply incredible to imagine it as their final destination, and that they would push their way up in less than two days time.

Just as all the climbers began to feel satisfied with conquering the Barranco Wall to reach this new height, the unthinkable happened. John picked up his pack and began to lead them down the other side of the ridge.

"No! We climbed all that way, and now we're just giving it all back!" Jack whined. "Can't we just go up from here?"

"Here" was closest to the Western Breach, not at all an approach for amateurs. John laughed as the hikers grumbled. By the end of their short hike today, they would climb almost 3,000 feet, but would net only 300 feet in altitude. They were traveling the South Circuit Path, detouring for the night into the Karanga Valley, so they would have one extra day for acclimatization. The extra day in the valley and the long hike across the plateau were the main reasons this route was more successful than others. By the time this group made its push for the summit — tomorrow at midnight — the hikers would be ready.

The Summit campers were delighted to find that they had the Karanga Valley to themselves, as the Umbwe group had gone directly to Barafu Hut, where they would summit tonight. This too was a beautiful campsite, nestled against the mountain and bound on the east by a rapid stream pouring straight from the glacier above.

Arriving in the Karanga Valley at one p.m., the hikers had the whole afternoon to rest in the warm sun. As was their practice, they hung out their sleeping bags to dry, and Mary Kate took the opportunity to finally wash out the Capilene long johns she had worn for four nights straight. The material was quick to dry, and she hoped she'd have it if she needed an extra layer for tomorrow night.

This time, it was the men who set out to find a bath, climbing high into the rocks and greenery to disappear for half an hour, emerging finally clean for the first time in days. The women followed suit, finding the water at this elevation to be *much* colder than the icy pool they had shared back at Shira 1. Still, the temptation to rid themselves of the clinging soot was overpowering.

When they reached the first small pool, Kristin broke the bar of soap in half, giving one half to the others. "I'm going to go up a little further and see if I can find a waterfall to wash my hair."

"Can I come?" Mary Kate asked. Her short blonde hair was matted to her head, thanks to the rain hat she had worn since they left the Keys Hotel.

"Sure," she answered, relishing the idea of having a private bath with this little cutie. However, Cyn would point out that the polite thing to do would be to invite the others as well. "You guys wanna join us a little higher?"

"No, I'm fine right here," Ann answered. "I'm just going to wash up a little bit. I don't think I'm going to bother with my hair this time."

"Me either," said Leah. "I'm just going to pull it back a little tighter. If there are any bugs in there, they can live in squalor."

About 30 feet higher, the women found what they were looking for: a pure stream of water tumbling between the rocks into a narrow shallow pool three feet below, creating the perfect spot for hair washing. Perfect, that is, if the water were 60 degrees warmer. Without getting undressed, Kristin loosened the tie that had held her long hair back since its last washing at the Shira 1 campsite. Tipping her head forward, she gasped as she soaked it in the icy stream, and then began to lather.

"I have a feeling this is going to be the fastest bath of my life," Mary Kate said, as she dipped her own head under the frigid running water. Briskly, she began to scrub the dirt from her scalp.

"I know, but it'll be worth it. Remember how nice it felt the other night to be clean, even if it only lasted an hour or two?" Kristin rinsed her hair of the thick black sludge, and started to lather again. It would take several more washings to get anywhere close to clean, but at this temperature, two cycles would have to be enough.

Mary Kate followed suit, rinsing and scrubbing again. Her shorter hair would fare better than Kristin's longer locks. "I think this will do it for me. Remember my two-day rule for the clothes that turned into a three-day rule then a four day rule?"

"Yeah." Rinsing her hair one more time, Kristin immodestly pulled off her now soaking shirt and sports bra, soaping a cloth to wash her upper body.

"Well, I think I'm going to change my definition of clean, too. I think if people can tell that I'm a blonde then my hair's clean."

"Then I guess you pass. But are you a *natural* blonde?" Like she had on the trail, Kristin knew she was dangerously close to flirting again, arching her eyebrows suggestively.

"Why, I would have thought you already knew the answer to that." Mary Kate teased back, figuring that her friend would certainly have noticed such a thing; she had stolen a glimpse of Kristin's jet black curls, and she wasn't even a lesbian.

"Kate Sasser! Are you accusing me of peeking?" The tall woman's voice rang with mock indignation. *Oh yeah, I peeked alright.*

"So you didn't?" Mary Kate grilled her friend playfully, and was right this minute getting an eyeful of two perfect breasts, the rose-colored nipples stiff and tightened from the chilled soapy cloth. *Did my brain just say 'perfect'?* "Well? Did you?"

"Maybe a little," Kristin answered sheepishly. *Busted!*

"And?"

"I'd...say...you were...a natural blonde." Her voice was just above a peep.

Mary Kate found her friend's discomfort amusing, but didn't make her wallow long, not wanting to make a big deal out of it. "That's right. Here, let me have that." She held out her hand for the soapy cloth and stepped across the narrow creek to wash her friend's back, as though it was the most natural thing in the world. She liked doing this, and was glad that Ann and Leah hadn't come up with them. Others might have read more into this than just the friendly gesture it was.

Kristin, on the other hand, felt her heart speed up at the other woman's touch, wondering if Kate had any idea of the effect she was having.

"It's no big deal. I...peeked a little too. I think it's perfectly natural, don't you?"

"*You* peeked? Why would you peek at the girls, Miss I-Have-a-Boyfriend-Back-in-Georgia?"

"That's ex-boyfriend," Mary Kate corrected. She finished scrubbing and dipped the cloth back under the flow so she could rinse the soap from the woman's sinewy back. "And it wasn't exactly peeking. We were all sitting out in the open buck naked. It was kind of hard not to notice."

The dark-haired woman didn't bother to say that she was planning on getting under the small waterfall to rinse when she was finished washing. She was enjoying Kate's touch too much for that. "Ah, but I only noticed you." Now *that* was flirting, and Kristin knew it too late to stop herself. "Of course, no one else was flailing around in the water like you were."

The blonde woman chuckled at the image. "That's true, and I especially noticed you because no one else offered me a hand out," Mary Kate reasoned that was as good an excuse as any for looking at her naked friend. She didn't want to leave Kristin the impression that she always looked at naked women.

"That makes sense." Kristin pulled off her boots and socks, then hooked her thumbs underneath the elastic waist of her convertibles, wiggling as she pushed them off her long legs. "But are you peeking now?"

Mary Kate's face went completely scarlet as she realized that she was indeed checking out her friend.

"I...."

"Go ahead," Kristin teased, "it's okay if you are. I'm not shy." *And by all means, let me know if you see anything you like.* It was obvious that Kate was looking at her, but what she really wanted to know was why.

"I..." *Think!* "It's just that after I started working out and all, I started paying more attention to how my muscles were developing. And then, I started to notice other women who worked out." That's all it was. "Their muscles, I mean."

"So is it just my muscles you're checking out? 'Cause I'm not exactly flexing over here." Again, Kristin knew she was flirting, and that she was getting perilously close to something more overt.

Mary Kate opened her mouth to speak, then closed it, thoroughly embarrassed at Kristin's pointed questioning. *I can't believe she's doing this to me!* "You just...have a very nice body. It's hard not to notice that."

"Thank you very much. For what it's worth, Kate, I think you have a very nice body too." Now that was unmistakably a flirt, and from a soapy woman wearing only her panties.

Mary Kate looked at her friend, this time at her beautiful face, which wore a gentle smile with no trace of mischief. Suddenly overwhelmed at the near electric atmosphere, she finally looked away. "I can't believe we're having this conversation."

Kristin's forced chuckle broke the tension. "Yeah, it did seem to have a life of its own, didn't it?" She'd obviously just made Kate very uncomfortable, and she needed to recover quickly. "Hey, sorry if I..."

"It's okay." In fact, Mary Kate was feeling something very akin to excitement from knowing that Kristin found her body attractive. The feeling was quite mutual, but it hadn't occurred to her until just that moment that her admiration was...*attraction*. And with that observation, she couldn't help but wonder if Kristin was attracted to her in the same way. That thought was both arousing and alarming.

"Hey, just let me get under there and rinse, and I'll go on back to camp and give you some privacy."

Mary Kate looked away as Kristin removed her panties and slid into the freezing water, briskly rinsing her soapy skin. In under a minute, she was out, shivering madly as she dried herself with the towel.

Kristin was angry at herself for overstepping the bounds of common sense. No matter what her gaydar said, it was obvious that Kate didn't want to go there. She was about to screw up a great friendship with this...predatory behavior. *It's no wonder that I don't have many friends.*

Twenty minutes later, Mary Kate entered the camp to find her nine fellow hikers stretched out in the sun like cats. She was unnerved about what had transpired up at the creek. Kristin had flirted with her, it seemed; but the next thing she knew, it was like she was flirting back. Or had she just misinterpreted everything, reading something sexual into it when Kristin hadn't meant that at all? Whatever it had been, she hadn't handled it well, and if she didn't fix it, it was going to be uncomfortable for both of them.

The dark-haired woman was off by herself, leaning back against a large rock as she wrote in her journal. After tucking away her dirty clothes, Mary Kate screwed up the courage to go to her, feeling that it would be best to clear the air.

"Hey, Kris," Mary Kate kept her voice low so that the others wouldn't overhear. "I'm sorry about...you know, up there. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable or anything."

Kristin looked up into the serious green eyes. She couldn't believe Kate was standing here apologizing to her after the way she'd acted. "No, Kate. I was out of line with the teasing and stuff. I..." *How much should I say?* "I really do like you a lot, and I'd hate it if I did something that offended you."

"No worries there, Kris. You and I are fine. It's just that I..." *Am I going to admit to what I really feel?*

"I know. I shouldn't have said something like that."

"Listen," Mary Kate held up her hand, drawing in a deep breath. "You weren't exactly having a one-sided conversation, you know. If there's any blame to go around, we should share it. Or maybe we should just agree that nobody did anything wrong."

As they had in the rocks above, the women locked eyes again in a stirring gaze. Both had more to say, but neither wanted to take a chance on ruining what was turning out to be a pretty nice moment.

"You guys want some M&M's?" Drew ruined the moment instead.

Gilbert outdid himself with dinner, especially considering that the shelf life of anything with protein in it had long since passed. The first course was French toast with marmalade. Next was a mixture of peppers and carrots, and piping hot French fries, which disappeared as soon as he set them down. This time, no one objected to the 10 sets of cleaner-than-usual hands that plunged into the bowl. For dessert, he produced a plate of fried banana pastries.

Brad finally got his revenge on Jack, telling him that his sleeping bag had blown into the dirt as he stole the last pastry from the prankster's plate. Ann offered hers to the flustered lawyer then stuffed it into her own mouth as he reached to take it.

Bill enjoyed watching his son finally come out on top, but he was especially proud of the way Brad had handled the ribbing from practically everyone in the group. No one was cutting him any slack, but he'd lost the attitude. Too bad he wasn't warming up to his old man.

Just as they were finishing dinner, John came in to brief them on what the next day would bring.

"We leave tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. We have a long day to get to Barafu Hut. Barafu means 'ice' and it will be cold there."

Jaws dropped around the table as the guide warned of a night more chilling than any they'd known. Though they were shielded from the wind here in the valley, the night air already gave every indication that the temperature was headed into the upper teens, below what they'd experienced at Barranco.

"When we reach the camp, we will eat and go to sleep. I wake you at 11 o'clock to climb. If you help each other, we will all be standing at Stella Point by sunrise."

"And how many of us do you think will make it all the way to the summit?" Drew wondered.

John had watched the group carefully, and predicted that three who would reach Uhuru would be Drew, Leah, and perhaps Kristin. Tammy would not; nor would Brad, who complained often about being tired and cold. All of the others seemed capable, but it was unclear how they would respond to the thin air at Stella Point. "I will guess only four or five, but I do not know which of you," he answered.

This was it. Tonight was their last full night before the push for the summit. The enormity of the moment hit everyone all at once, it seemed.

"We're finally here," Leah said quietly. "I mean, I know it's not Everest or anything like that, but this is the biggest mountain I'll ever hope to climb."

"I know what you mean," Ann said. "Tomorrow's the day I've been working toward for six months." She laid her hand in the center of the table, palm down.

Mary Kate covered it, and Kristin covered both. One by one, all 10 climbers built a tower of hands as a show of solidarity.

"Hey, guys?" It was Tammy, who had kept to herself most of the afternoon. They were all worried about her, as she continued to have headaches, but still she didn't complain. "Listen, I just want you all to know how much I appreciate the way everybody has helped me along so far. My goal is to reach Stella Point, not the summit. I'm going to do my best, and I have faith that God will help me; but if I fail, I'm pretty satisfied just to have made it to the top of the Barranco Wall."

"You're not going to fail, Tammy. We're not going to let you," Drew spoke up. "Ten for 10 at Stella Point, alright?"

When their meeting broke up, Kristin and Mary Kate scooted backwards into their tent, leaving their boots in the usual spot beneath the rain guard.

"Did you hear that, Kris? John thinks only four or five of us will make it." Mary Kate had looked carefully at the other climbers, trying to find the clues their guide had used to make his predictions. Drew would make it; so would the marathoners, Trevor and Leah. Kristin would certainly get there, and given Bill's pattern of success, she figured he would also. "I wish I knew if he thought I could do it."

"I'm kind of glad he didn't name names, you know? How would you have felt if he hadn't called yours?"

"Like I wouldn't be able to do it, I guess," she conceded. At this stage of the game, John wasn't really part of the equation. This was between her and the mountain.

"Kate?" That was John's voice.

"In here," she called.

From outside the tent, the guide relayed the news. "I got word from the other group. It was very cold on the mountain last night. Only two of the three reached the summit. They were named Kako and Vince."

"He made it!" Tears rushed to the green eyes as she thought of the odds her friend had beaten to accomplish his dream.

"That's great," Kristin said softly, touched at her friend's emotions. "We're going to make it too, you know."

Mary Kate reached over and took Kristin's hand, squeezing hard. "Yes, I know." But did she? She was feeling no ill effects from the altitude, but many climbers were struck suddenly, and the only recourse was to descend immediately. Without the Diamox, she was on her own. Would she have the courage and stamina to push through the smaller obstacles, and the good sense to give in if she had to? She hoped so.

"I had no idea I was going to be spending so much time in my sleeping bag. Did you?" the tall woman asked, squirming into her narrow bag.

"Yeah, I guess I did, now that I think about it. I read a bunch of personal accounts on the Internet. That's why I asked you to share a tent. I couldn't imagine being up all night with Drew," she laughed.

And you ended up trading one horny hiker for another, Kristin mused. She lay quietly, not knowing where to take the conversation after that thought.

"Kris?"

"Yeah?"

"Could I ask you a personal question?"

From inside her sleeping bag, the tall woman let out a muffled laugh. "After all the stuff we've talked about, you have to ask if you can ask me a personal question! I can't imagine what it's going to be, but fire away!"

Mary Kate returned the laugh, but her thoughts were much more serious. "I was just wondering about how you decided the first time that you were going to have sex with a woman. Was that Pilar?"

"Yeah, it was Pilar." *A very interesting question, Kate. Where did it come from?* "We met at an art festival and ended up walking around together all day. She invited me to her condo for dinner and I accepted. Now that I think about it, I'm not sure I ever consciously decided anything. It all just sort of happened."

"But did you say, 'Wow, I can't believe I'm doing this?' or was it just natural? Did you have a little voice in your head that said you shouldn't?"

"Well, now that you mention, I'd have to say that I did have to sort of give myself permission to do it. But I think it was something I'd thought about before, and I figured I would once I met the right person."

"So did you feel funny afterwards? Or guilty?"

"Not really. I mean, I told you, I felt like somebody had just turned all the lights on. I thought it was just going to be an experience. I had no idea it would define so much about me." Kristin couldn't help but wonder if Kate's curiosity was because she was going through some sort of upheaval of her own. Clearly, there was something going on in her head, and she'd probably never given voice to it before. "So have you ever considered it, having sex with another woman?"

Mary Kate froze. She had brought their conversation this far knowing it would lead here. She wanted to tell somebody. "Yeah."

"With your roommate, the one you had a crush on?"

"No, I never really let myself think of her that way. It was just so obvious that she wouldn't want that, and I was happy just to be her friend...and to have my little fantasies."

"So there was somebody else?"

"Yeah, but it wasn't a girlfriend or anything like that." Mary Kate couldn't believe she was telling all of this. Kristin Addison was going to know things about her that no one else on earth knew.

The small blonde had grown very quiet, like she was debating whether or not to say more. "Do you want to talk about it, Kate?"

Mary Kate blew out a deep breath. "There really isn't much to talk about. Nothing happened."

"Okay," Kristin answered softly, not wanting to push.

"When I first went to Savannah College, I was invited to try out for the women's basketball team. A lot of the girls on the team were lesbians, and one of them — her name was Trish — got to be a pretty good friend of mine. So one night I stayed over at her apartment off campus and we just started kissing. I came so close to just...." She couldn't finish the words.

"What stopped you?"

"I don't know. I just got scared. I didn't want that."

"You didn't want it, or you didn't want to let yourself have it?" Kristin asked gently.

"Both I guess. The whole idea of it was exciting and all, but I didn't really feel that way about Trish. And then there was that part of me that didn't want all those people in high school to have the satisfaction of being right."

"But they weren't right. You and Deb weren't lovers."

"That doesn't make any difference though, when you think about it. Whether it was Deb and me or somebody else and me, it would have been the same thing."

Kristin heard both resignation and resolve in her friend's voice. She suspected that Kate had been warring with this for a long time. "Do you still think about what it would be like?"

"Sometimes," Mary Kate confessed. *Like right now*, she admitted to herself.

The women lay still for a long time, not saying a word. Each thought the other had gone to sleep until finally Mary Kate whispered.

"Kris?"

"Yeah?"

"I have to pee." At three liters a day, a body just rented water.

Day 6 — Barafu Hut

On Saturday morning, the camp came alive at the usual hour, six a.m. Gilbert toasted the now-stale bread in a hot skillet, but it didn't improve the taste, as the campers had grown weary of the repetitive breakfast fare. John appeared in the dining tent during their meal to remind them that loss of appetite was characteristic of this altitude and that they should force themselves to eat more than they wanted. They would need energy for the climb.

This was also the day to take the Larium.

The hikers were ready to go by 7:30, but John held them in camp, explaining that they needed to give last night's summiting party time to vacate the campsite at Barafu Hut. He described the campsite as quite small, perched on a narrow ledge at the base of the path that led to Stella Point. This, he went on, was one of the reasons for the overnight push to the peak. If they waited until daylight to start out, it would be dark when they

returned to Barafu. By forcing climbers to start at midnight, the park could accommodate twice as many.

The main reason for the midnight summit was that the icy path melted in the sun, and was far too slippery to traverse. It was therefore important to get up and get down before it warmed up too much.

The problem with the late start from the Karanga Valley was that the high valley walls shielded the camp from the warming sun. In fact, the pleasant afternoon they had enjoyed the day before ended shortly after four, when the sun dipped behind the steep western ridge. When they finished packing their gear for the start of today's trek to Barafu, the hikers climbed one by one high onto the rocks on the valley's west side, waiting for the morning sun to find them.

Except for the persistent chill, Mary Kate felt good today, wearing clean clothes from head to toe for the first time since Shira 1. She was dressed in lightweight black fleece pants, a moisture-wicking shirt, with a bright green fleece pullover that hugged her torso snugly. When the sun finally cleared the valley wall, she lowered her wraparound shades and basked in the thawing warmth.

Kristin was the last to emerge from the tent, tossing her dirty yellow Summit bag into the pile in the center of camp. She too was wearing form-fitting fleece pants, but had a looser Polartec top over a Capilene turtleneck. Bending over, she retrieved her backpack from underneath the rain guard.

"Wow!" Drew couldn't tear his eyes from the sight of the shapely rear.

"Wow is right," echoed Jack.

Mary Kate's first inclination was to scold the men for their Neanderthal objectification of women. *But that would be hypocritical*, she realized, relieved that she hadn't said *Wow!* aloud herself. She watched from behind her sunglasses as her friend walked up the hill toward their group. The tall woman had an allure that completely transcended gender, and it went well beyond the fact that she was drop dead gorgeous. This wasn't a new feeling for the Georgian, and she couldn't doubt what it was: She was attracted to Kristin — sexually attracted — and she had never felt such a pull toward someone in all her life.

The tall brunette eyed her fellow hikers, perched high on the rocks to catch the sun's first rays. Kate's blonde hair shone in the light, making her easy to spot among the crowd. Not that Kristin needed any help — she seemed to know instinctively where her cute friend was at every moment.

Sleep had eluded her last night in the Karanga Valley. No doubt, the altitude played a role in her sleeplessness; but it was more than that. Her tent mate had fallen asleep soon after they returned from the latrine. When the petite woman turned in the night, the nylon of her sleeping bag slid along the vinyl of the air mattress, and the bundled form inched down the slight incline until it came to rest, perfectly spooned against her. Had it not been so cold, she would have unzipped her own bag to pull Kate even closer. Instead, she just let her fantasies wander.

Her thoughts had danced all night, replaying her conversations with Kate from the last few days. The blonde had all but admitted that she had been flirting with her too, and that she didn't see anything wrong with it. Yet it left unsaid where they would go from here, and Kristin had lain awake, turning over infinite possibilities. It probably wouldn't amount to anything, but still, the prospect was very, very exciting. Kate Sasser was undeniably appealing, more so than anyone since Pilar, and Kristin wanted to be her sexual mentor.

But Kristin's feelings for Kate went beyond a simple sexual attraction. The woman was friendly and open, and had a great sense of humor, even able to laugh at herself. She listened to others and seemed to know when someone in the group needed a word of encouragement or comfort. People like that were all too rare in this day of self-indulgence.

"Did anyone else have trouble sleeping last night?" Drew asked innocently.

"Are you kidding? With you awake and not snoring, the rest of us slept like babies!" Jack answered sarcastically.

"I knew something was different last night," Mary Kate added, only half joking. "I slept really well too. But that probably means that I won't sleep tonight before the climb."

"Then I guess Drew and I will, because I was up all night too."

Mary Kate raised her shades to look at her friend. "You didn't sleep at all?"

Kristin shook her head, taking a seat on the rock beside the smaller woman.

"Was that because your tent mate crushed you when she slid down the hill?" Mary Kate asked hesitantly. She had awakened this morning to find herself tightly squeezed against her companion.

"You weren't the only one!" Tammy pointed accusingly at Ann, who just shrugged her shoulders.

"Yeah, Trevor does that to me too. I wake up every single day and find myself wedged up against the side of the tent," Leah grumbled.

"I thought you liked it when I cuddled," her boyfriend answered, nuzzling her cheek with his scratchy beard.

"On the other hand, at least he was clean last night."

"Well, believe me," Brad piped up, "If this old man snuggles up to me in the night, you're all going to hear about it!"

"Yeah, like you're the perfect tent mate," his dad countered. "Should I tell them what you do in your sleep?"

"No!" Brad answered frantically. *How embarrassing would that be?*

Kristin leaned closer to her friend, and in a voice only Kate could hear, told her, "It may have been one of the reasons I stayed awake, but I'm certainly not complaining about it." Kate dropped her shades, her eyes fixed straight ahead as a light blush crept onto her cheeks. Kristin feared she'd said too much — again — when she noticed the corner of the blonde woman's mouth turn up slightly in a knowing smile. *Yes!*

From their perch high above, the hikers watched John strap on his backpack. It was finally time to start their day. They began with a steep climb, but immediately descended into another valley, this one almost three miles across. The route to Stella Point would remain obscured until they reached the ridge on the other side. From there, they would descend once more across a broad valley, and then climb a steep trail to Barafu on Kili's southeast corner. In all, they would gain 2,000 feet to Barafu, then 4,000 from there to the summit.

"How are you feeling, Kate?" Drew asked. After the last break, he and Mary Kate fell in at the back of the line, walking now in front of Eric, the assistant guide who been bringing up the rear for the last two days. Eric's presence was a precaution as they climbed to the higher elevations, just in case someone needed to descend.

"I'm pretty good. I keep expecting to start feeling the altitude, but so far, nothing. Too bad there isn't any wood up here to knock on." They had left behind all vegetation in the Karanga Valley.

"You know, I didn't say anything this morning, but the reason I was up all night was because I got this awful headache. I hope it doesn't come back tonight."

"Did you take something? I think Kristin has some aspirin."

"It's alright. It's gone for now. This happened to me before when I went up Mt. Shasta a couple of years ago, but we did that summit in two days."

"Did you have to come back down?"

"No, it went away overnight. But I'm a little worried that it bothered me at 13,000 feet last night, and we're headed way higher than that."

"You should tell John."

"No I shouldn't. If he thinks it's going to be a problem, he'll wanna turn me around at Stella Point, maybe even sooner. I'd rather make that decision myself, you know?"

"That's fine, Drew. But you should know I'm not going to keep my mouth shut if you're doing something dangerous."

"You're not going to rat me out, are you?"

"No," she answered seriously, turning to face him as he walked toward her. "I'm not going to say anything to John, because I don't want anyone else making my decisions

either. But I am going to watch you, and I hope you won't be stubborn about it if it's obvious you should go back down. That peak isn't worth dying for, you know."

"So you'll be like the friend that tells people when they've had too much to drink, eh?" he joked. Kate was just the kind of friend he needed. He knew he had to tell someone about his headaches, and had trusted her to be his safety net. "I appreciate it, Kate."

"That's alright. You do the same for me, okay?"

"Sure thing."

John made the rounds at the next break, asking each climber to come clean about any difficulties with the altitude. Tammy and Trevor admitted to having headaches, and Jack lost his lunch, but no one felt their problems were serious enough to turn back. Drew insisted he was feeling fine. Halfway up the ridge to Barafu, all but Kristin and Leah were gasping for air. John was pleased to see Kate handing out the Cliff bars and encouraging the others to eat. Her determination might just see her all the way to the peak, but he wasn't sure she'd be strong enough when things got really tough.

"Someone's in a pretty good mood, especially considering that she didn't get any sleep last night." Mary Kate lagged behind to walk with the tall woman. The hikers were spread far apart on the single file trail, most of them walking alone, lost in their thoughts about what the night would bring.

"What makes you think I'm in a good mood?" Kristin asked. In fact, she was in a very good mood.

"Because every time I look at you, you're smiling."

"Maybe that's because I smile every time you look at me," she countered.

Mary Kate had to laugh at that comeback, and fought back a blush. "You're being quite the flirt, Kristin Addison."

"Is that a bad thing?" The smile this morning had emboldened her; Kate was feeling something too, but Kristin had no idea how far her friend was willing to go. Nor had she any idea what she wanted from Kate. The thought of touching this exciting *natural* blonde was tantalizing, but Kristin was starting to think that even that wouldn't be enough.

"Who am I to argue with something that makes such a beautiful smile?"

Thud! Where on earth had this southern belle learned to flirt?

The women walked slowly up the hill. *Pole pole* was still the mantra, more important now than ever as they neared Barafu Hut.

"Are you getting excited?" Kristin asked, earning an arched eyebrow from her green-eyed friend. "About the climb?" she quickly amended.

"Anxious is probably a better word."

"You're going to make it, Kate." At this very moment, Kristin had more faith in Kate than she did in herself, given how tired she was. If she didn't sleep at Barafu, she might not even reach Stella Point.

When they crested the ridge, the site before them nearly stole their breath. John waited at the top, corralling the group as he pointed to the long incline that led to the glacier. "Up there is Stella Point. It is a four-mile walk from here, and is 4,000 feet higher. We will stand there at sunrise. Gilbert has dinner ready, and you should eat, then rest. I will wake you at eleven. It will be very cold."

Barafu Hut was home to three dozen tents tonight, including a larger one for three new guides who would accompany the group. It was important to have enough experienced guides on hand as escorts, especially to watch for signs of distress among the climbers.

The tents were packed closely together on the rocky ledge, the support wires wrapped around rocks or simply whipping in the growing wind. Kristin chose the one farthest from the single latrine and dropped her pack underneath the rain guard.

"Here's your bag." Mary Kate shoved both of their filthy bags next to the zippered door. "Let's get something to eat so you can get to sleep."

Kristin absently followed her companion to the dining tent, where Gilbert had laid out a large tray of French fries, a bowl of pasta, and a brown sauce no one wanted to try — not even Jack. The Milo was gone, the tea was tepid. The tall woman wondered aloud if the loss of appetite at the higher altitudes was actually a myth started by trail companies who ran out of fresh food.

"I'll pack some Cliff bars for later," Mary Kate offered. "Go on to bed and I'll do the water."

Kristin nodded her thanks and disappeared inside their tent. Mary Kate retrieved the Camelbacks from their backpacks and filled them to the brim. This would be the last night they would have to worry about water. When she entered the tent 10 minutes later, she found her companion already zipped up inside her bag.

Quietly, Mary Kate undressed and put on her heavier set of Capilene long johns over a light Capilene t-shirt. To that she added her heaviest fleece pants, and the form-fitting green Polartec top she had worn all day. She changed into her last pair of clean socks, putting the dirty ones back on over them. At the foot of her tent, she laid out her gaiters, gloves, hat, balaclava, and a fleece ear band. To the side, she set the Gore-Tex pants and jacket; they would provide insulation and protect her from the wind. Her jacket had several pockets inside, including one that would hold her Camelback. If she packed her camera, Cliff bars, sunglasses, and water inside the jacket, she wouldn't need the backpack. That would make the climb easier.

As she did every night, she gently pushed her flashlight and camera to the bottom of the sleeping bag where the batteries would stay warm. Tonight, she added her Camelback, as well as Kristin's. It was only six o'clock in the evening, but at 14,000 feet, the temperature was already in the single digits.

The invitation came as she burrowed into her bag. "You can sleep next to me again if you want."

So she did.

Day 7 — Stella Point — Uhuru Peak — Mweka Hut

Mary Kate was glad to know that Kristin was getting the sleep she so desperately needed. Too bad, though, that she didn't get any herself. Her lighted watch told her that the time was a quarter to eleven. John would be rousing them soon to start the climb to Stella Point. She had been perfectly still for almost five hours, afraid that any movement would wake her friend.

In the dark quiet hours, she had examined her feelings about this woman next to her. It was clear from Kristin's overtures that the invitation was there. If she wanted it, they were headed toward something physical, whether just a kiss or some sort of mutual exploration. Who knows, perhaps they would even have sex.

It wasn't like she'd never had casual sex, but it had been quite a while, since her cousin's wedding four years ago. Champagne does that to people. On the other hand, she shouldn't technically have to count that episode at all, since the champagne had rendered her partner pretty useless.

The more she thought about having a sexual encounter with Kristin, the more Mary Kate found herself both excited and intrigued. If she were ever going to do something like this, what better place to do it than halfway across the world from Mooresville, Georgia? No one would ever know about it unless she told them, and she seriously doubted that she'd say a word to anyone other than Deb. Mary Kate was attracted to this tall, dark-haired woman in a way she had never been drawn to Deb...or to anybody else for that matter. It was more than just Kristin's physical beauty, though that was undeniable. Every detail the woman chose to reveal was fascinating; Mary Kate found herself wanting to know more, and to share more of herself.

The one thing that made it so confusing was trying to figure out what Kristin wanted out of all of this. Mary Kate thought she could handle it if it were all just casual fun, but if this was some kind of game that Kristin played to test her own prowess, she wanted no part of it.

"It is 11 o'clock now," John called, his deep voice rumbling into the night. "Trevor?"

"We're up," Leah answered, jostling her boyfriend.

"Jack?"

"We're awake."

"So are we," Tammy yelled out.

"Us too," Bill shouted.

"Kristin?" the guide called to the last quiet tent.

"We're up," Mary Kate responded, unzipping her bag to gently shake the sleeping woman. "Kristin, it's time."

The tall woman sat up and scooted from her bag, stretching her long limbs to shake off the sleep. "I think I slept the whole time."

"You did. Are you ready for this?"

"Yeah, how about you?"

"I didn't sleep, but I'm ready to go. Here's your water."

"Ah, warmed by your feet. How nice!" she joked.

"Would you have rather had a block of ice?"

"Point taken." Like Mary Kate, Kristin had slept in her thickest long johns and middle layer. Piece by piece, they dressed like jousts, covering nearly every exposed inch before emerging from the tent.

Before they exited the tent, Kristin gripped Kate's gloved hand with her own. "Good luck tonight, Kate. I'm there if you need me, okay?"

Mary Kate hugged her friend tightly. "Thanks, Kris. Me too you."

The full moon lit up the entire mountain in a magnificent spectacle, the glacier on top glowing like neon. John lined them up, asking that they try to keep the same order all the way to the top: Tammy, Ann, the guide Lazarro, Kate, Kristin, Leah, Trevor, the assistant guide Eric, Jack, Drew, and finally, the guide Mohammed. The hikers beamed in anticipation. This was really it!

All four of the guides wore head lanterns, but the added light was unnecessary with the brilliant moon. With John in the lead, the path was easy to follow. After walking very slowly for only a half hour, he stopped at a place where boulders lined the trail. "We will break every half hour for five minutes. You should drink."

"I don't know about you guys, but I think I wore too many clothes," Ann complained, already damp with perspiration from exertion.

"My hands are cold," Brad complained.

Mary Kate couldn't believe when she saw the thin leather gloves the youth had brought for this trip. Her own were heavy Polartec, with elastic that tightened around the wrist. "Here, take these." She reached into her pockets and pulled out the silk glove liners. It seemed as though her heavy gloves would be enough.

Five minutes passed quickly, and soon they were underway again. The pace was very slow, even slower than it had been throughout the trip. It reminded Mary Kate of when she'd first learned to count seconds: *One, Mississippi, two, Mississippi, three....* Here they would take a step, count a couple of seconds, take another step, and count a couple of seconds. With each step, she would plant one of her climbing poles slightly ahead. This rhythm seemed to serve her well. She still hadn't really noticed the effects of the thin air, but she concentrated on taking a breath after each step to make sure it wouldn't hit her all at once.

"We break."

Had it already been a half hour?

Mary Kate reached inside her jacket for the bite valve to her Camelback. She wasn't thirsty, but John insisted that they would need the water tonight.

"It's getting colder," Kristin said softly. "I hope you don't regret giving away your glove liners."

"That's alright. But if Brad doesn't stop complaining, I'm going to take them back when I push him down the mountain," she joked.

"Yeah, it's too bad that he didn't bring enough warm stuff."

"It makes me respect all that much more what Vince accomplished getting to the top without his equipment."

Again, the break was short and they started up. Mary Kate lost count of how many times they stopped, not really wanting to know how much farther they had to walk. Her watch was buried underneath four layers, and it didn't really matter anyway. She was getting very tired, and the temperature had fallen considerably as they climbed. With the fleece cap pulled low over her ears, she dropped the ear band over her balaclava to add a layer of cover to her mouth and nose. Her breath crystallized inside the fleece, but it was warmer than if she left it exposed to the night air.

"My water's frozen," Kristin announced at their next break. She had forgotten John's instructions to blow the water back through the tube after drinking, and now the tube that ran from her backpack to her shoulder was frozen solid.

"Have some of mine," Mary Kate offered, tugging the bite valve from inside her jacket.

"I can't take your water, Kate. You might not have enough." Kristin knew that her friend was wishing she had her glove liners back right about now.

"I've got plenty. We'll drink yours on the way back down."

That made sense, Kristin thought, so she lowered her head to the smaller woman's neck and took a long pull from the Camelback. In any other circumstances, that might have been tantalizing. But tonight, both women were too tired and cold to think about anything else.

"Hey, my water tube's frozen up," Jack said.

"Over here," Mary Kate extended her offer.

"Kate Sasser, Human Water Fountain," he quipped, grateful that she'd thought ahead. Taking turns, he and Kristin helped one another by rolling the small tubes of their Camelbacks between their fingers until the ice broke up enough to force it back into the bladder.

If possible, the trail grew steeper as they climbed, now zigzagging between the rocks. The path was covered with scree — a loose volcanic gravel that made it difficult to get traction. For every two steps the climbers took, one was lost on the slide.

Tammy was struggling with every step and every breath. John had taken her pack and placed it inside his own to lighten her load, but still she begged for an early break. The art student was the only one complaining now. In fact, she was the only one saying anything at all. The others were concentrating on breathing and getting their bodies to the next resting place.

"Oh, my God! Look at that!" All heads turned up to see what had astounded Ann so. It was the glacier itself, now on their immediate left, a stunning three stories tall.

Mary Kate looked up toward Stella Point. The crater rim was only a hundred yards ahead, clearly visible not only in the moonlight, but also from the glow that crept along the eastern sky. She could make out the silhouettes of several other hikers along the ridge, presumably on their way from Gillman's Point to Uhuru Peak. All 10 of them were going to reach the rim!

Moments later, Mary Kate feared she had jumped the gun, as God had saved the steepest part of the trail for last. Every step took a colossal effort, and no breath was deep enough to deliver the oxygen her body needed. But still she plodded on, occasionally feeling the hand of her friend on her back as she slid backward in the scree.

In the last half hour, the sky grew light, and as the group finally peeked over the ridge into the massive crater of Kilimanjaro, a brilliant orange sun tasted the horizon. Mary Kate fished inside her jacket for her camera, hoping the battery had held at what John estimated was 30 degrees below zero on the Celsius scale. It was still too dark to see the faces of the people in their group, but she got a picture of the sunrise.

"The summit is there," John pointed to a trail that circled to the left. "It is one hour or more, almost a thousand feet higher. If you feel strong, you should continue. Anyone who feels pain in the chest or head should return to camp."

"I'm going back down," Tammy declared. "God bless you all for your help."

"I'm going too," Brad said. His hands and feet were freezing.

"Thanks for everything, Kate. This is it for me too." To John's surprise, the climber Drew also turned back.

"Isn't the water beautiful from up here?" Jack asked, staring back at the cloud cover that enshrouded the town of Moshi.

"Jack is going down also," John announced, gesturing for Mohammed to escort the obviously delirious man. "The rest of you should try to go to Uhuru."

Bill caught up with Kristin and Mary Kate as they picked their way along the icy path. "I'm so proud of Brad. He really wanted to turn around about halfway up, but this time he pushed himself and made it all the way to the rim."

Mary Kate turned slowly and looked at the beaming father. "You know what Bill? I think he'd be really proud of himself if he knew that he'd made it as far as his father did."

The man stopped suddenly as he realized the meaning of her words. "So you're saying I shouldn't go on to the summit."

"She's saying that it's pretty hard for a kid to grow up in the shadow of a father as successful as you. If he knows he's never going to measure up, he'll eventually quit trying." Kristin was very impressed that her friend had discerned the root of the boy's frustration.

Bill nodded as he weighed their words. "Maybe you're right. So get us a good picture, okay?"

"That took a lot of guts, Kate." Kristin was really proud of what her friend had just done.

"Not really. Believe me, when you work in special ed, you get used to managing parents' expectations."

"Well, it was a good catch. It's going to make a big difference for those two, I bet."

"I hope so." Turning toward the peak, they continued, stabbing their walking sticks into the hardened snow to gain footing along the slick path. "You doing okay?"

"I'm fine. You?"

"I'm okay." Mary Kate was in fact ecstatic about how her body was handling the thin air. When they reached the rim, she had caught her breath, and since the route to the summit was a very gradual incline, she was no longer struggling. "I can't believe this, Kristin. It's like I don't notice the thin air at all."

Not getting an answer, she turned to find the tall woman standing perfectly still, almost 50 yards back. As quickly as she could on the icy surface, she hurried back.

"Kristin?"

"I'm fine. I just...panicked or something because I couldn't get air."

"Do you need to go back?" Without a moment's hesitation, Mary Kate prepared herself to turn back so she could see her friend to safety. *The summit isn't that important.*

"No, I'm fine. Really, I just panicked for a minute and I waited here until it passed. I feel okay physically. Let's go."

"Do you swear?"

"I swear!" Kristin lowered her balaclava to shoot her friend a confident smile.

"Here, put your other stick away." Mary Kate offered an elbow. They would take the rest of their steps in tandem. They were the first in their group to reach the summit, but they were joined soon after by Ann, the 45-year-old mother of three, who took their picture before the sign that proclaimed:

CONGRATULATIONS

YOU ARE NOW AT

UHURU PEAK, TANZANIA, 5895M. AMSL.

AFRICA'S HIGHEST POINT

WORLD'S HIGHEST FREE-STANDING MOUNTAIN

ONE OF WORLD'S LARGEST VOLCANOES.

WELCOME

Trevor and Leah reached the summit also, and John, who had walked with Ann, collected their cameras to commemorate the moment. After 20 minutes, the five Summit climbers and their guide — exhausted but happy — turned back.

For Mary Kate, it was easily the most exhilarating moment of her life. She thought back to the moment that her plane had tilted to yield her first image of the mountain. Her spirit soared as she quietly celebrated the personal conquest of that most intimidating sight. Now as she continued back toward Stella Point, she pored over some of the trip's most important elements: telling her family that she was going; the countless days in the gym getting her body fit for the climb; the 10 days she'd rested a sore knee, worrying that it would keep her from going; the \$2,000 from her grandmother on the sly; Deb's unending support, contrasted with Bobby's

condescension; and the fear and doubt that had been her near constant companions for six months. All of the challenges had been met; all of the rewards were now obtained.

"We go back on this side," John indicated what looked like a steep slant board topped with scree, extending three miles toward Barafu Hut.

"You mean we're going to bust our asses all the way back," Trevor observed.

"I do not know that expression, but other climbers have used it before." The sly smile on the guide's face suggested that in fact he knew the expression very well. "They also say they get little rocks up the...wazoo?"

"Yippee," Ann deadpanned. "Here goes nothing."

The others watched as she started to walk slowly down the mountain. Within 20 yards, her feet flew out from under her and she slid. Standing again, she continued, repeating the process over and over. The temperature had warmed considerably with the sun, but she wasn't planning on losing any of the layers. It looked as though she would need them for padding.

The others followed suit, though Trevor and Leah were skiers and had an easier time keeping their balance as they descended. Mary Kate and Kristin lengthened their adjustable walking sticks, using them for balance or to break their fall.

Three hours later, the six summiters entered the dining tent, black and blue like everyone else, their knees like jelly. High fives and hugs went all around as they were congratulated for their conquest. All 10 climbers then posed with Stella Point in the background, the "after" picture to compare with the one taken at Londorossi Gate.

After a short lunch and a change into lightweight clothes, the hikers left behind their summit adventure. What had been "*pole pole*" was now "*haraka*," Swahili for fast, or as Jack put it, "get the hell off this mountain!"

The descent wasn't steep at all, but it was relentless. The constant pounding took a fierce toll on the hikers' knees and lower backs, and they struggled to find the best position for their backpacks, which now pulled on the shoulders and neck.

It hadn't occurred to Mary Kate until now that the routes on and off the mountain seemed to be one-way, since they never met anyone coming from the other direction. John explained that only the Marangu route — the more popular tourist route — was used for both the climb and retreat. By park rules, this route — the Mweka Route — was for descending parties only.

"You still feeling good, Kate?" Kristin stepped up to walk beside her friend. The trail was uncharacteristically wide between Barafu Hut and the rainforest, allowing the hikers to walk abreast.

"I can't believe it." Mary Kate stopped and turned around to face the mountain. "I mean, look at that. We were all the way up there just a few hours ago." The summit seemed even more daunting and farther away now than it had since it first came into

view the day they hiked to Shira 1. This angle showed more of the glacier, the most majestic view yet.

"I know what you mean. It's almost surreal."

"That's a good word for it," Mary Kate agreed. "You know, I was sort of irritated a few days ago because we were going so slowly. But if we'd gone faster, maybe I wouldn't have made it."

"I guess that's possible."

"Things work out like they're supposed to," the smaller woman concluded.

"Listen, I..." Kristin hesitated, not at all sure where she wanted this conversation to go. "I'm really glad I got the chance to do this with you, Kate. You made it really special."

Mary Kate's stomach fluttered with both excitement and nervousness at Kristin's admission. "Yeah, it was pretty special for me too, being up there with you, I mean."

"So!" The tall brunette wanted to say more, but lost her nerve. She wanted to say that she hoped they'd have the chance to get to know each other better over the next week on the safari; that she hoped they'd be able to explore this "spark" that was dancing back and forth between them; or that she hoped Kate would just allow herself to be kissed completely senseless. "What's the first thing you're going to do when we get back to the hotel tomorrow?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"I mean after your bath," Kristin clarified.

"Probably another bath, and then another. Then I'll have to pick the scree out of my wazoo," Mary Kate laughed.

Her companion smiled, secretly enjoying the image that conjured; but she bit her tongue to stifle the offer to help. "Imagine what that hot water will feel like."

"Ha! Don't get your hopes up. The first night I was at the Keys, we didn't have any hot water. What do you think will happen when all 10 of us try to turn it on at the same time?"

We could always double up....

Up ahead, Brad suddenly dropped his backpack and darted off to the left.

"Why, you little shit!" Bill dropped his pack also, starting off in pursuit as the rest of the group tried to figure out what was happening.

In moments, the playful father and son were rolling on the ground, laughing hysterically until Brad finally cried "Uncle!" It was a welcome sight to all after

bearing witness to the obvious tension between the two. Finally, the two returned to pick up their packs, still laughing, but not sharing what had triggered the chase.

"Did I hear you say there was an Internet café in Moshi?" Kristin asked when they picked up their pace again.

"Yeah, there is. In fact, I want to go send a note to Deb and let her know I made it. Wanna come?"

Though she knew it was silly, the tall woman grimaced, thinking for sure that she would hear that Kate was going to write Bobby. "Sure. I can send a note to my dad, and to Cyn and Andrea."

"What kind of work does your dad do?" Mary Kate asked. Kristin hadn't talked much at all about her family.

"He's an investment banker. He travels a lot to Europe. I saw him in London on the way over here."

"You stopped in London?" Mary Kate couldn't believe how nonchalant her friend was about seeing *London*.

"Just for a few days. I'll see him again in Miami before I head back to Bloomington."

"Sounds like you and your father are close."

"Yeah, I lived with him growing up. My mom...fell in love with somebody else and left us when I was nine." For years, Kristin had spent sullen weekends at her mother's new home, staunchly refusing to accept Luis, her stepfather. Only when she'd gotten old enough to realize the power of love did she finally understand why her mother had to leave.

"That must have been really hard for you, having your mom leave." One of Mary Kate's uncles had gotten divorced, and it scandalized the family for years. "Do you ever see her?"

"We've managed to get closer over the years. We'll probably never be really tight, you know, but I'm glad that she's happy." She had even become friendly with Luis. "I'll see her in Miami, if she's there. They travel back and forth a lot to Peru, and if that's where they are, I probably won't have time to go down and see them this time before I have to be back in school."

Mary Kate was fascinated to hear of Kristin's life. She didn't know anybody who just picked up and went to London, or to Peru. She couldn't even imagine what it was like to live in a place like Miami. It was hard not to wonder what someone like Kristin would think of a place like Mooresville.

"What's your family like?" It was funny they'd been with each other all week, lying awake for countless hours inside a five-by-seven tent and hadn't even talked about their families.

Mary Kate went on to tell about her family. At 26, she was the middle child of three. Her brother Randy Junior was the oldest, and he worked as a contractor. He and his wife Yvonne had three children. Her sister Carol Lee was six years younger, engaged to a policeman in Mooresville. They'd all grown up on top of each other in a three-bedroom house just like half the other houses in town.

"So you shared a room with your sister?"

"For 12 years. Carol Lee and I are pretty close, considering we're six years apart. She's probably going to be the most upset about me breaking up with Bobby."

"Why's that?"

"We would do things together, the four of us. Carol Lee and Mom would always talk about how our kids are going to play together and where we'll build our houses and all." Mary Kate was growing depressed as she told about the life her family had planned. "I guess they're all going to take it pretty hard."

"And you're sure it's really what you want, breaking up with Bobby, I mean?"

Mary Kate didn't answer right away. After spending two years thinking she was headed toward a life with Bobby Britton, it wouldn't be right not to consider it again for another...eight seconds. "Yep, I'm sure."

"We break," John announced to the weary hikers. They had been hiking for almost two hours straight. This break spot was different: A dark green hut like the huts used by some of the porters at Shira 2 and Barafu sat next to a clearing, its door open to reveal a cooler, stocked with ice cold Coca-Cola. The guide laughed as he watched the hikers' eyes light up at the sight, their mouths salivating as they dug into their backpacks for cash. One American dollar bought two Cokes; thus Bill's \$20 bought the round for the hikers and each of the porters as they straggled through.

Mary Kate got a spectacular picture of all of her friends sitting side by side on a long bench with their Cokes, the mountain looming in the distant background. John then took their cameras one by one so all 10 hikers could pose together.

"Hey, Tammy?" Mary Kate called the young woman over. "Would you mind getting a picture of Kristin and me?" She looked questioningly at her tall friend, who moved quickly to place an arm tightly around her shoulder. Mary Kate answered with an arm around the slender waist.

"Okay, say... 'rice and some sort of brown sauce'," she joked. There was no cheese on this trek.

"Wait, will you take one with my camera, too?" Kristin asked, pointing to her backpack. Neither woman loosened her hold.

"Say... 'I'll never go to the bathroom outside again as long as I live'."

After an hour and a half of hiking through the thinnest part of the rainforest, the Summit group came upon Mweka Hut, by far the muddiest camp they had seen on this trek. All five of their tents were huddled together — way too close to the latrine for Kristin's comfort — underneath a stand of wispy trees with branches that brushed the rain guards.

The exhilaration of the climb to the summit well behind them, the hikers were weary of the trail, sore from sleeping on the ground, and very tired of camp food. Poor Gilbert got barely a greeting when he brought out the potatoes and soup. The drizzle chilled them all to the bone, and two by two, they turned in soon after eating. Kristin had slept only five hours since the Karanga Valley, and Mary Kate hadn't slept at all.

The tall woman didn't bother changing at all, kicking off her boots and climbing quickly into her sleeping bag. "I can't believe it's this cold here."

"I know, I expected it to be a lot warmer too." Mary Kate dug out the long johns she had washed in the Karanga Valley. Once she had changed, she got into her bag, wordlessly scooting it next to Kristin, who turned on her side to mold her body with that of her friend.

Day 8 — The Keys Hotel

Mary Kate awoke on her side, her entire length resting against that of her taller companion. Though completely inside her warm cocoon, the welcoming feel of Kristin's long body was unmistakable. Thoughts of how relaxed they might be in this same position, but without the restricting bags, came unbidden. Although this strong physical attraction to a woman was an uncharted sensation, she felt at ease with it, much more so than with thoughts of Deb or Trish, or even Jessica. Mary Kate had long since stopped questioning this pull toward Kristin; in fact, she had all but made up her mind that she would explore this once they got some private time, if the tall woman was truly interested, that is.

"Hi," Mary Kate whispered as she raised her head for a moment and found her friend's perpetual soft smile. "You have a dirty face."

"I hate to be the one to tell you this, but so do you."

The smaller woman chuckled and dropped her head back on Kristin's broad shoulder. "I have a dirty everything."

"There's ice inside our tent," Kristin remarked drearily, peering through the hole in her sleeping bag at the frozen condensation.

"Do you realize that when we crawl out this morning, we won't ever have to go back in?" In an odd way, that realization made Mary Kate sad. It wasn't that she'd miss the hard ground, or the cold, or the dirt that pervaded everything she owned. But it had

been nice sharing the small space with her dark-haired friend, especially when they'd lie awake and talk.

"And you'll have your own space," Kristin finished. She'd miss this closeness.

"And you won't have a tent mate sleeping on top of you every night."

"I haven't minded that at all," her friend assured. "It felt really nice to have you so close," she confessed.

Mary Kate raised her head again and met the sterling blue eyes. "I...good. I liked it too." *And I wouldn't mind trying it in a bed, either.*

A sudden giggling from an adjacent tent broke the intense gaze.

"Hey everybody! Ann just challenged us all to a race to the bus. Last one there's a rotten egg!" Tammy was in a good mood this morning, no doubt because this would be behind them soon.

"That's appropriate, since we all smell like rotten eggs," Jack yelled from inside his own tent.

"I'm running off this mountain so fast you guys will be eating my dust!" Brad proclaimed.

"It's mud, Brad. There is no dust."

The banter continued between tents for another 10 minutes before Leah finally ventured out.

"Shit!"

"What?" several voices asked.

"Everything out here's covered in ice, even the stuff under the rain guard."

Sure enough, Mary Kate and Kristin unzipped the tent to find a thin layer of ice covering their boots and Summit bags. A peek outside the rain guard revealed more; ice coated the ground and hung from the trees.

"I'm ready to get the hell off this mountain," Mary Kate groaned.

"I'm right behind you. One more day of this, and I really think we'd be doing psych evacs."

Breakfast was hard-boiled eggs, delivered to the camp by the same transport that ferried Coca-Cola to the ranger station just above Mweka Hut. Mary Kate passed around the hand sanitizer, and everyone made the best of it. No one bothered to fill all of the water bottles today — a single liter each would be more than enough. They

would be off the mountain in three hours, and the persistent drizzle kept a chill in the air.

The exit through the rainforest was somewhat treacherous, as the damp moss growing across the rocks made for slippery passage. Nonetheless, they were making good time. Ann had positioned herself directly behind John today, still insisting that she would be the first on the waiting bus.

After their first break, the trail became somewhat muddier. Kristin helped her shorter friend navigate the muckier parts, lending a hand to ensure that she didn't lose her footing. Both women were glad that they had brought two walking sticks; most of the hikers had only one.

"So we're almost there, John?" They had been slogging for more than two hours now.

"I think we are...half." He hated to be the bearer of bad news, but the trail wasn't usually this muddy this high up. It was going to get worse — a lot worse — before they reached the roadway that would take them to the ranger station at Mweka Gate.

In fact, John had no idea it would be this bad. The runoff from last night's drizzle had spread through the jungle like a delta, and soon, the hikers had no choice but to trudge right through the middle of it. It was miserable, and seemed as though it might never end.

The usually jovial group was quiet, no one dare commenting this time that "it couldn't possibly get any worse." The slickened mud had brought down each and every one, most more than once.

"Hey Tammy!" Jack yelled ahead. "What did you say to God to make him hate us so much?"

The art student chuckled at the lawyer's good-natured teasing.

"Let me guess," he went on, "you thanked him for giving you such a challenge, and now he feels obligated to give you another one."

John stopped them again when they came upon a log that had fallen across the path. It was as good a place to break as any.

"Hey John," Brad started. "It isn't like this in the movies. You see, in the movies, the African guide walks ahead and chops down the branches with a machete so the tourists can just walk through without any trouble. There is no mud."

The proud African guide shrugged his shoulders. "I have never seen a movie."

Kristin spotted her friend slumped at the end of the sloping log, her back to the others in the group. "Hey Kate, how are you doing?"

Mary Kate didn't answer at first; afraid of what might tumble out if she opened the emotional floodgates. "Not so good." The grueling slog had taken its toll on her spirit. Only yesterday, she had soared; today she was deflated, completely demoralized.

Kristin put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "We'll be out of this soon."

"I sure hope so, because if I thought the next two hours were going to be like the last, I think I just might kill myself now."

The counselor recoiled at the flippant words. "Kate, please don't say that, okay?"

At once, the blonde realized the implications of what she'd just said for someone who had lost her best friend to suicide. "I'm sorry, Kris."

"Thanks. It's just that...."

"I know, I understand. It was a stupid thing to say." Adding guilt to the depression she already felt was too much and the green eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"Hey, it's okay." The tall woman kneeled against the log and drew her friend to her chest. "It's just for a little while longer. I promise you, that feeling you had yesterday morning will be back."

Mary Kate smiled through the tears that trickled down her cheeks. Giving her friend a tight squeeze around the waist in return, she whispered her thanks. Feeling suddenly like a baby, she looked around at the others. Trevor was consoling Leah, who was covered with mud past her hips; Ann was similarly slumped. She wondered if indeed their misery today was magnified by the contrast from their elation at the summit.

When John stood this time, he offered encouragement. "No more breaks. Now we go to the gate."

"Why don't we walk the rest of the way with Ann?" Mary Kate suggested. "She looks like she could use a little moral support too."

Again, Kristin was touched by the way her friend showed concerned for others, even when she herself was overwhelmed.

In under an hour, the Summit group exited the muddy trail onto a wide dirt road. It too was wet, but here they could easily get their footing. To their surprise, they were met from the other direction by several young boys who escorted them the final half mile to the ranger station. Everyone thought it odd at first, but the youths' friendly presence was a welcome addition. Rounding a final bend, the hikers got their first view of civilization — such as it was — in the form of several rugged four-wheel drive vehicles, and a simple white structure that housed the ranger's station.

The boy who walked with Mary Kate took her arm and led her to a constantly running faucet that splashed onto a concrete slab. Carefully, she held onto a pole as he took out a ragged scrub brush and began to wash the caked mud from her boots and pants.

"Kate! Look at me."

The blonde woman turned and smiled as Kristin got the "real" after picture. Finally, she was coming out of her funk. She hadn't imagined at all that the descent would have been so emotionally draining. But it was over, and she had realized her dream.

The boy was thrilled with the two dollar tip; usually, it was only a few shillings. He liked Americans.

John directed the group to the ranger's log book, where each hiker officially signed out of the park, noting the highest point reached. He was pleased that five from his group had made it to Uhuru. Tom Muncie would be glad to hear that they had achieved the 40 percent success rate they typically got from the Lemosho Glades Route. Ann and Kate had surprised him when they went on from Stella Point, but then, so had Drew and Bill when they turned back.

As was typical of Summit treks, this group of mostly strangers converged on his mountain and forged a bond that centered at first on conquering the summit. Over the course of the trek, this singular focus changed. Some — like Kate and Ann, and the couple, Trevor and Leah — still wanted the summit. Their hunger for the achievement was what drove them in this quest, and they had come to the mountain prepared.

Others, like Tammy and even Drew, set their sights lower, satisfied that any height under these conditions was a formidable personal triumph. Drew, he had learned, had quietly fought off the altitude sickness to reach Stella Point. His motivation, though, was not a matter of personal achievement, as it was for Tammy; his reason for pushing on was so the group itself would succeed.

And on every trek, some climbers set new goals that didn't really involve the mountain at all. The father and son in this group had done that, and the way they talked and joked with one another today suggested that their goal had most certainly been met. Jack and Kristin had come for the summit, but as the adventure unfolded, their aim shifted and they sought only to share this experience with others.

John was pleased that all of these climbers would take home happy memories of their time on Mt. Kilimanjaro. They all had helped one another over the challenges of the trail and had laughed at each other and at themselves. The African guide had no idea if these people would continue to be friends when their Summit trek was finished, but he liked to think so.

After a one-hour drive through the countryside, the bus pulled into the Keys Hotel, depositing the 10 tired and dirty hikers onto the same front porch where they had gathered expectantly eight days ago. In their last official act as Summit trekkers, the party pooled their dollars to generously tip their guide and the team of porters gathered by the bus. Remembering what Tom had said about the porters needing their extra clothing, several of the hikers left behind socks and Polartec shirts. Mary Kate donated her sleeping bag, which had suffered a small tear and was losing its filling, and her heavy backpack, which was caked in mud from the spill she had taken on the trip from Mweka. Kristin contributed her hiking boots, gloves, and two pairs of long johns.

In return, John rewarded the five summiters with official certificates from the Tanzania National Parks department, noting the date, time, and age of the climber. The others got a Summit Trail and Safari Company certificate, proclaiming that they had reached Stella Point.

The blonde woman then retrieved her valuables along with the extra bag she had stored in the hotel's closet, and climbed the stairs to her small room on the second floor. She had arranged with Kristin, who had already disappeared into her room down the hall, to meet on the porch in one hour to walk into Moshi to the Internet café.

Methodically, Mary Kate emptied her filthy Summit bag, hastily repacking the things that were dirty, or that she wouldn't need for the next five days on safari. She smiled when she opened the second bag, reveling in the fresh supply of shorts and tops. It was going to be so nice to be clean.

Turning on the faucet in the step-in shower, Mary Kate was disappointed despite her diminished expectations about the plumbing at the Keys Hotel. The shower barely managed a trickle, and it was cold. It would have to do.

After 30 minutes of intense scrubbing, the small blonde called it quits, dressing in her clean olive green convertibles with a plain pale yellow t-shirt. In the post-9/11 world, she had been warned not to wear clothing that might identify her as an American, so none of her t-shirts bore slogans or names. Sandals were a welcome change to the boots she had worn since leaving Mooresville. Finishing the new look, she added small gold hoop earrings, and the barest hint of makeup. It made her smile as she acknowledged to herself that she wanted Kristin to think she looked good.

Together, the women walked into the small village, stopping along the way to buy Cokes from an open-air stand. Kristin generously bought drinks and candy for two children playing nearby.

"So are you going to email Bobby?" she asked nonchalantly.

"I was going to send him a quick note, but he isn't very good about checking his email. I was thinking I'd try to call him at school from the front desk before dinner."

"That sounds like an adventure unto itself," Kristin joked.

"Yeah, I asked them if I could, and they said I could have six minutes for 20 dollars. Vince called his fiancée from there, but he said the connection wasn't all that good."

When they reached the café, Kristin took the last open terminal while Mary Kate perused a week-old copy of the *International Herald-Tribune*. The connection was sluggish, but eventually, the counseling student signed in to her campus account, quickly concluding that there were no messages that couldn't wait another week. First, she typed a short note to her father, letting him know that she had reached the summit and was now safe at the hotel in Moshi. Next, she wrote to Cyn and Andrea:

Well, I have to tell you, ladies — Kili was everything you said it would be...and more. Five of us made it to the summit — including yours truly — and most of us are headed out on safari tomorrow. Can't wait to tell you about the "and more" part...suffice it to say that she's blonde, with the most expressive green eyes I've ever seen. I sure hope I have a lot more to say when I see you, but if not, I'll be happy just to add another person to my short list of very good friends. I'll see you again from Miami, and I can't wait to look at your pictures again.

Love, Kristin

"Your turn," the tall woman said as she playfully snatched the paper from her friend. "If you're going to tell your friends all about me, be sure to say nice things."

Mary Kate smiled at Kristin's mischief. "You mean I can't tell them how you laughed at me when I fell in the water, or how you taunted me when I couldn't get up the Barranco Wall, or...?"

"No, none of those things. I don't want your brother and Bobby Britton thinking they need to come beat the shit out of me."

"Why, Kristin Addison! I do believe you understand Southern culture after all," she answered in her best Scarlet O'Hara voice.

Mary Kate sat down and logged onto her email account, grinning broadly as she read her longtime friend's reply.

To my dear, dear, dear, dear friend Mary Kate,

You cannot imagine the joy it brings me to hear you say that you are finished with Bobby Britton. In fact, I bought a six-pack of Coors Lite to celebrate the blessed event with you, but I drank the whole damn thing in your honor.

I'm glad to hear how much you're enjoying your trip. By the time you get this note, you'll have been to the mountain top! Can't wait to hear about it, and for God's sake, Mary Kate, don't bring home any parasites!

Love, Deb

Mary Kate was exceedingly glad that she had a friend like Deb Demers. She was the kind of friend that wanted for her what she wanted for herself, and Deb would have supported her even if she'd eventually married Bobby. She couldn't wait to talk to her about this mysterious attraction to Kristin, but she wouldn't do that in her email.

To my dear, dear, dear, dear friend Deb,

Have I told you lately how much I appreciate the way you make me laugh!

I am indeed back from the mountain, and I, Mary Kate Sasser, have conquered the highest peak on the entire continent of Africa! There were 12 in our group, and 5 of us made it: Ann from St. Paul, a mother of 3 teenage boys, Trevor and Leah, a couple in our group from Philly, and Kristin from Miami, who is a grad student at Indiana. She and I have gotten to be really good friends on this trip, and I hope I can talk her into driving through Mooresville on her next trip between school and home so you can meet her. She has a keychain just like yours. ;-) Anyway, Kris and I are doing the safari together for the next five days, then it's back home. She'll be flying through Amsterdam instead of Johannesburg.

I REALLY wish you had been able to come. I can't wait to get my pictures developed.

Love, Mary Kate

Thinking ahead to her phone call to Bobby, Mary Kate decided to skip writing a note. Walking by her friend at the counter, the blonde woman snatched the paper away teasingly, returning the favor from before. "We should go back before it gets dark."

"Did you let everybody in Mooresville know?"

"No, just Deb. Now I have to call Bobby and ask him to let my parents know. But I dread talking to him."

"What are you going to say?"

"I'm not sure. I'll have to wait and see what comes out of my mouth."

When they walked past the Coke stand on their way back, eight small children came to greet them, obviously on the recommendation of their two friends. The women bought another round of drinks and candy, just making it back to the hotel before dark.

Mary Kate pulled a \$20 bill from her pocket. "May I use your phone to call the States?"

"Good luck, Kate." Kristin started to head toward the bar when Jack suddenly appeared with Kendra and Lauren.

"Why look who it is! I almost didn't recognize you with your face clean," the lawyer ribbed.

"Look who's talking. You've been walking around with the same food in your beard for four days," the counselor answered back.

"Hi Dreama, it's me, Kate Sasser...Mary Kate. Can I talk to Bobby?" *So much for privacy.*

Mary Kate? Kristin was surprised to hear that her friend went by a different name with the people back home. "Mary Kate" was positively adorable.

"Mary Kate? Why do Southerners have to have two first names?" Jack asked, getting an elbow from his girlfriend and a wicked glare from the small woman on the phone.

"Let me buy the first round," Kristin offered, attempting to steer the others out of the hotel's small lobby.

"Hey Bobby, it's me! I was just calling to let you know that we're all back down, and I made it all the way...yeah, it was pretty tough...no, only five of us..." Now she had to listen to him speculate why the others didn't make it. "Listen, I've only got a couple of minutes — this call is costing me 20 bucks — but I just wanted to let you know, okay?" Listening to his protests about how expensive the phone call was, Mary Kate watched the clock on the clerk's counter, noting that she had less than 30 seconds. "Bobby, I have to go. I'll see you at the airport, okay? And will you call Mom and Dad and let them know that I made it and that I'm down and I'm safe? And tell them to call Grandma." She cringed as she heard the words she knew were coming. "You too. Bye."

Flooded with emotions, Mary Kate leaned across the counter to hang up the phone. She felt guilty for her pretense, but the stronger feeling was relief to be done with it. It would feel even better once they'd finally talked about things being over and they could move on from being a couple, maybe even to being good friends. At least now, she could spend the next few days not worrying about it.

The Southerner found her fellow hikers — all 11 of them — at a long table on the outdoor patio of the bar. An ice-cold Safari beer sat at an empty spot next to the dark-haired woman from Miami, who was lost in conversation with those around her.

Before sitting down, Mary Kate took a moment to study her beautiful friend from behind. Kristin's long black hair was loose around her shoulders, and her casual pose — one arm across the back of the empty chair as she leaned across to talk to Ann — was the picture of relaxation. It was a delightful contrast to the reticence she had shown only last week when they first met. As she approached the chair, Mary Kate found herself intent on peering down the open-collared shirt, stirred when she caught a glimpse of Kristin's white lacy bra.

"Thanks," she murmured, picking up the beer as she took the seat beside her friend.

"You're welcome. I assumed you'd want a beer." Kristin was pleasantly astonished at the way Kate had casually leaned into her arm when she sat down.

"Very much," she confirmed, taking her first taste of Tanzania's finest. "Oh...that's different."

"The second swallow's better, and by the third, it'll be your favorite," Bill explained. Father and son sat directly across the table, Brad trying not to guzzle the first beer he'd ever had in his old man's presence. He wanted to agree, but thought it best not to let his dad that his 18-year-old son knew his brew.

"Boy, it sure felt good to have a shower and a shave," Brad said instead.

"You shaved?" Jack asked incredulously. "Did you use a razor?"

As usual, the young man blushed furiously, coming up empty in his quest for a comeback. He was saved by a flicker of the lights, then another, before the entire complex was thrown into total darkness. The electrical grids in Africa were unpredictable.

"Gosh, Jack, you just got better looking," Brad quipped.

In a few moments, the bar staff appeared with candles for their table. Trevor and Leah sprang for the next round, as the 10 summit climbers regaled Kendra and Lauren with their post-Shira exploits, laughing as they told the story of Jack's delusional arrival at Stella Point.

"The ocean was there, I swear it! Someone must have moved it before you guys turned around," he whined.

Mary Kate bought the third round, though she, Kristin, Ann, Tammy and Bill had switched to Coke after two beers. Around eight o'clock, the restaurant manager appeared to announce that despite the power loss, the buffet was ready and their table was set.

No one ate the potatoes.

Her plate piled high with baked fish, tomatoes, and freshly-baked bread, Mary Kate squeezed into a seat at the far end of the table. Kristin joined her at the corner, brushing their knees together as she sat down.

Leaning over, the green-eyed woman lowered her voice so that only Kristin could hear. "It's nice to see you so relaxed tonight."

"Hey, I'm from Miami. I can't relax unless I'm warm," she joked.

"Well," Mary Kate really wanted to pay her friend a compliment, "it looks good on you."

"Thanks." Kristin reached under the table to squeeze her friend's knee and was pleasantly surprised when Mary Kate covered her hand with her own. Things were heating up.

"So Kristin," Kendra interrupted, "as the resident psychologist on this trip, how about running down the list of disorders that you observed in the last week?"

"Let's see, you mean besides Bill's hallucinations and Brad's inferiority complex. Oh, scratch that last one. It isn't a complex; Brad really is inferior."

The teenager just shook his head as everyone laughed at his expense. He was so far out of his league; he figured he might as well concede.

"And then there was the mass meltdown on the last leg from Mweka Hut. I think nearly everyone was on the verge of psychosis."

"And let's not forget who went catatonic at 19,000 feet," Mary Kate threw in, hoping her friend could take some teasing.

"Oh yeah...I forgot about that one," Kristin said sheepishly.

"How *convenient!*" Mary Kate was pretty good with her Church Lady imitation. And just to let her friend know that the teasing was good natured, she reached back under the table and groped for Kristin's hand, squeezing it with reassurance.

Kristin squeezed back, this time not letting go. Casually, both women continued in the lively conversation, but something too subtle for the others to see was raging on their end of the table.

This candlelight banquet would be the last meal together for the 12 new friends. Jack, Lauren, Drew, and the father and son team were heading out for home early in the morning. The others would stay for several more days to tour a few of the area's safari lodges, but tomorrow they would split up into three groups. Trevor, Leah, and Kendra were traveling together. Tom Muncie had paired Ann and Tammy for their safari leg, just as he had paired Kristin and Mary Kate. After tonight, they wouldn't see each other again until they arrived back at the Kilimanjaro airport on Saturday afternoon.

When dinner was finished, Mary Kate collected email addresses from everyone and promised to distribute them once she got back home. After exchanging warm hugs with the departing travelers, she and Kristin were left alone in the restaurant. Neither wanted their night together to end, and both were too nervous to suggest otherwise.

Mary Kate finally broke the impasse. "You want to walk me to my room?"

Kristin wasn't yet clear on exactly what her friend wanted, but she was reluctant to push. Kate seemed like she may be open to exploring things between them, and Kristin suspected that she might be entertaining thoughts of a casual sexual encounter. It was as though Kate had come to Africa seeking thrills, and that Kristin was but a part of the Southerner's adventure. *And if you keep things in check, that doesn't have to be a bad thing at all.*

"Sure." Kristin stood and led them through the candlelit restaurant, and into the candlelit lobby, where they were met by a young girl with a flashlight.

"I take you upstairs to your room," she offered.

Together, the three women mounted the stairs, arriving first at Mary Kate's room. Their escort waited until she had located the matches on the nightstand and lit the single deep candle in her room.

"Good night," Kristin said awkwardly as she turned and followed the woman down the hall.

Kristin parted the mosquito net and crawled into the twin bed. Tucking the net securely beneath her mattress, she settled naked into the smooth cool sheets. This was her first night alone since they'd left eight days ago for the Kilimanjaro climb. Privacy sucked.

She had hoped that by walking Kate to her room, she might have stolen a kiss. *Kate Sasser. Mary Kate Sasser. What have you done to me, Mary Kate Sasser?*

At the other end of the hall, Mary Kate was having a similar conversation with herself. At least tomorrow night she and Kristin would share a room. Too bad they'd run into that clerk downstairs. She had no compunctions at all about wandering around in the dark with her friend. And once they'd found her room, she might have even coaxed a kiss out of the beautiful woman. The very idea of feeling Kristin Addison's lips on hers....

A light knock at her door interrupted her thoughts as she climbed into bed.

"Who is it?"

"It's Kristin."

Mary Kate released the barrel bolt and opened the door, smiling to find her pajama-clad friend leaning against the door jamb, holding a candle. Wordlessly, she grasped the woman's wrist and pulled her gently into the room, snapping the privacy bolt back into place. Blowing out the candle so that only her own lit the room, she finally spoke. "I hope you've come to sleep beside me again. I've gotten sort of used to that."

Kristin had come for that elusive kiss. She had not expected this. "If that's what you hope for, then that's what you'll get." Setting down the smoky candle and her room key, she boldly placed a hand on the smaller woman's hip. Her other hand tenderly tipped the woman's chin, and she lowered her lips to brush softly against Kate's. Back and forth, Kristin nibbled and tugged with her lips and teeth, finally urging the mouth open to take her gently probing tongue. A soft moan told her that it was welcome, and soon, the two hands around her waist were roaming up her back, pulling her closer.

Mary Kate felt her knees go weak when she felt the woman's lips on her own, and she instinctively reached out to pull Kristin close. The lips and tongue were soft and seeking, and now she realized that her hands were sliding up and down the tall woman's muscled back. When Kristin's lips dropped below her ear, she decided that she wanted to feel this mouth in other places.

Stepping back from the heated assault on her neck, Mary Kate took the dark-haired woman's hand and led her to the opening in the mosquito net. "Here we are again, crawling into a tent."

Kristin chuckled softly and ducked through the slit, climbing across to the second twin mattress. Pushed together, the twin beds made a king-sized bed. "Somehow I think this tent will be different."

"I sure hope so," the smaller woman said, slipping into the enclosure and closing the gap behind her. The candle flickered with its yellow glow, casting two silhouettes onto the transparent white netting. Turning again toward the tall woman, she continued, "Now where were we? Oh yes, I believe your lips were right about...here," she presented her neck for further exploration.

Kristin didn't miss the invitation, pushing Kate back onto the bed as she devoured the tender neck. She was vaguely aware of two hands pushing through her hair, and a soft low moan of approval. Again, she brought their lips together, this time in a searing kiss meant to reach deep inside the other woman. Unconsciously, she draped her leg between the two beneath her, both women now rocking in a slow, steady rhythm. Realizing her climbing need, she stilled her hips and drew back; she was moving too fast. It wasn't likely that Kate was ready for all of this.

Or was she?

Kristin was surprised when the small hands left her hair and ventured down her back.

"I want to feel you," Kate pleaded, lifting the woman's top to her shoulders.

Kristin helped to pull it over her head, and now was naked from the waist up. Her long fingers worked the buttons of Kate's top, and when the soft breasts were finally revealed, she resisted the urge to caress them with her hands and mouth, instead lowering her body to bring their warm skin together.

Mary Kate thought she might die from the softness against her. This was so...what was it? It was...sweet; it was sensuous; it was exquisite. Her hands roamed across the rippled shoulder blades, down the dip of the tall woman's spine, and back up the curved sides to start again. Lowering her hands to Kristin's hips, she slipped her fingertips underneath the elastic of the flannel shorts. "More."

Kristin's heart hammered as she answered the demand, slipping off her shorts and tugging Kate's off her bent legs. Shifting on the bed, she positioned herself between the soft thighs and lowered herself slowly, gasping as she watched her own dark curls cover the blonde mound beneath her.

"God, Kris," Mary Kate murmured. *I am lying here naked with another woman!* She had no idea that two bodies together could feel like this.

"You feel so good, Kate. Don't let me go too far."

Mary Kate trembled at the woman's warning words. "I want you to touch me." She wanted the long hands and the soft mouth to know her body.

"Are you sure?" Kristin searched the green eyes in the dim light for any sign that they should stop.

In answer, Mary Kate pulled her down again for a heated kiss, guiding Kristin's hand to a waiting breast. "Please."

The dark-haired woman needed no further encouragement. She kneaded the firm breast, teasing the brown nipple into a hardened tip. Lowering her head, she enveloped it in the warm softness of her mouth, sucking gently as her hand sought out its twin.

Mary Kate pushed her chest higher off the bed, willing it deeper into Kristin's caress. She watched through hooded eyes as the dark head moved from one breast to the other, lavishing a tantalizing touch on the aching peaks.

Too soon, the wet mouth left her breasts, but as it drifted lower across her abdomen, Mary Kate became solely focused on a stronger ache, this one burning from her center. Instinctively, she raised her hands to cover her own breasts, pinching and pulling her nipples in an excited frenzy.

Kristin shuddered at the erotic display, feeling her own excitement build. The scent of Kate's arousal now filled her head, and she wrapped her arms underneath the soft thighs, lowering her face to its source. Unable to hold back, she pressed her mouth into the wet softness, thrilled at her new lover's sweet taste.

Mary Kate had never imagined anything so sublime. On impulse, she opened fully to allow the soft tongue to trail through her most intimate folds. Every nerve in her body had seemingly vacated its function, all now congregated in a single place. The instant Kristin closed her lips over that tiny spot Mary Kate erupted, a million sensations rushing like lasers to and from her core. Nearly frantic, she jerked away.

"It's okay, it's okay," Kristin assured the rapidly retreating woman. She withdrew her mouth completely, recognizing the hypersensitive response to her prolonged caress. Quickly, she crawled up her lover's body, cradling her in a calming embrace. "Shhhh, I've got you."

The blonde woman shook as she wrapped her arms tightly around the sinewy back, still feeling both the physical and emotional aftereffects of her numbing orgasm. She was barely aware of Kristin's soft words, but the deep rich voice was soothing. Mary Kate had never had such an explosive response to sexual intimacy. Bobby had brought her to a climax a few times before, but never one that thundered deep inside her as this one had, and none that left her weak and pulsing in its wake.

"Are you alright?"

Mary Kate buried her head into the long neck and nodded, too embarrassed to raise her head and speak. Her body still trembled and twitched from what Kristin had done.

Kristin stroked her back gently and planted soft kisses on the blonde head that burrowed under her chin. What had happened to change Kate's surging insistence into such obvious regret? Kristin feared she had indeed gone farther than the other woman ever intended, stepping over a line that she hadn't recognized.

Gradually, Mary Kate's small body began to relax, her hands finally loosening their death grip on Kristin's broad back. It was...humiliating to have gone into something

she simply wasn't prepared to handle. Worse, Kristin had been witness to her obvious naïveté. This was so much more intense than anything she'd ever experienced.

And it was so much more intimate. Bobby had kissed her down there once, but he hadn't *tasted* her as Kristin had. At his urging, she had returned the gesture, but with a similar lack of enthusiasm. Now with horror, it suddenly occurred to Mary Kate that Kristin might expect her to reciprocate. She didn't think she could do that.

The counsellor tried to make sense of what had happened between them. It was beautiful, so sweet. Kate was very aroused, and had climaxed quickly, but withdrew as though it were something she hadn't expected. Kristin knew from the way the smaller woman was huddled against her chest that Kate needed some sort of reassurance, and she needed to feel safe. Stretching her long arm to the foot of the bed, she pulled the sheet up to cover both of them.

"You're lovely, Kate. You taste so sweet," she soothed. The body in her arms relaxed a little more at the comforting words. "I'm so glad you let me share that with you." Lowering her face to the one beneath her chin, she softly kissed the cheekbones and the corners of the mouth, finally resting her lips against the quivering pair that opened slightly to receive her. "So special."

"I'm sorry, Kris."

"What could you be sorry for? It was beautiful," Kristin continued softly.

Mary Kate shook her head without answering. She couldn't articulate what she was feeling.

Gently, Kristin pushed her lover back against the bed, stroking Kate's breastbone with her palm. "Talk to me, Kate. What are you feeling?"

Mary Kate couldn't meet the waiting blue gaze.

"Did I do something you didn't like?"

"Oh, no!" Finally, she turned to see a look of doubt in the beautiful face. "No, it was...wonderful. Really it was. I just...."

Steadily, Kristin continued to stroke her chest. It wasn't a sexual caress, but a touch meant to comfort and disarm. "Talk to me," she whispered again.

"It was so intense. I was just surprised by how strong it all was...and how fast it happened." Mary Kate figured that with more experience, she might have had more control. It was just another contrast between herself and the intriguing woman who held her.

"Sometimes it's like that. And other times we can take longer." She hoped there would be many more times. "Did you like what we did, Kate? Did you like my mouth there?"

Mary Kate looked away, feeling a hot blush that she hoped Kristin couldn't see in the dim light. "Yes, it was...amazing."

"Good, because I liked it too." Kristin was relieved to hear that Kate had enjoyed what they'd done. They might salvage this night after all. Beneath the sheet, she trailed her hand lower to caress the flattened stomach. "In fact, I like many things about you, Kate Sasser. Mary Kate."

Mary Kate sighed dejectedly. *Could this night get any worse?* She'd known that Kristin had overheard her on the phone, but she hoped it wouldn't come up. To folks back in Georgia, it wasn't unusual to use two names, but people outside of the south always seemed to find it funny.

But Kristin wasn't making fun. "Mary Kate is a beautiful name for a beautiful woman. I'd like very much if you'd let me call you that."

"You want to call me Mary Kate?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"I like it. And if all the people who know you and care for you call you that, then I want to call you that too."

Mary Kate finally allowed herself a small smile. "Okay," she acquiesced.

"So Mary Kate..." Kristin murmured softly as she nuzzled the smaller woman's neck, "...I want to touch you again. Please."

The blonde woman stiffened involuntarily, a sudden hitch in her breath. "Kris, I don't...."

"Trust me. I would never do anything to hurt you. Please trust me." Tomorrow would be the most awkward day of both their lives if they didn't get past this uneasiness. Kristin wanted to take it very slowly, and she wanted to connect with her lover on an emotional plane.

For long minutes, she caressed the muscled body beneath her, finally trickling her fingers through the blonde curls, her fingertips urging the thighs to part. "This part of you, Mary Kate..." she dipped her hand into the wetness, "...is the warmest..." she kissed the woman's cheek, just in front of her ear, "...the softest..." she whispered low and sexily, "...and the wettest. And this..." a long slender finger gently entered the opening, "...is a treasure."

Mary Kate willed herself to remain calm, though her hips wanted badly to thrust forward and take in more of the probing hand. But that would just show her impatience and her lack of control. Instead, she fought to remain still.

Kristin slid her finger deep within and then almost out. Again and again, she slowly rocked her hand against the soft folds, adding a second finger to the slippery canal. With each stroke, her own mound pressed rhythmically against the thigh beneath her. But no matter what she did, Mary Kate remained seemingly impassive, and Kristin began to worry that this time she had really gone too far. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No, please don't stop," was the near desperate response.

Relieved, Kristin continued with her soothing words. "You feel so good inside. Can you feel how deep I am?" Almost imperceptibly, she felt the hips below rise a tiny bit to meet her hand. In a growing rhythm, the women began to thrust into one another tenderly, then with more fervor.

This time, it took Kristin first. "Oh yes, Mary Kate...I'm coming," she gasped, grinding her hips against the now rigid thigh. At the same time, she pushed her fingers still deeper, brushing her thumb against the sensitive bundle of nerves.

Mary Kate wasn't sure what triggered her climax — the hand that filled her or the look of ecstasy on Kristin's beautiful face — but this was even deeper and more intense than the first. And this time, she didn't pull back.

"Oh, Kris. Oh God, you're so beautiful." She felt herself pulsing around the fingers that had stayed inside her, but she was more enraptured with the idea that Kristin had climaxed without so much as a touch.

The women lay still until they both caught their breath. Ever so slowly, Kristin extracted her fingers and cupped the blonde mound protectively.

"That was wonderful," she sighed. *I'm going to fall in love with you, Mary Kate.* She knew that the instant she felt the blonde woman release her body from the self-imposed restraints, demonstrating the trust she'd asked for.

Mary Kate was almost overwhelmed at the rush of emotions she'd felt at what they'd just shared. Kristin was a skilled lover, but more than that her touch and her words had conveyed a connection that Mary Kate had needed after her earlier retreat. Kristin hadn't turned away, and she hadn't just allowed the less experienced woman to withdraw.

With this exotic, erotic woman, Mary Kate had set out to explore a different aspect of her own sexuality; but now she was getting more than she'd ever imagined. Much more.

Safari Day 1 - Lake Manyara & the Ngoronoro Wildlife Lodge

I can't believe it. I actually had sex with a woman. Well, maybe not exactly, since I didn't really do anything to her. Who am I kidding? She took my head off - twice!

Just after dawn, Mary Kate awoke to find herself wrapped in long protective arms, a bent knee firmly wedged between her own. Turning slightly, she was startled to see those brilliant eyes she'd come to seek smiling down at her in welcome.

"Good morning," a throaty voice intoned. "I've been waiting for *ages* for you to wake up so I could tell you all about the most remarkable evening I had." The blue eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Okay, I'm awake now. But I have to warn you that I blush easily, so you may not want to give me too much information."

Kristin leaned down for a morning kiss. "Would it be enough to tell you that it was the most wonderful time I've had with a woman in about as long as I can remember?"

Mary Kate smiled, crinkling her nose in near embarrassment. "I could say the same, but I'd have to amend it to say ever."

"The most wonderful time ever?" *Wow!*

"Certainly the most wonderful time with a woman," Mary Kate teased, now thinking hard about whether she needed that qualifier.

"Oh. Then I guess technically it was also the worst time...."

Mary Kate silenced that thought by pulling Kristin down for a long, sensuous kiss. "It was incredible, Kris. You were incredible, and you made me feel incredible. And now, I have this incredible urge...to go to the bathroom right this second!"

Kristin watched appreciatively as the blonde woman sat up and parted the mosquito net to exit the bed, padding unabashedly naked into the washroom. *Maybe this would be a good time to get dressed to go back to my room*, she thought, scooting out through the slit. By the time her lover returned, she was sitting on the bed dressed in her flannel shorts and t-shirt.

Suddenly self-conscious, Mary Kate reached for a t-shirt of her own.

"Come here, beautiful," Kristin grabbed her before she could add her shorts, opening her arms in invitation. When the smaller woman stepped into the embrace, Kristin buried her face beneath the two covered breasts and ran both hands up softly over the curves of Mary Kate's behind. "I need to go back to my room. But we're going to pick this up again tonight. And when you look over at me today and see the smile on my face, I want you to know that I'm thinking about it."

"Me too, Kris."

"And you should kick me or something if I suddenly forget that we're in a Muslim country where they really frown on this sort of thing." She wasn't joking.

"Same here."

The lovers shared a long kiss, then Kristin slipped out and down the quiet hall.

"Masai," the driver said, pointing at the two red-clad tribesmen amidst the small herd of cattle.

Kristin and Mary Kate were situated in the back seat of a rugged Toyota Land Cruiser, the apparent vehicle of choice for private safaris. Their guide Mohammed spoke very little English, but in order to work for the Summit Trail and Safari Company, he was required to know the words for the things of interest to tourists.

"Did you know that the Masai consider cattle to be sacred?" Mary Kate was trying to remember what Kako had said.

"Yes, I did. Did you hear about what some of the tribesmen did when they heard about what happened at the World Trade Center?"

"No."

"I read that they gathered 12 of their best cattle and made a gift to the United States ambassador here in Tanzania."

"You're kidding!"

"They did, and at first, I think the U.S. said 'thank you very much, but you should keep your cattle.' Then the ambassador here explained the magnitude of such a gift and I think they arranged to have them transported to the States."

"That's amazing. What a noble thing to do." Looking at the meager way these tribesmen lived, Mary Kate was very touched by the tale.

Mohammed seemed to know the secret locations of all the invisible speed bumps, managing to miss most of them. Indeed, the speed bumps in Tanzania were plentiful, random, and not officially marked. In some places, the local warning system was a small stack of rocks on the side of the road.

When they turned off the main road, speed bumps were no longer consequential, as the road itself was one pothole after another. Both women vowed as they bounced across the rugged dirt route that their next autos would be Toyotas.

At midday, Mohammed pulled into a courtyard of shops, retrieving the three box lunches that were provided by the Keys Hotel. Indicating a wide porch that held a half dozen plastic tables and chairs, he exited the vehicle and pointed them in the direction of restrooms and a small bar where they could purchase drinks.

Mary Kate bought Cokes for all three of them, then she and Kristin moved to a quiet table in the corner. It was their first opportunity to be alone since the dark-haired woman had left her room early this morning.

"So have you been reading my mind today like I told you?" Kristin teased, smiling sexily as she looked the smaller woman up and down.

"Yes, I have." Mary Kate laughed. "And the irony is that I've come 10,000 miles to see exotic animals living in their natural habitat, and all I can think is that I wish this day would hurry up and be over."

"Let's not wish our time away," Kristin said seriously. "I look forward to spending every minute of the next four days with you, and the fact that I'm going to get to see these marvelous things with you will just make them all that much better."

Mary Kate nodded. "Kris, you know I...", she couldn't make eye contact while she confessed her naïveté. "...I really want to thank you for everything you did last night."

"It was my pleasure." Again, the blue-eyed woman flashed her patented sexy smile.

"I don't mean just the...you know...", she could feel the creeping blush. "I mean the way you talked to me. I'm really sorry that I..."

Kristin interrupted her with a hand on her arm. "It was my pleasure, Mary Kate. All of it," she said sincerely. "Can't you see how much I care for you? I wanted to show you that."

"I'm glad you did. I care for you too." In fact, Mary Kate's had admitted to herself this morning when Kristin left her room that nothing about what they'd done had felt casual.

Before entering the Lake Manyara Game Reserve, Mohammed pulled over and climbed onto the roof of the Land Cruiser. Releasing a catch, he folded back two panels, opening the roof of the vehicle so that his passengers could stand for a safe and unobstructed view of the wildlife in their natural setting.

Within a few hundred yards of passing the park gate, they came upon three other vehicles stopped in the middle of the road. The party in front had encountered an elephant in the roadway, and following park rules, had to hold its position until the animal moved along. Unfortunately, the creature wasn't pleased with this motorized challenge to his territory, and after a stubborn standoff, moved to charge the vehicle in front. All of the well-trained drivers responded in unison, reversing gears to back up quickly. Finally, the mighty beast turned into the woods, trampling the bushes and small trees in his path.

"Did you get pictures?" Mary Kate asked excitedly. She had used the last of her roll of film on a candid shot of her friend.

"Yeah. Listen, why don't we take turns taking pictures? We can get double prints and share them."

"Or you can take pictures of the animals and I can take pictures of you," Mary Kate suggested, raising her newly-loaded camera to snap yet another picture of her beautiful companion, who stuck out her tongue as the shutter clicked. "Well I'm glad I got a picture of that wild animal," she joked.

"Hmmm, I'll give you more than a picture," Kristin murmured, too low for Mohammed to hear...assuming of course that he would have understood in the first place.

"You're on!" This was the most fun Mary Kate had ever had flirting with someone.

When they cleared the elephant's path, they stopped again as a family of baboons crossed the road in front of them...and another...and another. After almost a half an hour, they had seen more than 200 of the adorable creatures, all passing within a few feet of the Land Cruiser. In some instances, the younger baboons rode on the backs of their parents.

Winding through the heavily wooded park, the women got a close-up view of a small herd of impala, then a fleeting glimpse of a dozen or so zebras as they rushed shyly into the bush, and eventually a long-distance look at two adult giraffes by the lake. Several trips through the park yielded no new species, and finally Mohammed left the park for their first game lodge.

As its name suggested, the Ngoronoro Wildlife Lodge overlooked the magnificent Ngoronoro Crater, a natural zoo that spanned 60 square miles. The crater was home to hundreds of species, including zebras, wildebeests, hippos, elephants, lions, and the very rare rhinoceros. Tomorrow, they would descend into the game reserve; but tonight, they would be treated to a buffet dinner and a traditional African dance program at the lodge.

Mary Kate waited with their bags while Kristin checked in and picked up the key to their room.

"Lights out at ten o'clock, back on at 6:30," Kristin reported. "Dinner starts in 30 minutes, and the show starts an hour later."

"So we have a half hour to...freshen up?"

"Or to make out."

"Or to make out," Mary Kate concurred.

Following the elaborate dinner and highly entertaining floor show, Kristin and Mary Kate returned to their room, neither certain as to what the night would bring. The blonde hoped she'd have a little more self-control than she'd shown last night.

The twin beds at this lodge were separated by a nightstand, which held the standard candle for after-hours illumination. Mosquito nets were not needed, given the dry

vegetation atop this crater ledge. In fact, the temperature here was headed to freezing overnight.

Forgoing her nightclothes, Kristin slipped into one of the beds naked, waiting to see what her lover would do.

"You got room for me in there?"

"Thought you'd never ask." Kristin raised the covers and made a space.

Seeing from the candlelight that her lover was already naked, Mary Kate slipped off her pajamas and slid into the tight warm space. Instantly, she was engulfed in soft smooth arms and legs, and she turned to find the seeking lips.

All day, Mary Kate had imagined this feeling, the moment they would come together, when Kristin would touch her body and move against her. She hoped that it would lead again to a climax, but that was probably too much to expect; her body didn't usually respond to touching like it had last night. Besides, it hardly worked at all when she tried too hard or when she wanted it too much. Still, the sensations were...sensational, and Kristin seemed to know exactly what she liked. But to avoid repeating last night's disaster, Mary Kate decided that she would concentrate more on keeping control.

Kristin could feel her lover respond - everything she touched or kissed brought a gasp or a tremble - but it was clear that Mary Kate was again holding back, seemingly afraid to let go. "Listen to your body, Mary Kate. It knows what you want. Let go, and I'll keep you safe," she whispered.

Listen to your body, Kristin had said. Her body was telling her that she would soon explode again. And Kristin wanted her to let go. Maybe now it wouldn't be too soon. Gradually, Mary Kate let herself begin to move against the stroking hand inside her, rising up in invitation.

"Oh, yes," Kristin hissed. "I love it when you move with me." The tall woman shifted to press her own wetness against a hardened thigh. Together they rocked until this time, the orgasm ripped first through Mary Kate, then through Kristin as the smaller woman dug her fingertips into the broad back.

As she had been the night before, Mary Kate was simply overwhelmed by the force of her body's reaction, made even more intense when she opened her eyes to witness the wave that crashed over her beautiful lover. No one had ever moved her that way, and Kristin had done it each time she had touched her. And Kristin had reached that peak without even a touch.

"How do you do that?" she asked when they'd caught their breath.

"How do I do what?"

"How do you...climax without...?" She couldn't bring herself to say what she was thinking. Without me touching you there?

"You excite me so much, Mary Kate. Just being with you like this, touching you this way gets me so hot. And when I move against you, that's all that I need."

Mary Kate was fascinated that Kristin could reach her release without more direct stimulation. She wanted to know what would happen if she were to touch Kristin the same way Kristin had touched her. Not that she would have a clue what to do. She had thought all day that she might try to do that tonight, but since they had both already had their release, she should probably wait until the next night.

Kristin softly stroked the blonde hair, marveling at the easy way they moved together. *God, this woman's exciting!* "What are you thinking about?" she asked, noting the pensive look on her lover's face.

"I...was thinking about...what it would be like to touch you," Mary Kate answered hesitantly.

Thud! "Do you want to touch me, Mary Kate?" *Because if you do, you certainly may, and I'll try to remain conscious.*

"I was thinking about it...but we've already...."

Kristin covered her lips with her own as her new lover floundered for the words. "You don't have to if it's something you're not comfortable with, sweetheart. Touching you is all I need." Another partner would have reached for her automatically, but Mary Kate's measured response told her that she wasn't completely confident about taking that step. "But if you want to, I'll show you what I like."

Sweetheart? The blonde woman warmed at the endearment and gathered her courage. Tentatively, she rolled onto her side and allowed Kristin to take her hand, which was guided to a breast. Mary Kate took it in her palm, brushing a thumb across its peak. A sharp intake of breath was the response, and the dark-haired woman leaned back against the bed to allow better access.

"Yes, I like that," Kristin encouraged.

Emboldened by the response, Mary Kate stared openly as she trailed her fingers across the naked breasts, marveling at the now-hardened rose-colored nipples. She had to feel one of those in her mouth. Instinctively, she closed her lips over a tip, sucking gently at first, then with more vigor.

Kristin moaned at the new sensation, pushing her hands through the short blonde hair. "God, sweetheart."

There was that word again. Mary Kate liked that word, and she really liked the feel of this rigid nipple under her tongue. What were the other treasures like? Automatically, she rubbed the flattened stomach, wandering over a pronounced hipbone to the top of a strong thigh. Once again, Kristin took her hand.

"I want you to feel what you do to me." Opening her thighs, she laid the small hand on top of her mound. It would be up to Mary Kate to go further.

Unable to resist, the smaller woman pushed her fingers through the slickened folds, enthralled by the warm velvet texture. Again, she heard her lover gasp and turned to see the dark head thrown back, a look of near ecstasy on the beautiful woman's face. Slowly, she slid her fingers through the swollen center, up and down in a rhythm that Kristin soon matched with her hips. Mary Kate was torn between the need to kiss this woman and the desire to watch what her own hand was doing. The latter won out.

"Oh baby, you're teasing me." Kristin took the small wrist and moved it up to the spot that begged for her touch. "There...easy...that's it."

Mary Kate continued; mesmerized by the effect her fingers were having on the woman beneath her. I can't believe I can do this to her! Suddenly, the rolling stopped and Kristin's body went rigid. The inexperienced fingers almost gave up their motion, but it may not have mattered at this point.

"Oh, God! Oh, yes!" The tall woman collapsed back onto the bed, still writhing against the hand at her center, but now pulling the blonde woman on top of her. "Oh, Mary Kate...." Kristin gasped for breath, still shuddering as the pulsing receded, amazed at what her new lover had just done for her. "Oh, baby, that was wonderful!"

It certainly was, Mary Kate realized. She had never felt such power, such control over someone; and she had never felt so glad to have witnessed another's release. I did that!

Safari Day 2 - Serengeti National Park - Seronera Wildlife Lodge

Mary Kate awoke first, her back spooned against her taller partner's chest. As it had yesterday morning, a protective arm snaked around her midsection, triggering an automatic need to clutch it tightly and draw even closer. The amazing woman who held her had touched her yet again last night, and *tasted* her until she nearly cried. She had no idea that her body was capable of the things Kristin had drawn from her - five climaxes in two days; she and Bobby had managed maybe five in two years, and added together, they didn't equal the strength of any one that she'd shared with this beautiful woman.

Kristin had shown patience with her, coaxing her again to relax and to listen to what her body wanted. And what her body had seemed to want was to be consumed. What they had shared these last two nights was so much more than she had anticipated from their easy flirtations on the trail. Indeed, her sexual horizons had been expanded; but something more was going on here.

It's like I'm falling in love with her.

But Mary Kate wasn't free to choose that, even if Kristin felt the same way. She didn't even want to think about the uproar such a decision would cause, not only between her and her family, but for all of them as they dealt with the fallout from others in

their small town. Mary Kate couldn't bear to put them through something like that. What she and Kristin had here would have to end here.

A soft pair of lips on her shoulder announced that her lover was awake. Turning to face the smiling blue eyes, her fingers went right for the bare breast just below her chin. "Good morning."

Kristin answered with a kiss to the top of the blonde head. "I like this," she said simply, "waking up with you."

Mary Kate snuggled closer, remembering their last morning at Mweka Hut, when she'd imagined this very thing. Waking up in Kristin's arms was more comfortable than she'd ever imagined. Being with Bobby never felt like this; in fact, the last time she felt this close to anyone was just before Jessica left college to get married, when they'd held each other for an hour while saying goodbye to their time together.

Now the women lay quietly, softly touching one another in an intimate way that wasn't overtly sexual. Both were seeking the boundaries of their growing feelings toward one another, careful to acknowledge the likelihood that the other might see this as only a physical interlude. Neither had said anything to suggest otherwise.

Mohammed was an adept game spotter. Driving away from the herds of wildebeests, zebras, and Thompson's gazelles, he located a pair of rhinos grazing in the tall grass. Kristin and Mary Kate got their best view standing atop the vehicle, but even a zoom lens didn't do justice to the sight of the rare creatures in their natural habitat.

Stopping for a picnic lunch provided by the lodge, the women were cautioned by their driver not to exit the vehicle. Alas, the latrines beckoned, and besides, others were picnicking in the grass by the lake, so they couldn't resist. As they were leaving the crater, Mohammed explained - in his best broken English - that a guide was attacked and eaten by a lion and the people in the vehicle could do nothing to help him. Eyes darting about nervously, he got out and lowered the top on the vehicle to drive the 40 kilometers to the Serengeti National Park.

"So how are the folks back in Georgia going to react to your big adventure?"

Mary Kate laughed. "It's probably an understatement to say that nobody really understood why I would want to do something like this. Bobby's reaction was at least out in the open. I knew where he was coming from, even if it was patronizing. But Mom and Carol Lee couldn't imagine why I would go off to climb a mountain instead of going on a tour to Europe or on a cruise or something more 'civilized'. And they got really pissed when I said I didn't want Bobby to come with me, like I shouldn't be doing things without him. My grandmother is the only one in my family who really supported me in this."

"She must be a special lady."

"She's the best. I've always thought I was her favorite, but I actually think all my cousins feel the same way." Mary Kate chuckled as she thought of her beloved grandparent. "Grandma made a quilt for each of her grandchildren to give to them as a wedding present. Carol Lee's the youngest - she's 20 - and she's getting married in October. But she gave me my quilt when I was 22 because she said it looked like I wasn't going to get married."

"She gave up on you at 22?" Kristin laughed. "On the other hand, you haven't exactly proven her wrong."

"No, I guess I haven't. And I've enjoyed my quilt for three winters already."

"Mary Kate, would you really consider leaving Mooresville? I mean, I know there are a lot of things about being there that get under your skin, but do you really think you want to give up all that...family? All that security?"

The Southerner sighed wistfully. "Yeah, I think I do. Maybe I'll feel different about it when the time actually comes to decide what's next. I have the whole year to sort of try on the idea in my head. But ever since I started thinking that I wanted to leave, I've felt good about it. Of course, I haven't told anybody yet, so I haven't had to listen to all the reasons I should stay, and all the awful things that will happen to me if I move away."

"You think they'll put pressure on you to stay?"

"Oh, yeah. One of my cousins married a man from Jacksonville, and my uncle bought them the house next door so she wouldn't leave when her husband couldn't get a job. But that kind of stuff is pretty normal for our family."

"So you all take care of each other."

"Yeah...but I think it can be overdone. Sometimes, it's just...manipulative. And that's what I want to get away from."

"So where do you think you'll go?"

"Now that I don't know. Maybe I'll come to Miami," she suggested offhandedly, a smile curling at her lips.

Is she serious? "Would you really consider that?" Kristin asked with guarded enthusiasm.

What the hell am I saying? Suddenly unnerved, Mary Kate realized that she was very close to saying yes. That she wanted to come to Miami. That she wanted to see if they could build on this time together. That she was falling in love.

"Mary Kate?"

"I don't know," she answered noncommittally. *We can't let this continue. I can't let this continue.* "But I think with teaching special ed, I can pretty much find a job

anywhere. I'd definitely like to live in a bigger city, like Atlanta or maybe even Charlotte."

So not Miami, Kristin realized that Mary Kate's remark was merely flippant. *Or she was afraid.*

"Masai," Mohammed interrupted, pointing out a group of black-clad boys with painted white faces.

"Get your camera, Mary Kate."

Mohammed slowed and rolled down his window, talking to the boys in Swahili. "One dollar for picture," he said.

Kristin rummaged in her pocket and found a couple of bills. One of the youths peeked inside the vehicle and resumed negotiations, raising the ante.

"Water," Mohammed added, indicating one of the bottles in the back seat.

For one bottle of water and two dollars, the women got seven remarkable photos of Masai males in their ritual maturation costumes.

The Serengeti terrain was different from what they'd seen at the lake and at the crater, more desert-like with occasional stands of trees and boulders that lent shade to a variety of species. Plants were brown and yellow; even the green leaves held a thick coat of grayish dust.

It was here that the women got their first glimpse of a lion, lazily stretched alongside the roadway, seemingly oblivious to their presence. From the top of the Land Cruiser, they were close enough to count the whiskers on his face. For almost a half hour, they watched quietly as he ignored them.

"I hope we see a cheetah," Mary Kate said, slumping into her seat as they moved on to the next stand of trees. It was tiresome to balance for a long period of time while standing on the seat. Their earlier talk about where she might move when she left Mooresville seemed to have thrown a wet blanket on further personal conversation, so they might as well talk about the animals.

"And a leopard. We've already seen rhinos, and most people don't get to see those." Kristin had taken two rolls of film since breakfast, half of the animals, and half of her excited friend.

Near sunset, they were pulling into the Seronera Wildlife Lodge, where they would stay for the next two nights. This lodge incorporated the indigenous rock into its architecture, and was home to thousands of gerbil-like rodents that huddled along the

walkways and window sills. If a person really thought about it, the heebie-jeebies were unavoidable.

Their room was like the one at the crater lodge: twin beds on either side of a nightstand. Not that it mattered. As soon as they entered, both women tossed their things on the bed next to the wall, establishing without words that they would sleep in the other.

The centerpiece of the buffet dinner at the Seronera Lodge was barbecued pork ribs, made even more interesting by the suggestion from a tablemate that the meat was likely from a wild warthog rather than a farm-raised pig. Whatever the source, Kristin and Mary Kate ate their fill and headed back to their room, hoping to shower before the hot water was turned off at 8:30. The desert ride had left them dusty, and the sun had sapped their energy.

"Your nose is sunburned," Kristin observed as her lover stepped from the shower.

"What else is new? I should probably wear a hat tomorrow."

"I have sunscreen if you want it. It would be a shame to cover up that beautiful head."

"Aren't you a sweet talker? What is it you want?" Mary Kate asked suspiciously, wrapping herself in a bath towel as she combed her wet hair straight back.

"What are my choices?" Indeed.

"Infinite," the blonde answered, strangely confident. *For the next three nights, you can have anything.*

Kristin was surprised by the Southerner's boldness. There was only one way to find out if Mary Kate would consider giving her what she really wanted - a chance to see if what they had here in Africa could grow into something more. Taking the smaller hand, she led her lover to the open bed and sat her down, taking a seat on the opposite bed so that they faced one another.

"I choose to talk."

"Okay," Mary Kate answered nervously. Talking wasn't what she had in mind.

"Look, I know we started out wondering sort of how far we would take things." Kristin looked up and down, unable to maintain eye contact as she searched for the words that would say just what she was feeling without coming on too strong. "Anyway, I'm really happy with where things have gone."

"So am I, Kris." Mary Kate reached across the bed to touch her lover's arm. "It's been pretty amazing."

"Yeah. What I mean is that I'm going to be sad when our time here is over."

When it's over.... The blonde woman felt her stomach clench, then relax just a bit, relieved in a way that Kristin had just taken the decision out of her hands. But she had to admit, the more the idea simmered that they continue what they had someday in Miami, the more tantalizing it had become.

"We should make the most of it, huh?" Mary Kate suggested.

"What?"

"The next couple of days...that's all we have and we should make the most of it, right?"

I guess that settles that. For Mary Kate, this really was only an *Africa* thing, something she was willing to do 10,000 miles from home, but not something she wanted to pursue back in the States.

"Yeah, we should make the most of it." Standing quickly, Kristin turned toward the bathroom so Mary Kate wouldn't see her look of disappointment. "I better hurry and get my shower before the hot water goes off."

Well, that was certainly abrupt, Mary Kate thought. Had she read that wrong? Still sitting on the bed, she replayed the conversation in her head. *Sad when our time is over. Was it really possible that Kristin was going to suggest that this might go further?*

Another scene was playing out in the bathroom, where Kristin admonished herself in the mirror. *No regrets. This has been very nice, and I'll have no regrets.* Still, she hated to concede that it was all about sex. But obviously it was for Mary Kate, and when she finished her shower, she would go back into the bedroom where the two of them would prove that very thing.

Safari Day 3 - Serengeti National Park - Seronera Wildlife Lodge

Both women vowed that they would sleep for the entire trip home, and for days after, if necessary; but they wouldn't give up their late nights together. Last night had been another incredible night of sharing, touching, soaring, and cresting. Mary Kate it seemed had given up most of her inhibitions, even taking the lead at one point as she turned her lover toward the candle to watch her own hand at work.

Today, they were sated. They were also exhausted, reminiscent of the mornings after their sleepless nights on Kili.

Click!

Click!

Click!

"You're cruel," Mary Kate winced as Kristin played shutter bug. "I look like death warmed over."

"Not true," her friend proclaimed. "You look much better than you did this time last week."

"Okay, let's see. What day is it?"

"Wednesday."

"Wednesday was Shira 2. That was the day after my 'flying bath' exhibition."

Kristin laughed as she remembered the image.

"You could at least have the decency to cover your mouth again."

"Sorry, I can't help it."

"Cheetah," Mohammed announced excitedly, veering off the road toward a lone bush in the midst of a speckled plain.

Kristin and Mary Kate strained to see what their guide had spotted so easily, but couldn't make it out until they were nearly on top of the beautiful creature. The spotted coat blended perfectly into the landscape, and the lazy cat posed for the curious onlookers.

Kristin got several spectacular pictures, then they waited quietly as several other safari vehicles joined them. Mohammed pulled back, drifting back to the roadway. The park ranger frowned on guides who left the marked trails.

"So what's been your favorite sight so far?" Mary Kate asked her friend.

"You mean my second-favorite sight?" A blue-eyed wink followed the oh-so-smooth reply.

Mary Kate was way beyond blushing. Last night, Kristin had pored over every inch of her body with her fingers and tongue. That's exactly what the Southerner had had in mind when she suggested they make the most of their last three nights. "Okay, your second."

"I think I liked the baby giraffes best. What about you?"

"I liked seeing all the elephant families, and how they crowded around the little ones to protect them when we came by. I just can't believe poachers kill such beautiful animals for profit."

"And then there are the ones who kill for sport. There were some guys on my plane from Amsterdam who had pre-paid as much as \$30,000 for a lion or a cheetah."

"I thought the cheetahs were endangered."

"They are, but in some places that just means that there are limits on the number you can kill, so they're higher priced."

"That's just plain sick. I have a hard time swallowing the fact that half the men in Hurston County live for deer season, but at least they eat what they kill."

Mohammed suddenly veered off the road again, coming to rest in a heavily wooded area beneath a broad shade tree. "Leopard."

Kristin scrambled for her camera, focusing just as the beast sauntered lazily into the woods, his long graceful tail disappearing from view. "Great. Remind me when I get those developed that that one is a leopard's butt."

"You should get a picture of that," Mary Kate gestured up into the tree, where a half-eaten Thompson's gazelle was wedged snugly into a forked branch. "Leopard lunch."

"Ewww!" Nevertheless, Kristin got a photo.

As quickly as they had veered off, Mohammed ventured back onto the roadway, stopping to proudly compare notes with another safari driver. His clients had a clean sweep: rhino, cheetah, and leopard. The other animals were plentiful and not nearly as elusive.

The ladies got a break from the standard box meal, returning to the Seronera Lodge for the lunch buffet.

"Where do you eat lunch, Mohammed?" Mary Kate asked.

The driver gestured to a banana and bottle of water on the front seat, then pointed to a parking lot off to the side.

"It isn't fair how these drivers are treated," Mary Kate complained as they walked into the restaurant. "I wonder if Tom Muncie knows that Mohammed slept in his car the other night when the temperature went down to freezing, or that he eats bananas in the car while his customers are leaving food on their plates."

"So let's buy him lunch," Kristin suggested, knowing well that the lodge would forbid their African driver from entering the restaurant. "We'll get it in a box and take it out to him."

The appreciative guide was the envy of his friends, dining on roast beef and fresh bread, enjoying an ice cold Coke. He smiled his thanks, assuming that this was his reward for doing a good job. It was in fact the kind nature of his clients.

"Tell me more about why you like Miami," Mary Kate asked as they sat down to lunch. It was a place she'd always wanted to visit, and now she had an incentive, she told herself.

Kristin's face lit up, first at thoughts of home, and second at the fact that Mary Kate was expressing an interest. "Miami is...home. It's hot and muggy nine months out of the year. The mosquitoes are like small birds, but you don't notice them because of all the flying palmetto bugs. The people are rude, the drivers are horrible, and service is terrible everywhere you go. I just love it."

Mary Kate couldn't help but laugh. "Oh, it sounds like a place people would really love."

"I bet you'd like it. You should come for a visit. I'll show you all the fun parts. There's the boardwalk, Key Biscayne, South Beach, Coco Walk. We could ride out to the Everglades, or all the way down to Key West. Now that's a place you'd love."

Mary Kate smiled as she watched her friend's enthusiasm grow. Was there really an invitation in there, or just a polite segue into the travelogue?

"So what do you say? Will you come?" She was serious.

"Sure," the blonde nodded. "But if I do, then you have to come to Mooresville."

Both observed that they were talking about this as though it might actually happen.

"Okay, count on it," Kristin answered without hesitation. "And what will I see in Mooresville?"

"Oh, just the usual tourist spots. There's the town square, the elementary school where I teach, and the high school where my mother teaches. There's a McDonald's, and Brenda's Drive-In - home of the Brenda Burger. There are four stoplights, three of them on Highway 63. There's Lake Hampton, which is actually more like a pond. You can shop for gifts for all your friends at the Super Wal-Mart." As she told about her hometown, the humor left her voice. Were it not for her family there, Mary Kate wondered if she'd ever go back once she got up the nerve to leave. "I really am from a hick town, Kris. There probably isn't a thing you'd want to see in Mooresville, Georgia."

"That's where you're wrong, Mary Kate," she said, leaning over to swipe a bite of *ugali*. "There's something in Mooresville I'd very much want to see. Or rather, someone."

The blonde woman smiled. "Would you really come?"

"Absolutely. I tell you what..." Kristin had been looking for a way to press the issue. "When do you start back to school?"

"August 23rd."

"Okay, and I start back on the 16th, which means I'll be in Miami until around the 10th. What if you came to visit on, say...the first, and stayed for a week?"

"I don't know, Kris. I'd like to, but...." *My family will have one big cow if I run off to Miami two weeks after getting back from Africa.* And if suspicions were raised again like they had been with her and Deb, they would be hard to overcome.

"It's okay...it was just a thought." That answered that. It really was over when they left Africa. *Why am I having such trouble getting that message to sink in?*

Mary Kate saw the disappointment on her friend's face, and felt it within herself. She wanted to see Miami through Kristin's excited eyes; but more than that, she wanted to show this woman what her own life was really like. *I'm not going to be able to just let this go, she realized.*

Mary Kate sat close to her friend on a wide smooth rock that had been incorporated into the furniture of the bar and dance floor, where the costumed African dancers moved gracefully to the drumbeat. She was tempted at times to offer a friendly touch, but Kristin had definitely withdrawn.

When they'd returned to their room this afternoon, Kristin pulled her into a long quiet hug. There was no masking the emotion for either woman as they stood solemnly in this revealing embrace. What was going on between them was more than just sexual; and if they didn't seize it, it would slip away forever when they left Africa.

Mary Kate had first thought herself not brave enough to pursue it. Now, she doubted her own resolve to resist it. No one had ever made her feel this way. She hoped she was right about what Kristin was feeling.

"Hey, Kris?"

"Yeah?" The blue-eyed woman flashed a casual smile, trying for all the world to put on a cheerful face. She felt so deflated inside.

"Can we go back to the room?"

"Are you okay?" Kristin was immediately worried.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just don't think we've left things between us in a very good place. Let's go talk some more, okay?"

Without speaking, they walked back to their room, lighting the candle in anticipation of lights out.

"So why don't you tell me what's wrong," Mary Kate coaxed. Sitting together on the bed, she took Kristin's hand in both of hers and began to softly stroke the palm. "And don't try to tell me it's nothing."

Kristin sighed. "I'm just having a bit of a hard time with this." She pulled the blonde head close for a gentle kiss.

"What is it?"

"Look, I really don't...want things to end with us here...in Africa. If we'd both work at it a little, I think we might have a chance at making something out of this. I know that's probably not what you had in mind when we started all this."

"No, it wasn't."

Kristin nodded sadly.

"And I don't think it's what you had in mind either, is it?"

This time, the dark-haired woman managed a small smile as she shook her head. "Not really, but I never ruled it out. I just sort of let things happen as they happened, and...here we are."

"You know I feel this too, Kris. It isn't just you."

"I sort of figured that, but I'm glad to hear you say it." Kristin hugged the small blonde. "It seems to me like you hold a lot of yourself back, like you won't let yourself feel things the way they are. I don't mean that as a...."

The blonde woman cut her off with a searing kiss, and Kristin suddenly felt herself being driven backwards onto the bed. To her delighted surprise, Mary Kate's weight settled directly on top of her and two hands were pulling her shirttail from her jeans.

"I do feel it, Kris...and I don't want to hold back anymore," the blonde woman murmured, now tugging at the zipper on her lover's jeans.

Kristin quickly matched her intensity and soon both women were completely nude, the smaller woman again on top. Mary Kate had no idea where this aggressiveness was coming from, but it was heady; feeling and hearing the response of the tall woman underneath her made her crave it even more. Before she knew it, her lips had wandered south to Kristin's navel, and the taller woman was gasping for breath, her legs instinctively spread.

Mary Kate continued lower, brushing her lips through the dark curls. When her tongue finally met Kristin's wet center, she couldn't hold herself back at all. Each caress brought a moan or a movement; everything about this was...wonderful! Mary Kate held off on touching the most sensitive spot, knowing that once she did, it would all end too soon. But when she finally did take the tender bud in her lips, Kristin cried out, clutching wildly at the sheets and thrashing from side to side. For the novice lover, it was the most powerful thing she had ever seen.

The blonde woman scooted up to lie beside her spent partner, both acutely aware of the significance of what had just transpired. It was more than just the act of putting her mouth on Kristin's most private place; it was the hunger she had felt for this beautiful body, and for giving the woman pleasure. Mary Kate had never wanted anyone like that before.

"You've killed me," Kristin moaned.

The blonde chuckled. "I think I've discovered something I really like."

"Oh, me too!" the tall woman concurred. "You can...like that whenever you want."

"Be careful what you ask for," Mary Kate warned. This wasn't going to end in Africa. It wasn't going to end the day after tomorrow.

Safari Day 4 - Tanganiere - Sopa Lodge

Mohammed took a circuitous route from the park, hoping to spot something of interest to his clients on this, their last day of safari. The rest of their time would be anti-climactic, he knew; they had seen each of the rare species, though an additional cheetah, leopard, or rhino would be a bonus.

Sure enough, that bonus came in the form of a mother cheetah, sunning herself on a boulder while her two cubs tumbled nearby. Mohammed parked within 30 yards of the magnificent spectacle, and both women used their zoom lenses to take as many pictures as they could before the family moved from their view.

As they did on the first day, the group stopped for lunch at a roadside stand, where Mohammed led them once again through a courtyard to a small bar and café. The Seronera Lodge had packed a box lunch, and Kristin bought Cokes for the three of them.

"So tell me how we're going to do this, you with the big ideas," Mary Kate started as they sat down at a table in the corner.

"Well, for starters, I think you should try to come to Miami before school starts. Can you do that?"

"My folks will go nuts, but they'll be so nuts about Bobby that they probably won't be speaking to me anyway," Mary Kate sighed dejectedly.

"Will you tell them about me?"

The blonde woman frowned, knowing that would be the hardest part. "I can't imagine it will be the first thing out of my mouth, Kris. And I'd..." Mary Kate couldn't meet her friend's eye, "I'd like to know that things were working out for us before I did that."

"You want some assurance that it's going somewhere," Kristin nodded in understanding.

"Yeah, I guess. It just isn't the sort of thing you can take back once you tell people."

"Well, you're right about that." The dark-haired woman could sense the waves of apprehension. "Look, I'm not really big on closets. If you're lying to people, you're going to feel guilty - about the lies as well as the truth. But I don't see any reason to tell anybody anything before you have a little confidence in yourself...or in us."

"What do you think will come of us, Kris?"

"I think it's in our hands, Mary Kate. If we really want each other, what other people think won't mean a thing. But you need to understand something." Kristin set down her fork and leaned back. "As long as you hold back from telling people, I'll read that as you having doubts. We can only go so far without resolving that."

Mary Kate nodded in understanding. "So I come to Miami for a week. Then what?"

"Then if you want, I'll stop in Mooresville for a couple of days on my way back to Bloomington. We email a lot. We get those phone plans with thousands of minutes. And we start looking at our calendars to see what else we can work out. I'm finished at Christmas, and you're finished next June."

"You really think we can do this? That's a lot of space after being as close as we've been."

Unsure how to read her lover's obvious skepticism, Kristin chose a pointed response. "We can do it if we want to, Mary Kate. But it won't stay alive if either one of us has too many doubts."

"Kris, I can't help these doubts. These aren't the kind of dreams I've had for my entire life."

"You mean you didn't dream about falling in love?" There, it was out.

The Southerner drew in a breath of surprise at hearing the words spoken aloud. But she couldn't dispute it: Falling in love was exactly what they were doing. "Of course I did. I just didn't know it would be with someone who would turn everything else in my life upside down." That was as close as she would come to admitting what she felt.

"Look, I'm not saying we have to make promises or anything like that. But I want us both to stay open to the possibility that it could happen."

Could it? To herself, Mary Kate acknowledged that it could. Outwardly, she spoke her biggest fear. "What I might want could very well mean giving up my family, Kris. And I don't know if I'm strong enough to do that."

Once she gave voice to her doubts, they took on a life of their own. The pendulum had swung: It was now likely that things would end in Africa after all.

Goodbyes

The sun crept through the crease in the curtains that covered the sliding glass door, casting a stream of light across the two women who lay entwined in one of two double beds in the oversized room. The Sopa Lodge at Tanganiera was by far the most luxurious of all their accommodations, but as it lay within a lush tropical forest, the familiar mosquito netting had made its return.

Despite the comfort of their surroundings, neither woman had slept well the night before, needing desperately to convey all that they felt for one another on this, their last night together in Africa. Both worried that it was in fact, the last time they would share their bodies, the last time they would ever be this close.

In her mind's eye, Mary Kate played out their parting. If she prepared herself, she might be able to avert the tears she was certain would otherwise come. They had spilled forth unchecked last night when Kristin had made love to her - that's what it was - and implored her to listen to her heart.

"You know that your body needs this, Mary Kate. Your heart needs it too. It's who you are. Don't you feel it?"

Mary Kate reached underneath the mosquito netting, stretching to turn off the alarm clock before it blared. It was almost six a.m.; they would leave at seven for the 90-minute ride to Kilimanjaro Airport, where her flight for Johannesburg left at 10 a.m. Kristin's flight to Amsterdam did not leave until mid-afternoon, and she had an overnight layover at the airport before continuing on to Miami.

"Hey, beautiful." Mary Kate gently pushed the dark hair back and delivered a soft kiss to her lover's cheek.

Instinctively, Kristin reached out to pull the small woman closer.

"I'm going to get in the shower. You wanna sleep some more?"

"Nah, I'll get up too." Instead, she snuggled tighter and buried her face against Mary Kate's bare chest.

"So what's that old saying? You wash my back, I'll wash yours?"

Kristin smiled at her lover's offer. "Okay."

In the hot soapy shower, the women caressed one last time, sharing a deep kiss that threatened to make them late.

Mohammed was waiting in the circle by the lobby. Quickly, he loaded the bags, and the three were underway.

"Was it all you hoped?" Kristin asked. She didn't specify what "it" was.

"It was more, Kris. Much more."

The two women slumped quietly in the departure lounge, the blonde head lying against the taller woman's shoulder.

Mary Kate wanted to say the words; wanted to say that she would see this through; wanted to say that she would listen to her heart. Her heart told her that the woman next to her could move her soul in a way no one else ever had. But what would giving in to this mean for her future? How could she turn her back on everything she'd ever known? How could she bear to disappoint all those people?

"You have my phone number?" Kristin asked for the third time.

"Yes."

"And my email address?"

"Yes. And your street address. And your post office box at IU." Mary Kate sat up and looked into the doubtful blue eyes.

The intercom called her flight for Johannesburg.

"You have to go," Kristin said simply.

Mary Kate nodded and stood, pulling the tall woman to her feet as well. They fell into a long hug, breaking finally when the flight was called again.

Kristin drew in a deep breath in an attempt to stifle the tears she felt. She didn't want to cry anymore. She had felt the subtle shift last night in her lover's demeanor that signaled goodbye. Mary Kate had probably already made her choice; and she would have *no regrets* about their time together.

"No matter what happens, Mary Kate...I love you. Please don't forget that."

Mary Kate planted a small kiss on Kristin's lips. "I love you too," she whispered.

In contrast to how she'd reacted on her inbound flight, Mary Kate hardly noticed the bumpy ride as the A-300 climbed through the cloud cover. Her thoughts were on Kristin Addison. The last couple of days - especially last night - had left Mary Kate anxious and unsettled. No matter what scenario she tried on in her head, nothing felt right.

The majestic sight of Mt. Kilimanjaro came into view as the jet emerged into the clear blue skies. Towering above the clouds, the vision again drew gasps from the passengers around her. As she had been when she first saw the mountain below their plane, Mary Kate was awed. But this time, she was not intimidated. This time, she owned that peak.

It was ironic, she thought, that she'd given the summit barely a thought since exiting the park at Mweka Gate. Indeed, from that moment on it seemed Kristin had stolen most of her attention. It was certainly peculiar that something which had been so important - so essential - to her sense of self had moved so far from her consciousness. In her two weeks in Africa, she had conquered the summit...and no matter what happened next, it was not what she would remember most about her trip.

Still, the memory of standing on that peak only six days ago was deeply satisfying. Her determination and months of preparation had paid off...even if no one cared but her. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the details of her trip. The breakfast right before they left, when she first met Kristin Addison. The long bus ride to the gate, and the hike through the rainforest. Their first night in camp....

Shortly after the Air Tanzania flight left, Kristin was greeted by familiar faces. As it turned out, all five of her climbing companions - Trevor, Leah, Kendra, Ann, and Tammy - were on the flight to Amsterdam. From there, they would scatter, but for the moment it was nice to have a distraction from the empty feeling of watching Mary Kate leave.

"So did you and Kate have a good time?" Ann plopped down next to Kristin as the others dropped their backpacks and went in search of restrooms.

"Yeah, we did. How about you?"

"Mostly okay. Tammy got food poisoning on the second night, so she missed a day on safari. But we saw a lot."

"Food poisoning," the tall woman laughed. "You know, considering the odds, it's kind of amazing that she was the only one."

"Yeah, but who knows what parasites we're all carrying home? Three weeks from now, we'll probably all be hospitalized."

"Oh, it's Larium day," Kristin remembered aloud, reaching in her backpack to get her pills and a bottle of water.

"So will you and Kate...keep in touch?" Ann seemed to think she knew something.

"I hope so," Kristin answered simply, not giving anything away.

"Trevor and Leah thought you two made a pretty good pair."

"I beg your pardon?" How would Trevor and Leah know anything?

"You and Kate? Am I off base here?"

Kristin momentarily debated deflecting the question, or answering with a flat out lie. Instead, her curiosity got the best of her. "How did you guys know?"

"Are you kidding? The sparks were flying off both of you that first day at breakfast!"

"No way!"

"Oh, yeah! It was cute!"

The dark-haired woman covered her very red face in her hands. "Cripes!"

"Really, you guys seemed suited to one another."

"Does everybody know?"

"Well, Tammy didn't, but after we talked about it at dinner the other night, I'd say she does now."

"So much for privacy," Kristin groaned.

"Look, you can't spend eight days as close as we all were and not notice things like that. So now that it's out in the open...how come you're so depressed?"

Kristin sighed. She was such an open book. "Because I don't think Kate can do this. Her family has other things in mind."

Ann nodded in understanding. "My oldest son had a lot of trouble coming out because he was worried we wouldn't love him anymore."

"Your son's gay?"

"Yep. All through high school I kept waiting for him to get interested in girls. It never happened."

"Are you okay with it?"

"Of course. The day Jason finally sat down and talked to us was the first day he didn't have secrets. That was when the rest of us finally had a chance to get to know who he really was. He wasn't afraid to talk to us anymore; he took an interest in everybody else because all of a sudden, we were interested in him." Ann proudly fished out her pictures to show off her three boys. "Any chance at all Kate will tell her family?"

"I don't know. She says they sort of have her life planned already."

"Parents can't help that. But they'll adapt." One by one, the others joined them in the departure lounge. "I hope things work out, Kristin."

"Thanks. I just wish you could be talking to her instead of to me."

The flight from Johannesburg was much less crowded than the one from Atlanta, and Mary Kate was delighted to find that the seat adjacent to hers was open. She was by

the window this time where there were only two seats, which meant not only could she stretch out a bit, but she would also have privacy.

Drifting in and out of sleep, Mary Kate noted with no small amount of irony that her head was filled with thoughts with Bobby Britton, just as it had been on the way over. But things were different now. She was standing at a crossroads in her life and it was time to choose what kind of life she wanted.

Kristin Addison loved her. She loved Kristin.

Bobby Britton loved her too, and had asked her to marry him. She loved Bobby, or so it seemed. But if she had felt as strongly for him as she did for Kristin, she would never be having this debate.

Kristin had awakened her body; Kristin had taught her things about herself that Bobby would never have known. But now that she knew those things, could she not teach her husband to elicit the same response?

A future with Kristin was uncertain. Once they tried to mesh their day-to-day lives, what they had might not even work. They connected emotionally in a way Mary Kate never knew possible; but how much could they realistically build on that without support from her family?

Bobby was already considered a part of her family. He came for Thanksgiving dinner and for Christmas morning. Their day-to-day lives were already entwined. They would have children; their children would play with Carol Lee's children; the women would sit in the kitchen and the men would watch football.

Bobby would be principal one day when Warner Hughes retired. He would be a good family man; a good provider; an excellent father. Her family would be very happy for her; and for themselves, because everything would have worked out perfectly.

Crossroads.

I'm going to marry Bobby Britton.

Cyn and Andrea are going to kick my ass....

The whole purpose of going off on this trip was to alleviate some of the stress in her life. When she got back to IU, Kristin would be wound tighter than a drum; and it was doubtful she'd want anything to do with her friends. They would press her to answer questions and to explain things that she herself didn't understand.

It wasn't that she'd gone off and broken the cardinal rule of lesbian-hood by going after a straight woman. Mary Kate wasn't straight, even if she thought she wanted to be. No, Mary Kate felt exactly the same way she did, but she wasn't going to give herself permission to have a life like that.

And Kristin was in no position to pressure the woman. When you love someone, you want for them what they want for themselves.

The tall woman raised her leg rest and leaned back. She felt a little guilty about the fact that she was flying business class while her friends were in the back, crammed into tiny seats. Hopefully, they were eating well.

Home

Mary Kate returned to her seat, having washed her face and brushed her teeth in anticipation of their arrival into Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport. They had crossed over land about a half hour ago, starting their descent soon after.

Bobby would be waiting for her.

"I'm going to do this," she said aloud to herself. *I'm going to tell him yes, and we're going to plan a December wedding for when we're out of school. When we come back from the holidays, I'll be Mary Kate Britton.*

What will it be? A phone call? A card? An email?

Kristin pulled the personal video screen from her seat arm and activated the plane's global positioning system. They were over Iceland; they would land in Miami in seven hours. If Mary Kate's plane was on time, she was touching down right now.

Will I ever even see her again?

Mary Kate wheeled her cart through the exit marked "Nothing to Declare," turning over her form to the Customs agent. She had spent less than \$200 for gifts, and she wasn't carrying any of the forbidden foodstuffs, animals, or plants. The hallway snaked as if it were a maze, finally passing two security guards who made certain no one entered through the exit.

Bobby was waiting, grinning broadly as he spotted his girlfriend. He was genuinely excited to have her back.

I'm going to marry him, Mary Kate reiterated. She dismissed her lack of emotion as nerves; once they had a chance to talk about it, she would feel more settled. And happy; she would feel happy.

"Mary Kate!" Bobby enveloped her in a strong hug, which she returned with equal fervor. "I'm so glad you're back. I've missed you."

Mary Kate hadn't anticipated his kiss, and automatically turned her face away at the last moment. For the very first time, it occurred to her that she had been unfaithful.

"I've missed you too, Bobby." When it left her lips, it felt like a lie...because it was.

Bobby picked up both of the duffle bags and turned. "I got here really early and got a parking place right by the elevator so we wouldn't have to walk far." All business now, he proceeded toward the elevator. "Everybody's going to be really glad to see you."

"I'll be glad to see them too," she admitted. She especially wanted to sit with her grandmother and tell her all about the magnificence of the mountain.

Bobby tossed the bags into the trunk while she got into the passenger seat.

"So are you...satisfied with the way everything turned out?" He was careful this time not to make any references to "getting it out of her system." Boy, had she gotten pissed when he said that!

"It was fabulous! It was such an incredible sensation, standing up there on the top of it all. It's just so different when you look at that mountain for seven days, marching closer, wondering and worrying the whole time if you'll have what it takes to reach the peak."

"Well, that's what you went for. Did you see lions and stuff?"

"Boy, did we ever! I bet I saw 20 or 30 of them, just out in the wild. But the most amazing thing was the...."

"We had a little incident with wild animals too," Bobby chuckled as he remembered the tale. "The State Patrol called out to the school and told Warner that his fence was down, and he had three bulls running up and down Highway 63. So he and I jumped in his truck and drove out there. You should of seen us, Mary Kate, out there waving our arms to get those bulls to go back into the pasture. It was a sight, I tell you."

I bet it didn't compare to a mother cheetah with her cubs, Bobby. It was clear that he wasn't all that interested in her trip. Mary Kate looked over at the man beside her. He was what most would call a handsome young man: average height and weight, with short brown hair, brown eyes, and a dimple that the secretaries at school teased him about. The secretaries all mothered him because he didn't have a wife to do that; all of the teachers liked him because he was professional and even-tempered; and the kids adored him because he was fair and knew when to have a good time. *He's got a lot to offer.*

Bobby drove through the parking garage, winding down several levels until he got into the long line to pay. "I always manage to pick the line that moves the slowest," he groused. They were gridlocked in the middle of the garage.

"So what did Mom and Dad say when you told them I made it to the top?"

Bobby was quiet for a moment, trying to recall that part of their conversation. "You know, I'm not sure I told them that part. All any of us cared about was that you were down off that mountain and okay. That was the important thing. You know," he fumbled in the glove compartment for his cell phone, "you ought to call and tell 'em your plane got in okay."

"You didn't even tell them that I made it to the top?"

"You can tell them, Mary Kate. They'll like hearing that from you."

Bobby just didn't get it. He was a good guy, but he would never get it.

Now overwhelmed with the horror of the thought of marrying Bobby, Mary Kate had the sudden urge to just jump out of the car. She wanted to leave Bobby right here in the garage and run back inside the airport. She wanted to get on the next plane to Miami and be there to meet the woman she loved when she walked out of customs. Daring herself to do something so bold, Mary Kate fidgeted with both her seat belt release and the door handle.

"Finally!" Bobby exclaimed as the bottleneck broke and he eased the car forward.

The moment now past, the blonde woman snapped the seat release and leaned back. "If you don't mind, I'm going to just close my eyes. I didn't sleep much on the plane."

"You go right ahead, Mary Kate. I'll wake you up when we get to Mooresville. Oh, before I forget...I went ahead and got us a room for a week at the Days Inn in Myrtle Beach starting next Saturday. It's not on the ocean, but we can always drive over every day." They were next in line for the attendant.

Sorry, Bobby. Next week, I'll probably still be in Miami.

Before he had a clue what was happening, Mary Kate opened the door, causing the annoying chime to sound in warning. "Pop the trunk. I have to get something."

The young man did as asked, surprised to see his girlfriend hoisting the green duffle over her shoulder.

"Listen, Bobby. Thanks for coming to get me, but I'm not coming home just yet."

"Mary Kate!"

"Look, I'll be back in a few days. Go on to Myrtle Beach without me, or take your brother or something. I promise, I'll come talk to you as soon as I get home." She couldn't say anymore. No matter what she did, she wasn't going home right now with Bobby Britton.

Recklessly, Mary Kate picked her way between the cars that were stacked up at the toll booth, crossing a stream of oncoming traffic to reenter the terminal. Hartsfield was dominated by Delta Airlines, and the snaking line to check bags or purchase tickets held hundreds of passengers.

"Excuse me," she approached a lurking skycap, "is Delta the only way to get to Miami?"

"Naw, I think AirTran goes to Miami." The uniformed aide pointed down the concourse. "They're cheaper than Delta. Lots of people go that way."

Mary Kate fished out a couple of dollars for a tip and pushed her way through the throngs of Delta passengers, eager to be out of the crowd. Bobby would surely park again and come looking for her.

The AirTran board showed a flight leaving for Miami in 90 minutes, and another two hours later. If she could get a seat on the earlier one, she'd arrive there by a quarter to one. Kristin got in at 2:30.

Looking over her shoulder constantly for the confused - and probably by this time angry - man she had left in the parking garage, Mary Kate worked her way to the front of the line. For \$204, she had a guaranteed seat on the second flight; or she could go standby on the first. Either way, her duffle would go on the earlier flight.

Despite her climbing anxiety about what she was doing, Mary Kate finally relaxed when she cleared security. Bobby could not come this far without a ticket.

What would it take? What would have to happen for you to see that this is what's right?

In her mind, Kristin was having it out with first her lover, then herself.

Am I supposed to just step back and pretend like it's over? Does she really understand that it wasn't just casual for me?

Two hours, six minutes. The global positioning system had them over North Carolina. Out of nowhere, it occurred to Kristin that a rental car equipped with a GPS could get her all the way to Mary Kate's doorstep...where she could make her case one more time.

"Hello, Deb?" Mary Kate had snagged a phone card that would give her a hundred minutes for ten dollars. She'd walked onto the earlier flight, arriving in plenty of time to meet Kristin's flight from Amsterdam. "It's me, Mary Kate. I've lost my mind."

"Are you home?" her friend asked excitedly.

"I'm in Miami. Deb, listen to me. You're the only one on earth I can talk to."

"Are you with Kristin?"

"How...how did you know? I mean no, she's not here yet, but how did you know?"

"You told me about her in your email, that she lived in Miami. I figured that's why you were there."

Of course. "Yes, she's why I'm here. Deb, all hell's going to break loose when Bobby gets back to Mooresville without me. You're probably going to get a call."

"Fine. Do I know anything or not?"

"The better question is do you want to know anything or do you want to be able to plead ignorance?" Mary Kate was finally beginning to relax. Talking with her best friend grounded her.

"Hey, just promise me you're still breaking up with Bobby Britton. That's all I really need to know," her friend joked.

"Oh yeah, I'd say we were definitely breaking up alright. But that's not the big news, Deb." Mary Kate readied herself to spill her secret.

"So I guess the big news is Kristin, eh?"

"How did you know that, Deb? Yes, the big news is Kristin. The big news is that I went all the way to Africa to find out that I'm a...I'm attracted to women. To a woman. But how did you know?"

"Give me some credit, Mary Kate. First of all, you're calling me from Miami. Second, for the last six months, all you could talk about was getting to the top of that mountain. But when you finally did, you sent me a note that was more about some girl you met, right down to her keychain. And third, you've been my best friend since I was seven years old, and half of that time, I've been in love with you. I know you almost as well as you know yourself. But I accepted who you were a long time before you did."

The blonde woman slumped into the booth and sighed. "You know, if you had told me all this, you could have saved me a lot of trouble."

"No, you have to figure these things out for yourself. That's the rule." Deb laughed, glad that her friend had finally acknowledged this so that they could talk openly about it. "So Kristin must be pretty special."

"She is, Deb. She's...beautiful, and she's kind. I think we have a chance, if I don't screw this up."

"Wow, so it's serious."

"It could be. I think we need to spend a lot more time together to be sure, and she's in school in Indiana until December. Besides, I have a contract through next summer, so it isn't like we won't have time to find out."

"I'm really happy for you, Mary Kate."

The women waited to continue their conversation as the general information announcement about keeping baggage under close watch played loudly in the background.

"So what do I do now?" Mary Kate asked.

"What do you want to do?"

"I want to run away from home!"

"Nothing wrong with that," Deb soothed. "But sooner or later, you're going to have to come back to Mooresville and face the music."

"God, Deb...my parents are just going to die!"

"Don't be so sure about that, Mary Kate. Listen, I think you ought to call your mom and tell her where you are."

"Not a chance. Bobby's probably there already, and they're all patting the poor boy on the shoulder, going on about me and my crazy notions."

"I doubt it, Mary Kate. He's probably there, and they're all probably worried, but I don't think they're all ganging up on you like you think."

"You don't know them like I do, Deb. This is going to kill them."

"Look, I promised your mom I wouldn't say anything, but under the circumstances, I don't think she'd mind," Deb started with trepidation. Her friend needed to hear what she had to say. "Actually, I promised her I wouldn't say anything if you went on and married Bobby."

"What are you talking about?"

Deb's answer was drowned out by a page over the airport's loudspeaker.

"Say that again," the blonde woman implored, not quite believing what she'd heard.

"I said your mom called me last Christmas and asked me if you were gay."

Mary Kate felt as if she'd just been punched in the stomach. "My mom...? What did you say, Deb?"

"She wanted to know if that was why you turned down Bobby's ring. I told her I honestly didn't know. But I also told her that I didn't think you were in love with Bobby and that you were afraid of making a mistake."

"What did she say?"

"Basically, she said if you weren't in love with him, she hoped you wouldn't just marry him anyway."

"And what did she say about the gay part?"

"Nothing really. She said she hated to put me on the spot asking that question, but she said she figured if it were true, you wouldn't tell them."

"Well, she was right about that!"

"Mary Kate, listen, I don't think you ought to keep it from them, your mom at least. She sounded...I don't know, sort of disappointed when she said she didn't think you'd ever tell them."

"You really think I should call my mother?"

"Yeah. You at least should let them know where you are. And maybe you should tell her that you met somebody and leave it at that."

"You really think so?"

"I do. I can't imagine having to keep a secret like that from people who love me. Telling my mother and telling you really took a load off my shoulders, Mary Kate. I'm not saying it'll be hunky-dory, but over time, I think they'll all come around."

Another announcement - this one a page in Spanish - silenced the two women for a moment.

"Deb, you are the best friend a person could have."

"No, that would be you."

"No, it would be you."

"No, you."

"Look, I have to go. The board says her plane's on approach. Wish me luck."

"You got it."

"Oh, I almost forgot! Will you come pick me up at the airport whenever I decide to come home?"

"Of course. I love you, Mary Kate."

"I love you too. And Deb?"

"Yeah?"

"You're the best friend a person could have." And she quickly hung up.

Kristin breezed easily through passport control and customs, her mind racing ahead to what she had planned. The first order of business was to get home and get a shower; dump the two dirty duffle bags; and repack a carryon. She'd make a plane reservation over the phone. If she got out of here by seven tonight, she could be at Mary Kate's door by eleven.

And what if she has company? Or what if she's not there because she's spending the night with Bobby? *But they never stay the whole night*, she remembered. *I'll wait all night if I....* Kristin did a double take, astounded by how much that woman looked like....

"Am I too early?"

Kristin dropped both her bags and opened her arms wide to receive the smiling blonde package. "I can't believe you're here!" Sleep deprivation was a cruel condition, but if this wasn't really happening, someone was going to have to die.

"Is it okay?"

"Are you kidding! It's more than okay." The tall woman hadn't yet relinquished her hold.

"Kris, I almost made a really big mistake," Mary Kate confessed.

"But you didn't. Besides, I'd have talked you out of it," Kristin declared emphatically, planting kisses all over the blonde head.

Mary Kate finally loosened her grip and drew back, thrilled at seeing the smiling blue eyes. "This isn't going to be easy, you know."

"A lot of the easy stuff just isn't worth doing. If we'd wanted easy, I don't think either one of us would have picked climbing a mountain as a summer vacation."

"I guess you're right about that. But you know, when I left Atlanta two weeks ago, I thought I was prepared for anything."

Kristin laughed and pulled her lover close again. "You can only prepare for so much, Mary Kate. The rest of living is all about how you handle surprises."

The End.

Asante (thank you) for reading. Your feedback is *Karibu* (welcome). *Tafadhali* (please), drop me a note at kgmacgregor@yahoo.com