



*Other Titles By Lauren Gallagher*

Between Brothers

*Carnal Passions Presents*

# The Next Move

By

Lauren Gallagher



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## ***Dedication***

Mom, Dad, and Eddie for the love and support,  
Nichola for the discipline,  
The people of Absolute Write for the information,  
Everyone who has ever believed in me for the faith,  
And everyone who has ever doubted me for the challenge.

# One

"Checkmate."

"Damn it." Chris Bailey leaned back in his chair, shaking his head. "She wins again."

Kat Morgan lifted her wine glass off the coffee table and gave him a smug grin. "That's what you get for not paying attention."

"I was paying attention." He rolled his eyes and picked up his glass. *Paying attention, but not to the game, that's for damn sure.*

Swirling her wine, she laughed. "So that's why you took my knight when my queen was as open as a hooker's legs?"

Chris choked on his wine. Clearing his throat, he shook his head again. "You're so classy."

She shrugged. "Just speaking your language."

"Hey!"

"What? It's true."

He pretended to give it some thought. "Okay, you're right."

"Of course I am."

"Arrogant wench." He chuckled and gestured towards the board with his glass. "Now what the hell are you talking about? Your knight was a move away from putting me in check."

"Check, but not checkmate." She set her glass down and leaned forward, backtracking the pieces to their last few positions. "See? You could've taken my queen out with your rook, because all I had to do was move over here—"

His eyes followed her hand, but instead of watching

the queen's path across the board, drifted up Kat's arm to her shoulder, where a hint of black lace peeked out from beneath her grey sweatshirt. Swallowing hard, he tried not to let his mind fill in the blanks and draw a mental picture of the rest of her bra. *Christ, she even dresses sexy when she's dressed down.*

"—and when you moved that bishop to take out my knight," she went on, oblivious to his wandering eyes. "You also lost your one defense against my queen. Thus," she sat up, squaring her shoulders and grinning at him. "Checkmate."

Raising his glass in a toast, Chris said, "Well done, Morgan." He drained his glass. "Well done."

She raised her glass as well, the devilish twinkle in her eyes suddenly making him wish he was drinking something a hell of a lot stronger. *Come on, man, it's Kat. What is wrong with you?*

"More wine?" she asked.

"Absolutely." His head was a bit light from the last couple of glasses, but it was still early. Knowing them, they'd be up until three in the morning playing chess, so he wouldn't be driving anytime soon. Odds were, he'd crash on her couch again anyway.

He watched her walk out of the living room and into the kitchen. *What I wouldn't give to spend a night on a different piece of her furniture.*

~ \* ~

Setting the wine glasses on the counter, Kat let out a long breath and closed her eyes, pausing for a moment to collect her thoughts. *What is the matter with me tonight?*

It wasn't like this was an unusual evening for them. They'd been friends since high school and, especially since they'd both been single for the last year or so, spent a lot of time together. Just hanging out. Just friends. She could let her hair down around him, be herself, not try to impress him. Because she wasn't supposed to be attracted to him.

*Friends, Katrina. Friends. Nothing more.*

Glancing back into the living room, she caught his eye and he smiled. Letting out a breath, she turned her attention back to getting their drinks, pretending that smile didn't make her head spin more than her last few drinks.

She poured the wine, trying to keep her hands steady. This was the kind of nervousness she expected on a first date, not on an evening in with a longtime friend. Not with *Chris*.

It wasn't that he was unattractive. Quite the contrary. Everything about him was attractive and always had been, but tonight, the air about him seemed different.

She couldn't remember his eyes being so stunning. Whether it was the vivid green color or maybe the way they narrowed when he gave her that devilish grin, she didn't know. He'd always had beautiful eyes, but suddenly she couldn't tell if the mischievous sparkle meant he was thinking of his next witty remark, or some deliciously filthy thought that he didn't dare speak.

Earlier, she'd caught him looking at her exposed bra strap. She'd been a second away from adjusting her shirt to cover it, but when she realized he was looking at it, she left it be.

*For God's sake, it's Chris. What is wrong with me?*

They'd touched thousands of times in the past, but it was always completely platonic. A friendly hug. A shoulder to cry on. A dance or two every now and then. They'd touched when he taught her how to swing at the batting cages and when she taught him to shoot at the gun range.

Tonight, though, just taking his wine glass from him—touching something that was touching him—made her skin tingle.

Maybe she was just horny. She'd been on a few dates recently, but no one worth taking home. It had been a while, but still, she'd been around Chris during longer dry spells without getting this overwhelming urge to beg him to fuck her.

Whatever it was, at this point, the only thing stopping her from coming onto him was the fear that he didn't return her feelings. Even satisfying the tingling ache inside her wasn't worth risking their friendship.

*Looks like I'll be up for a while after he goes home tonight.*

She picked up the glasses and headed back into the living room, nearly dropping them when he looked up and gave her that heart-stopping smile.



"You okay?" He laughed as she almost tripped over her own feet.

"I'm fine." She handed him a glass. "Maybe I've just had a few too many of these." She raised her glass, and then took a sip.

"Oh please," he said. "This from the woman who could probably drink the entire Navy under the table and still play chess."

"Being a nerd with a high tolerance for alcohol has its perks." She laughed.

"A nerd? Yeah right."

"I'm home on a Friday night playing chess, aren't I?"

He raised an eyebrow. "As am I."

"So you're a nerd, too."

"I am *not* a nerd." He nodded towards the board, which was set up for the next game. "Your move."

After a few turns, Kat watched Chris consider his next move. She cocked her head. "We're really pathetic, aren't we?"

His eyes flicked towards her, then back to the board. "Why? Because we drink and play chess?"

"No, because we're playing chess on a Friday night instead of out painting the town or getting laid."

He gestured dismissively. "That's not pathetic. I don't know about you, but sometimes I need a break from all of that headache and aggravation."

"So you come over and let me whoop your ass at chess?"

"Hey now, I've beaten you too."

"Once."

"Out of four games." He moved his knight and captured her bishop. He held it up between two fingers. "The night's still young, my dear. I have plenty of time to catch up."

*Or we could just skip the chess altogether.* Ignoring the way her cheeks burned, she looked at the board, trying to decide on her next move.

"Honestly, I'd rather do this than be out on the prowl anyway," he said. "I hate all the dating bullshit."

"Yeah, I feel your pain," she said.

"Especially first dates."

"Why's that?" She glanced up from trying to decide between sending in a rook to take out his vulnerable bishop, or sacrificing a pawn in hopes that he'd take the bait and put his queen in harm's way again.

He took a sip of his wine. "It'd probably be easier if I didn't want to get laid. I mean, sometimes when I'm out with a girl, I'm not into her enough to put in the effort to impress her into a second date, but I wouldn't mind impressing her into bed. If I wasn't so damned desperate to get her—*any* woman—into bed, I wouldn't bother trying to impress some of these women at all."

Snickering as she sacrificed her pawn, Kat grinned. "And you say I'm classy."

He shrugged. "What? Come on, why lie?"

"Good point. Been there, done that. More times than I can count." She sat back to let him take his turn. She idly swirled her wine glass. "You know, there are some upshots to first dates."

He raised his eyebrows. "Such as?"

"That first kiss," she said. "There's nothing quite like it."

He sat up, looking at her with a stunned expression. "Katrina Morgan, are you suggesting that you would let a man kiss you on the first date?"

She rolled her eyes. "Please. I've let first dates do a hell of a lot more than kiss me."

Even though he laughed as he dropped his attention back to the board, she swore his cheeks colored. And was that a nervous swallow?

He took the bait and moved his queen, opening up a perfect attack by her knight. She moved her pieces, captured his queen, and smirked at the twin lines that appeared between his eyebrows.

"Didn't see that coming did you?" she said.

"Stop gloating, woman," he growled, grinning at her. He paused. "So you're a first kiss junkie?"

"You could say that. I guess it's not even the kiss itself," she said. "It's the anticipation. Everything leading up to the kiss. You know, that moment when you hit a point of no return, when someone is close enough that it's not *if* they're going to kiss you, it's *when*. It's like—"

"Checkmate."

"Yes! Exactly."

"No, checkmate. You lose."

She looked at the board, furrowing her brow. "Damn it, how did you...?" Retracing the steps of the last few turns, she realized her fatal error. In baiting him to sacrifice his queen, she'd let her guard down and moved the crucial knight away from her king.

"Guess you should have been paying attention," he said with a smirk.

"I was paying attention."

He laughed. "To what?"

Her breath caught. So did his. Their eyes met for a second, and then they each went for their wine glasses.

"I need another drink." She gestured with her now empty glass. "You?"

"Please." He avoided her eyes as he handed her the glass.

~ \* ~

Once her back was turned, he looked at her. As he did earlier, he watched her walk into the kitchen, letting his imagination run wild at the thought of what else she hid beneath that sweatshirt and those casual jeans. She was dressed to relax, not to tease, but tease she did. He couldn't count the number of times he'd seen her dressed for a club—tight, low-cut tops, super short skirts or skintight leather pants—but she was just as attractive dressed this way.

Kat was simply too sexy to be unsexy.

Tonight, more than ever, he wished he had the nerve to tell her he wanted her.

It was more than just her appearance that attracted him. She combined a subdued kind of sexy with an unapologetic wild side. Sweet, but brazen. She was the kind of girl you don't take home to Mom. In fact, she was the kind of girl who took *you* home, and it wasn't to meet Mom.

They'd never discussed their sex lives in great detail. Maybe a comment or two here and there about not getting laid for a while or wanting to get laid, but otherwise, they just didn't go there. What happened in their respective bedrooms stayed in their respective bedrooms.

Still, she'd told him a few stories without even

realizing it. Welts on her wrists that looked distinctly like marks he'd gotten himself a time or two from handcuffs. An occasional subtle wince and stiffness in her gait, suggesting that her hips had done more than their fair share of work the night before. And while Chris was certainly no cosmetics expert, he couldn't help but notice one night that the smudge of lipstick on her collar was a dramatically different shade than her own.

He'd been attracted to her as long as he could remember, but never like this. Maybe it was the wine. Maybe it was that sliver of black lace that taunted him from beneath her sweatshirt. Whatever the case, he was losing his mind.

*At least I can somehow still manage to play chess without looking like a total idiot.*

His spine straightened. She always gave him a run for his money, even if he was stone cold sober and playing his very best. Yet tonight, she was making as many mistakes as he was.

As if she was as distracted as he was.

*No way.*

She couldn't be.

But what about the way she paused when he jokingly asked what she was paying attention to? His mouth went dry. That had to be his imagination. Wishful thinking. He looked towards the kitchen. She couldn't possibly feel the same thing he did tonight.

Could she?

~ \* ~

*Come on, get it together. It's Chris, for crying out loud.*

Pulling a bottle out of the wine rack, Kat wondered how many more it would take to get up the nerve to say something. Or *do* something. *No. No, I can't.*

"Need a hand?"

Kat spun on her heel, nearly dropping the bottle. "Jesus, Chris, you startled me."

"Sorry." He came towards her. Slowly. Cautiously. "Are you okay, Kat?"

She swallowed. "Yeah, of course. Why?"

"Because you're shaking."

She looked down at her hands, gripping the bottle

tighter and clenching her free hand into a fist to still the tremors. Staring at her hands, she cleared her throat. "I'm fine, yeah. I'm just..." *What? Shaking because I want you so bad it hurts?*

Something in the air shifted. The atmosphere changed, became electrified, making it hard for her to breathe.

"Kat..."

Her head snapped up as she realized what had changed. He'd moved closer, and now stood less than an arm's length in front of her. Close enough to touch. She'd stood this close and closer to him a million times in the past, but now, he was simultaneously too close for comfort and too far away.

She couldn't look him in the eye. She couldn't breathe, and she didn't know if it was because she was afraid that he would touch her or that he wouldn't.

He reached for her and her heart pounded. The presence of his hand warmed hers as it came to rest near, but not touching her fingers on the wine bottle. He tugged gently at the bottle, but she hesitated. Part of her wanted to let him take it so that she no longer ran the risk of dropping it, but judging by her own vise grip, it wasn't going anywhere. It was the one thing she had to hold onto. If she let go, she'd need something else to anchor herself in reality. And the only thing close enough besides the wine bottle was him.

"Kat, what's wrong?" The unsteadiness in his whisper brought her eyes up to meet his in the same instant that her fingers released the bottle.

He leaned away to set the bottle on the counter and when he came back, he was closer to her than before. As if he'd taken a step while she wasn't paying attention.

The fabric of his shirt rustled, a sound that would have been inaudible if not for the total silence in the kitchen, and she closed his eyes just before the warmth of his hand met the side of her face. "Talk to me, Kat," he whispered.

*I want you to kiss me.*

Forcing herself to look at him, she swallowed hard. A million thoughts ran through her mind, but there were no words to express them. Instead, she put her hand over his

on her face. His fingers separated just slightly, letting hers sink between them, her own fingertips cool against her face compared to the heat of his.

*Are you going to kiss me?*

Drawing an unsteady breath, she moved towards him, willing herself to stay upright as she ventured into the tense, electrified space between them. She stopped, leaving it up to him to come closer. When he did, he slid a hand over her hip.

*You're going to kiss me, but when?*

She put her arm around his waist, as much for stability and support as for closeness.

*Chris, kiss me.*

He tilted his head slightly and leaned towards her, slowly, but stopped.

*Kiss me.*

With his chest touching hers, she wondered if he felt her heart pounding.

*Kiss me.*

When he spoke, his lips were almost close enough to hers to touch. "Kat..."

"Chris, I—"

"Checkmate."

## Two

Before the word even registered in her mind, his lips were against hers.

Immediately, she wanted to taste and explore his mouth, but even the gentle touch of his lips was too intense. She parted her lips, inviting his tongue, then brought them back together, then parted them again. *I want more. This is too much. I want everything you'll give me. I can't handle this.*

The hand on her face started towards her hair, and her own hand fell from his, landing on his forearm. Desperate to touch him, she let his arm serve as a pathway, guiding her hand to him as she fumbled blindly through the confusion that served as her conscious mind's last defense against understanding that this was really happening. Her hand found the warmth of his face and her fingers registered the movement of his jaw a heartbeat before his tongue parted her lips.

His mouth tasted vaguely of wine, but it was the realization that it was Chris's tongue against hers that sent a shiver up her spine.

*This is really happening.*

He broke the kiss, resting his forehead against hers as his fingers tangled in her hair. "Jesus, Kat..."

He brought his chin forward to kiss her again, but pulled back a second before their lips met. Closing his eyes, he swallowed hard before releasing an unsteady breath. He made no effort to push her away—in fact, he still held her close to him—but he avoided her mouth.

"Kat, I want to kiss you again." He was breathless, his

voice was tinged with frustration. "I want to so bad, I..."

"Kiss me again." *Please. Chris. Please, kiss me again.* His fingers moved in her hair and she realized his hand was trembling. "Chris..."

"If I do," he paused, swallowing hard.

*Why won't you kiss me again?*

Finally, he found the words. "If I do," he whispered, touching her face. His voice shook with desperation. "Kat, if I kiss you again, I won't be able to stop at just a kiss."

The ache inside her, that feeling that had nagged her all night, suddenly became unbearable. All night long, she'd wondered how she could tell him she wanted him, that she wanted him every way he'd have her, and finally, the words came:

"Kiss me again."

Chris didn't hesitate.

As his tongue explored her mouth, he slid his hands under her shirt. They both gasped as his skin touched hers, and they broke the kiss just long enough for him to lift her shirt off.

Kissing her deeply, he let his fingers memorize the bra he'd imagined so many times since its strap first caught his attention that night. He ran his fingertips along its alternately smooth and coarse surface, seeking the warm silkiness of her skin but hesitating as if some irrational part of his mind expected her to shove his hands away. As she leaned into his kiss and murmured when his thumb circled her nipple through the fabric, that irrational little voice quieted.

Kat reached behind her and a second later, her bra went slack, as did Chris's mouth when his hands cupped her breasts with nothing separating skin from skin. It wasn't as if he'd never touched a woman before, but he'd done a lot of fantasizing about this particular woman and never imagined he'd ever have her like this.

Circling her nipple with his thumb, he kissed his way down her jaw and onto her neck, his mouth watering at the thought of sucking on her nipple, of gently holding it between his teeth while he flicked his tongue across it. He wanted to taste every last inch of Kat's body.



She tugged at his shirt. "Let's take this someplace else."

He murmured against her neck. "Wherever you want."

Without another word, she took his hand and led him out of the kitchen. On their way through the living room, his jacket, draped over the back of a chair, caught his eye.

"Wait," he said.

"What? But—"

"Condoms." He paused to pick up his jacket and fish the condoms out of the inside pocket.

"No reason to go get all the way into the bedroom, then." She grasped his shirt and pulled him into a desperate kiss.

With a hand on the small of her back, he guided her towards the couch, but she stopped him.

"No. Right here."

"Right—"

She cut him off with another kiss, pulling him down to the floor behind the couch. He didn't protest; he was already on the verge of coming simply from her desperate, hungry kiss. Though he wanted to touch and taste her all over, he had to be inside her *right now*. Judging by the frantic hands trying to unbuckle his belt, Kat was very much on the same page.

He sat up and pulled his shirt off, then went for his zipper. Nodding towards her, he growled low. "Get those jeans out of the way."

She chewed her lower lip and fumbled with her belt, cursing under her breath as her hands shook. His own hands trembling, Chris tore the condom wrapper with his teeth and pushed his jeans far enough off his hips to be out of the way. Rolling the condom on, he watched her shimmy out of her jeans and the black lace panties that matched her bra. A passing thought of *I didn't know she had those tattoos* murmured through his consciousness, but there would be time to look at her ink later. The only thing that mattered now was being inside her.

As he came down to her, she met him halfway, kissing him deeply as they sank together to the floor. Her thighs squeezed his hips and she pushed against him, whimpering as the head of his cock slid into her pussy.

"Fuck me," she moaned.

*You don't know how long I've wanted to hear that.*

In the next heartbeat, he was inside her. Deep inside her. Closing his eyes, holding his breath, he was still. Every fiber of his being screamed at him to fuck her, to thrust hard, deep, fast, but for a moment, he simply. Couldn't. Move.

"Oh God." His own voice sounded foreign, the words coming out as something akin to a sob.

"Chris," she moaned.

He opened his eyes, and the look on her face almost drove him right over the edge. Lips parted, skin flushed, blue eyes on fire with pure, desperate lust.

Slowly, he withdrew, exhaling as he pulled almost all the way out. A soft whimper escaped her lips, her eyebrows lifting, wordlessly pleading with him to stay inside her. She took a breath, opened her mouth as if to speak, but before she could, he slammed into her and took her breath away. He paused, then did it again. And again. Her moans and shudders turned him on more than anything, and he fucked her faster and faster.

Thrusting as hard as he could, he watched her eyes, watched her body writhe beneath him as her pussy tightened around his cock with every stroke he took.

Her fingers dug into his arms. "Oh my God, oh my God..." Her spine arched beneath them as she screwed her eyes shut and gasped for air. "Oh God, I'm...I'm..." All that followed was a throaty cry, and she came.

Chris kept thrusting, kept fucking her, watching her come, feeling her come, completely disbelieving that *he* was making Katrina come, until she cried out his name and he couldn't hold back anymore. He couldn't even say her name, or curse, or cry out, or even moan; all he could do was gasp for breath, hold onto her shoulders, and come.

When the last shudder had passed, he rested his weight on his shaking arms, trying not to collapse on top of her.

He lifted his head and kissed her. As soon as their lips met, goosebumps prickled his skin. That desperate hunger was still there, barely tempered by what they had just done. If anything, she was even more turned on than before.

Judging by the way she held him and devoured his kiss, she wasn't unsatisfied. He'd done nothing wrong. She simply wanted *more*.

He dipped his head and kissed her neck, working his way up to her ear, where he whispered, "Bedroom?"

The shiver that ran through her told him everything he needed to know.

## ***Three***

The orgasm Chris gave her had the opposite effect of any she'd ever had. It turned her desire for him into need. Every stroke of his cock inside her had driven her insane with desire and as soon as she climaxed, every nerve screamed for *more*.

Chris kicked off the last of his clothes and followed her into the bedroom. Beside the bed, he grabbed her hips and turned her around, kissing her passionately.

Something in the back of her mind tried to tell her this was wrong, but the ache in her pussy and the desperation in his kiss silenced her doubts. She pulled him onto the bed on top of her. This was too right to be wrong.

For the longest time, they simply kissed, holding each other close and exploring—*devouring*—each other's mouths. There was nothing tender or gentle or even intimate about the way they kissed. It was, in every sense of the word, *desperate*.

Chris lifted his head, opening his mouth to speak, then kissed her again. The second time he broke away, he finally managed to speak.

"I want to taste you," he growled.

The thought of his tongue on her clit made her gasp as he started down her neck, kissing here, circling with the tip of his tongue there. His lips lingered on her collarbone, then slowly trailed kisses down to her breasts. When he sucked her nipple between his lips, holding it gently between his teeth as his tongue flicked across it, she realized he didn't just mean he wanted to taste her pussy, he wanted to taste *her*. All of her.

He sucked her nipple just hard enough to border on painful, that perfect balance between not enough and too much. Her shoulder blades dug into the bed as she arched her back towards him, silently pleading for more. She moaned, the earliest shudders of an orgasm building inside her. If he could do this just by touching her nipple, she could only imagine what would happen if—*when, not if, oh God, he's going to, I know he is*—his tongue met her clit.

His fingertips drifted down her side, leaving a tingling trail of goosebumps in their wake before pausing on her hip. Though his mouth drew most of her attention to the deliciously maddening way he teased her nipple, that still presence of his hand on her hip didn't escape her notice.

He moved to her other nipple, teasing it just as mercilessly.

His thumb moved on her hip, just brushing across her skin, but it was more than enough to make her gasp. When it continued, drawing a slow, gentle line in the groove between her hip and thigh, edging dangerously close to her pussy, she couldn't breathe. Then his entire hand moved, following his thumb's path, and she bit her lip, certain she would come just from his hand's proximity to her clit.

Now his lips moved, trailing kisses down her chest and belly as his fingertips teased her pussy. His lightly stubbled chin grazed her skin, making her shiver, momentarily distracting her from his fingers. Her attention was instantly drawn back, though, when his fingers slipped inside her, moving slowly, touching all the places that were still deliciously sensitive from everything his cock had done to her.

As he kissed his way along her hipbone, his fingers bent slightly inside her, beckoning, turning up just enough to put his fingertips right against her G-spot. She gasped as they stroked it gently, every movement sending lightning bolts up her spine, but his mouth stayed stubbornly away from her pussy. Even as he brought her closer and closer to what promised to be a powerful orgasm, he only kissed her hipbone, the inside of her thigh, anywhere but the one place that screamed for his tongue.

"Oh God, Chris," she moaned, sheets bunching in her hands. Nothing between her hips and shoulder blades

touched the bed as her building orgasm threatened to levitate her entire body.

"Come for me, Kat," he murmured, his breath whispering across her skin inches away from her clit. His fingers crooked a little more, putting just the slightest bit more pressure on her G-spot, and a heartbeat before she came, he closed his lips around her clit, circling it rapidly with his tongue.

"Oh fuck...Chris...*don't...stop...*"

He didn't stop. Even after her orgasm rose and fell, he didn't stop, gently circling her clit, his fingers still moving although much slower now, the constant stimulation keeping her from completely coming down from her climax. The ability to release a satisfied breath, the exhalation that signified her return to terra firma, stayed out of her reach in the same way an orgasm itself often did: Almost there, almost, not quite.

Finally, it became too much. She begged him to stop and as soon as he did, her entire body relaxed. She exhaled, closing her eyes as the room spun around her.

A moment later, he was over her, kissing her deeply with the heady sweetness of her pussy on his tongue.

"You taste incredible," he said, licking his lips before kissing her again. "I've been wanting to do that all fucking night."

"Then why did you wait so long?"

He laughed softly. "What do you mean?"

"You took ages to finally do it."

He grinned. "Was I frustrating you?"

"Yes, you were." She laughed.

"There was a method to my madness," he said, bending to kiss her neck as he pressed his cock against her hip. "God, you don't know how bad I wanted to, but..."

She thought he shuddered, but maybe she did. It was impossible to tell with as turned on as she was. "But what?"

"I wanted to taste you," he whispered, pausing to kiss her. "But I wanted my first taste of you to be right when you came." He kissed her again with the same desperation from earlier, once again making her clit tingle without even touching it.

*Can't wait. Need him. Right now.*

Without breaking their passionate kiss, she reached for the nightstand, fumbling blindly for the drawer. As he kissed her neck, she cursed under her breath. It was bad enough that she couldn't see the drawer, but she was also on her back, so her arm was at an odd angle to try to open the damned thing, let alone rifle around in it. Then, his hand was over hers, gently nudging it out of the way, his lips meeting hers as he opened the drawer. The rustle of foil against foil told her he knew exactly what she had been searching for.

He sat back, tearing the wrapper open and looking at her as he rolled the condom on. "I think the only thing I could possibly want more than I wanted to taste you earlier," he said, lowering himself over her. "Is to be inside you."

Slowly, his entire body trembling as if it took every bit of restraint he had, he pushed into her, making sure she felt every. Last. Inch.

In spite of the fact that she was aroused beyond belief, and the fact that he'd already been inside her once tonight, her pussy yielded to him gradually, as if barely accommodating him. His cock slid against her G-spot and every nerve ending in her body was suddenly electrified again, just as they had been when he made her come, each one awakening like a dimly glowing ember flaring back to life.

"Oh God, Kat, your pussy feels so good," he whispered, letting his head fall beside hers and exhaling against her neck as he withdrew.

With each stroke, he moved faster until he knocked the breath out of her with each deep, powerful thrust, fucking her so hard it hurt, and she begged for more. He toed the intoxicating line between just right and too much, and the more he fucked her, the more she wanted him to cross that line. She wanted too much and then some.

As her orgasm built, as every sensation reached and passed that coveted degree of too much, her cries and moans quieted, her voice making way for the silent intensity that he so easily unleashed within her. The only sounds were their sharp, uneven breaths and the bed creaking in time with Chris's powerful thrusts. White light exploded just beyond the edges of her vision and she wanted to tell him how fucking incredible he felt, how close she was, but

managed little more than a whimper when something inside her finally gave, and she came.

She gasped, her body lifting off the bed as much as possible with Chris over her, and he kept fucking her, kept driving himself into her.

"Oh God, Kat," he moaned. "Oh fuck, that's...you're..."

She finally found her voice. "Don't stop, don't stop..."

"I won't, I can't, I—" He slammed into her, growling through clenched teeth. "I can't... Fucking... *Stop*."

Then he gasped, pulling her hips against his as he shuddered, groaning as his cock twitched inside her. "Oh Jesus, I'm coming..."

As one last tremor rippled through him, they collapsed together. She hadn't even realized that her back had come up off of the bed until she sank back down to it. His head fell beside hers, his breath cooling her sweaty skin.

Though the palpable desperation was finally sated, finally calmed enough to let them breathe, it still simmered just beneath the surface, waiting for a touch or a kiss to reignite it.

She stroked his damp hair as he panted, his shoulders rising and falling rapidly. *Catch your breath, Chris. I'm not done with you yet.*



## ***Four***

Kat winced as she sank onto the sofa, coffee cup in hand. She wasn't hung over; she'd had several glasses of wine the night before, but that was just enough to make her a little tipsy. Too drunk to drive, sober enough for anything else.

*Except, evidently, using halfway decent judgment when it comes to friendships.* She shifted uncomfortably, her aching hips reminding her of everything she and Chris had done the night before.

She really couldn't blame the alcohol. They were both completely coherent. He obviously wasn't too drunk to perform, and she remembered everything with crystal clarity.

No, it wasn't the alcohol. It was lust. Pure lust.

Pure, stupid, unthinking, reckless, *lust*.

Neither of them had said much that morning before he left. Just a few awkward morning after pleasantries, some small talk, the kind of stilted crap she'd expect after a one night stand, not with Chris. Not after a night with Chris, because there never should have *been* a night with Chris.

"Shit." She closed her eyes and ran a hand through her hair.

Replaying the night's events, she couldn't comprehend how they'd gone from a casual evening of chess to a sizzling night between the sheets. She'd always been attracted to Chris, but what had gotten into her? And for that matter, what got into *him*?

Not that it mattered. It was done. The only thing that mattered now was the fallout, and the nervous knot twisting

in her gut suggested that it wasn't going to be pretty. She only hoped she hadn't completely destroyed her friendship with him. A few awkward evenings and some uncomfortable conversations, she could deal with. The loss of his friendship would be too much.

Her cell phone rang, breaking the silence and making her jump so badly she almost spilled her coffee. Ice ran through her veins as she expected to see Chris's name on the caller ID, but to her great relief, it wasn't him. It was her younger brother, Dylan.

"Hey," she said, trying to sound cheerful in spite of her sour mood.

"Hey, how's it going?"

*I think I just royally fucked up a friendship, even if it was some of the hottest sex I've had in recent memory, but otherwise, peachy. You?* "I'm okay. You?"

"Good, good," he said. "Hey, the reason I called, a bunch of us are heading up to Whistler this week—"

"You're going *snowboarding*?" She groaned, rolling her eyes. "Dylan, you can't be serious."

"Why not? It's the end of the season, but there's still plenty of powder up there."

"But you *just* got out of a cast," she said. "Don't you think you should stay off the slopes for a little while? Maybe enjoy walking around on an intact ankle before you break it again?"

He snorted. "Please. I've already missed the entire season."

"Yeah, because you fucked yourself up at the beginning of the season. Dylan, seriously—"

"Kat, relax," he said. "The doc says my ankle is fine."

She sighed. There was no point in trying to talk him out of it. "Just, be careful, okay?"

"I'm always careful."

*No, you're not. You're a reckless idiot on the slopes and always have been.* "Promise?"

"Yes, I promise," he said, probably rolling his eyes at the same time.

Kat scowled. "I'm serious."

"So am I," he said in a tone that told her he was anything but. "Anyway, look, I'll be gone all this week and

next weekend. Can you stop by and feed my animals while I'm out?"

"Heidi won't be around?"

"Nope," he said, a grin in his voice. "She's coming up with us. Finally talked her into taking some lessons."

*Great. You two can have matching casts.* "From a trained professional, I hope."

"Of course. I'll be on the advanced slopes, so—"

"Dylan!"

"Relax, Kat," he laughed. "I know what I'm doing."

"Right. Okay, I'll take care of them. Just leave a note with their feeding instructions and all of that."

"Will do. I gotta run, we're heading out to buy Heidi's gear."

"Okay. Love you, bro."

"Love you too, even if you're a nag."

"Just looking out for you."

"Thanks, Kat," he said.

After they hung up, Kat let out a breath. Great. Now, in addition to all of her worries about her friendship with Chris, she could sweat about Dylan. She sipped her coffee. Every season, she told herself not to worry about him, that he would be fine, he knew what he was doing, and every season, right about the time she relaxed, he came home in a cast.

She went into the kitchen to pour herself another cup of coffee. There wasn't much she could do about Dylan except hope he didn't hurt himself again. Chris, on the other hand, required some attention.

Eyeing her cell phone, she wondered if she should call him. Or give it a few days. Or wait for him to call.

Glancing at the clock, she chewed her lip. He'd only left an hour ago, so she didn't want to call now. *Maybe tonight. After dinner. Or maybe a bit later. Like tomorrow.*

"Fuck, what have I done?"

~ \* ~

"Christ, how could I be so stupid?" Chris glared at his cell phone, hoping it would ring, but it remained stubbornly silent on the coffee table beside his chess board.

Hours had passed since he left Kat's place, after they parted with an awkward hug and a goodbye with no eye

contact. Hours had passed since he had the perfect opportunity to sort this out.

Then again, maybe it needed to rest a while. Maybe they both needed some time to think before they talked about it. If they talked about it. No, no, they had to. They couldn't just let something like this slide into the past and pretend it never happened.

He sucked in a breath as another thought crossed his mind: What if she was angry? Upset? What if the longer the silence lingered, the angrier she got?

*Shit. What do I do? Shit!*

He rested his elbows on his knees and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. His mind kept trying to wander back and figure out just what had happened the night before, but he forced himself to think only of what needed to happen now. Come what may, he needed to talk to her.

Sooner than later.

But not too soon.

Definitely not too late.

"Fuck."

Before he could think twice, he picked up his phone and speed-dialed her.

Leaning back on the couch, he closed his eyes, and waited. His heart pounded as the phone rang on the other end. Each ring made him wonder if she was ignoring him. If she was looking at her phone, trying to decide whether or not to answer. If she—

"Hey."

He sat up. "Hey."

Silence.

He cleared his throat. "Look, about last night..." *Good one, Bailey. Way to think ahead and figure out something to say before calling.*

She took a breath. "I guess we should talk about it, shouldn't we?" Was that nervousness in her voice? Anger? Fear?

"Do you—" He paused. He wanted to discuss this face to face, but would that lack of distance make her uncomfortable? Swallowing hard, he said, "Would you rather talk about it in person, or over the phone?"

She was quiet for a moment. "Do you want to come

over?"

*Returning to the scene of the crime. This should be interesting.* "Yeah, sure. When?"

Another long pause. "The sooner the better."

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

## ***Five***

Kat watched her fingers play with the hem of her shirt, just giving herself something to look at besides Chris. He sat on the opposite end of the couch, the silence lingering between them.

She chewed the inside of her cheek. All day long, she'd dreaded this encounter. She couldn't really call it a conversation, since neither of them had said more than a few words, but now that he was here, she was uncomfortable for an entirely different reason.

*Maybe we should have done this over the phone.*

Chris cleared his throat, the sound startling her. After a moment, he said, "What happened last night?"

"We drank a lot of wine and didn't play a lot of chess."

Their eyes met briefly and they each allowed themselves a short cough of laughter. Then they fell back into silence, avoiding each other's eyes.

His fingers idly traced the pattern on the upholstery *just like he did when he ran his fingers over my bra. Stop it, Katrina.* She dropped her gaze back to her fingers.

She wetted her lips, pretending she didn't hear his breath catch. *Just a coincidence. He probably wasn't even looking at me.*

"Honestly, I don't know what happened," she said.

"Neither do I."

"But it did."

"Yeah, it did." He was quiet for a long time. When he spoke again, he was barely whispering. "Do you regret it?"

Her fingers stopped moving. Ever since she woke up beside him, she was certain they'd made a huge mistake, but

now his presence only served to remind her of all the reasons she *didn't* think it was a mistake. Every orgasm. Every touch of his hand. Every kiss. The memory of his tongue circling her clit sent a violent shiver up her spine, making her gasp.

"Kat? You okay?"

She nodded. His other, unanswered question still hung in the air, and she simply didn't know the answer. Finally, taking a deep breath, she looked at him, hoping the words would come to her.

But when she met his eyes, the words didn't come.

The answer didn't come.

She couldn't even remember the question.

All she remembered was the electricity between them the night before, when his lips were a hair's breadth from hers and he'd whispered, "Checkmate."

"Kat, are—"

She pushed herself off the couch, grabbed the front of his shirt, and pulled him into a passionate kiss. His body tensed and his lips parted in surprise, but he didn't return her kiss. A pang of disappointment and embarrassment hit her in the gut, but just before she broke the one-sided kiss and retreated, warm pressure on the small of her back told her to stay.

A second later, his lips relaxed into her kiss, and as his other hand snaked around to her back, his tongue met hers. He drew her closer to him, easing her onto his lap as she released his shirt and put her arms around his neck.

Both were breathing hard when they broke the kiss, letting their foreheads rest against each other.

He wetted his lips, then took a breath. "Should we be doing this?"

"I don't know. I really don't."

"Maybe we shouldn't." His fingers trailed up her back, raising the hairs on the back of her neck.

"But I want to."

He released a ragged breath, raising his chin to kiss her again. Just before their lips met, he whispered, "*I need to.*"

His kiss made her dizzy, just as it had the night before. He had the kind of kiss that unabashedly boasted of

skilled lips and tongue, promising more orgasms than one woman could handle. If last night was any indication, his mouth had more than earned the right to make such claims.

"We should take this in the bedroom," he said.

She pulled him closer. "I don't want to move."

"If we stay in here," he paused, catching his breath. "I'm going to end up fucking you right there on the floor again."

Running her fingers through his hair, she kissed him and pressed her hips against his. "Do you have condoms with you?"

"Not this time." He kissed her again, breathing hard against her. "We used them all last night."

"Bedroom, then." She slid off his lap and stood, offering a hand as he got to his feet. He took it, and they walked in silence into her bedroom, both exercising just enough restraint to get through the doorway before they were on each other again. Clothes fell away, landing haphazardly at their feet as they stumbled over each other on the way to the bed.

She pulled him towards the bed, but he stopped, putting his arms around her and kissing her. In spite of her reservations about what they'd done and what they were about to do again, she couldn't escape the odd feeling that being against his body, being *almost* as close as two people could be, was right. The heat of his naked skin against hers silenced her apprehension.

*Do you regret it?* His unanswered question echoed in her mind.

*No, I don't,* she told him with her fingers in his hair and her lips against his. With the way his tongue intertwined with hers and his cock pressed into her hip, she knew his answer too.

Again she pulled him towards the bed. "Fuck me, Chris." Her voice shook as badly as her body. As badly as *his* body.

"I will." He kissed her neck. "But first..." He pressed his lips against her collarbone, pausing for a moment as a shudder ran through him. Finally, he looked up. "Kat, I *have* to taste you again." Before she could respond, he kissed her, and she remembered the tangy-sweetness of her own pussy



on his tongue the night before.

He lowered her to the bed, still standing beside it but bending to kiss her. Kissing his way down her neck, he worked towards her breast. In spite of his barely restrained need, the trembling in his hands and the unsteadiness of his breathing gave him away. He took his time, sucking each nipple in turn, circling them with his tongue just like she knew he was about to do to her clit. Most men hurried from her lips to her pussy, but Chris seemed to enjoy the journey as much as the destination. It was as if going down on her without first paying attention to everything else made about as much sense as fucking her without putting his hands on her.

By the time he reached her pussy, she was a breath away from an orgasm. He didn't go right for her clit, instead taking his time tasting and exploring her just as he had the night before.

Her fingers grasped his hair, couldn't decide if they wanted to push him away or pull him against her pussy. It was already too intense, but she wanted the orgasm his mouth promised with each sweep of his tongue. *How? How, God, how is it possible to feel this incredibly, insanely, painfully good?*

The first shudder of an orgasm rippled through her and her hands went to the bed, grabbing the edge for dear life as if she was in danger of melting right off the side.

"Oh my God, *ooh...*" Her orgasm lodged her breath and her voice in her throat, and she could do nothing but tremble and claw at the edge of the bed.

When at last she could exhale, the words came out as a choked sob, "Fuck me, Chris, *please.*"

An instant later, he was over her, kissing her deeply with the intoxicating sweetness of her own pussy on his tongue. The more she tasted herself on him, the more she felt his heart pounding just beneath her hands, the more she wanted him.

He reached for the drawer and she started to move, getting all the way onto the bed, but he stopped her with a gentle hand on her hip. "No, stay there. Stay right there."

Letting his gaze run down her body, then back up, he

swallowed. "I want you just like that."

His hands shook as he rolled the condom on, but he managed. Standing beside the bed, he pulled her hips to the edge and let her wrap her legs around his waist. She hooked her ankles behind him, choking back a whimper as his cock teased her pussy.

"All I've been able to think about since last night," his voice shook. "Is how fucking amazing your pussy feels around my cock." And with that, he thrust into her, taking her breath away as his cock electrified her G-spot.

"Oh God, Chris," she moaned, rolling her hips in time with his deep, desperate strokes. "Oh God..."

He leaned over her, kissing her as he moved from the hips. "You feel so good," he whispered. "Oh my God, I could do this all night."

"You're gonna make me come again, oh fuck, that's..." Her entire body seized, her spine arching beneath them as she gasped. At that, he pushed himself upright, grabbed her hips, and *railed* her so hard it almost hurt. A shockwave surged through her so violently her shoulders lifted off the bed. Her voice distantly registered in her consciousness, calling out his name and God only knew what else, but all she cared about was the incredible sensations exploding with each deep, powerful thrust.

When it finally subsided, she fell back to the bed, panting and shaking as he kept fucking her.

Chris's fingers dug into her hips. "Oh God, oh my God..." He threw his head back and roared, driving his cock deep inside her as he came. After one last, violent shudder, he groaned and collapsed against her, breathing hard against her shoulder.

When the trembling stopped, he lifted his head, and when their eyes met, Kat swallowed hard. Now that the horny, irrational desperation for each other was sated, rational thought moved in. Chris's expression mirrored the same feeling that tied her gut into knots: *What the hell did we just do?*

## *Six*

"You awake?"

His voice brought her back into the present. Ever since they'd slipped beneath the covers, seeking the warmth they didn't dare get from each other's bodies, they were silent. Not touching. Not talking. How much time had passed, she didn't know.

She opened her eyes and rolled onto her side to face him. "Yeah, I'm awake."

He smiled, caressing her cheek. Then, his smile fell and he withdrew his hand. Looking anywhere but at her, he swallowed and said, "I guess we can't blame the wine this time."

"I don't think we can blame the wine for last night, either." She reached for his hand, clasping it gently, hoping he'd return the gentle squeeze, but he didn't. His fingers intertwined loosely with hers, neither resisting nor accepting her gesture. She watched his eyes avoid hers. "So what do we do now?"

He took a breath, looking up at the ceiling. After a moment, he shook his head. "I don't know."

"We can't uncross this line."

"I know."

"Chris, I don't want to lose our friendship over this."

Her heart skipped when his hand finally closed around hers, his thumb running back and forth along the side of her finger. *Thank God, you're still here.*

"I don't want to lose our friendship either." He looked at her then. "But I can't pretend that this doesn't change anything."

She swallowed. "So what does it change?"

He started to speak. Stopped. "You know, it's funny, I guess in a way I always wanted this to happen." He bit his lip, looking away for a moment. "But I always thought it would fuck things up between us. And now that it's happened..." He shook his head, then met her eyes again. "I don't know if it's fucked things up or not."

Chewing the inside of her lip, she let his words roll around in her mind for a moment. "Maybe it doesn't have to fuck things up."

His eyebrows lifted.

She wetted her lips. "We can't pretend this never happened, but..." She trailed off, thinking for a moment. Then she looked at him. "Do you feel differently about me now?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, now that we've had sex," she paused. "Everything between us still feels the same to me. I still see you as my friend."

For a long moment, he was quiet. Then he rolled onto his side, but neither moved closer to her nor broke the gentle contact of their clasped hands. "That's part of why I'm worried. I'm not going to lie, Kat, I'm very attracted to you. I have been for a long time."

"Likewise."

He swallowed. "And I have to admit, now that I've been with you, it's going to be difficult as hell to go back to the way things were."

"Maybe they don't have to."

"Won't things get even more complicated if we keep doing this?"

"No necessarily."

He cocked his head.

"I think sex starts fucking things up when it gets tied up in emotions," she said. "Jealousy. One person falling for the other. Dishonesty."

"Right." He furrowed his brow. "So, what do you suggest?"

"Why not friends with benefits?"

His eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"Sure. We both want each other. We both want to stay

just friends. You want to get laid, I want to get laid, neither of us is having much luck with the dating bullshit *because* we want to get laid." She shrugged. "So why not have some hot, no bullshit, no strings attached sex to take the edge off of the dating frustration?"

He blinked. "You're serious? You think we should be...booty calls?"

"Basically."

"Wouldn't we be using each other?"

"Sure," she said with a shrug. "But if we're both using each other for the same thing, and we both know what the deal is..." She shrugged again.

"Good point."

"As long as we're both honest, and we keep it as friends with benefits, nothing more, then what's the harm?"

"So let me get this straight." He moved a little closer to her, putting his hand on her hip and looking at her as if waiting to see if she'd recoil. "You're suggesting that we stay 'just friends', just like we've always been, only fucking on the side? While we're both out looking for other people?"

"Exactly."

"And what about other people?"

"What do you mean?"

He wetted his lips. "If, say, I'm out with a girl and want to sleep with her."

She shrugged. "As long as you're using condoms with her and with me, I don't care." She raised an eyebrow. "Assuming the same applies if I decide I want to sleep with someone."

"Sounds fair." He grinned. "I like the sound of this."

"At least then—" She trailed her finger down the center of his chest, watching his abs ripple as she continued down the groove of his six-pack. "We both have a sure thing, so we don't end up sleeping with some of these people just because we want a warm body for the night."

"You're such a lady, you know that?"

"This coming from someone who's such a gentleman."

He laughed. "Touché."

"As long as we both play by the rules," she said. "I think it'll work."

"So what rules?"

"No lying, no commitment. If one of us wants out of it, we let it go. We go back to being just friends with no hard feelings."

"Do you think it would be that easy?"

"Well, it might not be easy to stop, but say if one of us meets someone else. Or we just decide we don't want to do it anymore. We just have to put our friendship first. If the sex starts threatening our friendship or making things weird, we stop."

"Easier said than done."

"As is everything in life."

"Good point." He paused, pursing his lips for a moment. "I think I like this idea."

"And let's face it," she said, smiling. "We're damned good in bed together."

He grinned. "I always *thought* we'd be good in bed together—"

"Christian Bailey, are you saying you had impure thoughts about us?"

"On multiple occasions, yes." He smirked. "You know, you would be amazed at the number of positions my mind can get your body into."

She rolled her eyes and laughed. "You dirty bastard."

"What? It's true." He chuckled. "Don't tell me you've never thought about it."

Her cheeks burned. "Oh, I have."

"Do tell."

"A good girl doesn't kiss and tell."

He snorted. "First of all, if you were kissing me, your fantasy version of me or not, it doesn't count as kissing and telling." He nibbled the side of her neck. "And second of all, you are *not* a good girl."

She scoffed with mock offense. "I beg your pardon."

"You can beg for something else." He pressed his hips against her.

"I don't think you'd make me beg."

He kissed along the underside of her jaw. "I could make you beg."

"No, you couldn't." She slid her hand under the covers.

"Is that a challenge?" He parted her lips with his

tongue.

She wrapped her hand around his cock, stroking gently and grinning into his kiss as his body tensed. "It's a *fact*."

He groaned softly and pulled her closer. Then he rolled her onto her back, sucking her nipple between his lips. He moved so that his cock was just out of her reach, so she let her fingers tangle in his hair instead.

"So..." He kissed between her breasts. "No bullshit." Trilled kisses down the center of her abdomen. "No strings." Slid his hands under her hips. "A smoking hot woman who will let me..." Kissed her hipbone. "...Use her for..." Kissed the groove between her thigh and her hip. "...All manner of wild, dirty sex..." His tongue slid between her pussy lips, making her hips squirm in his hands. When he spoke again, his mouth was so close to her clit that his voice thrummed across it: "I'm failing to see the downside."

His lips closed around her clit, and the conversation was over.

## Seven

*How can someone be so interesting online, and yet so insufferably dull in person?*

Kat crunched on an ice cube, the sound drowning out the monotonous drone of Quinn's story about...something. She'd long since stopped paying attention to her date's endless explanations of the intricacies of his job as an engineer, and simply focused on looking politely interested while secretly planning her escape. As much as she loved analytical, intellectual types, there was only so much she could take.

*I wonder if Chris is available tonight.*

When Quinn had paused long enough that she could politely change the subject, she said, "So you said you're a chess player?"

His eyes lit up. "Oh yes, I love chess."

"Me too." She smiled. *Thank God. Common ground.*

"I haven't met too many people who can play worth a damn," he said. "Seems a bit too, shall we say, *demanding* for some?"

Kat played with her straw and gave him a puzzled look. "Demanding? How so?"

"Well, the high school chess teams aren't made up of the math and science nerds for nothing." The smugness in his grin and his tone set her teeth on edge. "I think anyone can learn how to move the pieces, but the strategy and planning? That takes someone with some brains."

She thought about messing with his head and giving him her theory about chess being as primal as it was intellectual, but his rebuttal would probably have put her into



a coma. Instead, she said, "I don't know, I've been given a run for my money from a few players you might not have expected to be so skilled."

"Yes, but how much actual strategizing went on?"

She raised an eyebrow. *Did you just insult my chess prowess?* "On which side of the board?"

"Either, really, I mean..." He wandered off on a tangent about complex strategies, even mentioning specific games from tournaments past.

Kat sucked an ice cube into her mouth and crunched it as loudly as she could. Not loud enough that he could hear, but loud enough that she couldn't hear *him*. She knew chess strategies inside out and backwards, but was no longer interested in much of anything Quinn had to say at this point.

*Quinn, you've insulted my intelligence and you're making chess boring. You've gone from common ground to treading on very, very thin ice.*

The antagonistic side of her wanted to tell him to put his money where his mouth was, come back to her place, and throw down on the chess board. But then he'd be at her place, with all the requisite hints that such an invitation created. And he'd probably irritate her so much that she'd devise a way to make a bishop into a weapon just to shut Quinn up.

That thought almost made her giggle, but she suppressed it and went for her drink.

Pity he was such a pompous jackass; he wasn't bad-looking, and she was horny as hell. If only he'd kept his mouth shut.

Her mind shifted to her backup plan.

*Chris.* She sucked another ice cube into her mouth. Her stomach suddenly twisted into a nervous knot. *I can't possibly call him, can I? This is what we agreed to do. Why should I be embarrassed? It was my idea, why am I so afraid to call him?*

Quinn cleared his throat, drawing her attention back to him. For a moment, she was afraid he'd noticed that her mind was elsewhere, but as he continued on, explaining the strategies and dynamics of the Alkehine-Poindle game of 1936, he probably didn't even realize she was still there.

*Chris, you may want to grab a couple of Red Bulls.*

She scooted her chair back slightly, the movement catching Quinn's attention. "Hold that thought for just a second," she said, forcing a smile. "I'm going to run to the ladies' room, but I'll be right back."

"Oh, sure, certainly," he said, smiling in spite of the obvious annoyance in his voice.

She picked up her purse and headed towards the back of the restaurant. The restrooms were tucked away in a hallway that was mostly hidden from anyone in the dining room. Glancing over her shoulder to make sure she was truly out of Quinn's sight, she dug her phone out of her purse and speed-dialed Chris.

She chewed her lip as it rang, wondering if he was busy, if he'd even want to see her, if she was a complete idiot for even thinking of this, if—

"Bailey's Booty Call Service, how may I direct your call?"

Kat burst out laughing. "What gave me away?"

He chuckled. "Nothing, it was just wishful thinking."

"Are you saying you hoped my date was a bust?"

"I'm saying I hoped you'd want to get laid tonight."

"Well, you're in luck. My date is a bust and I *really* want to get laid."

"We have at least one thing in common tonight, then."

"Your date was a bust, too?" She giggled.

"You know what I mean."

"Yes, I do. So I suppose I don't need to ask if you're busy?"

He laughed. "Not doing anything I wouldn't drop in a heartbeat if a hot woman demanded my presence in her bed."

"Well good, because I'm demanding your presence in my bed."

"Say the magic word."

"Now."

He chuckled again. "Works for me. You closer to your place or mine?"

"Mine." She glanced back towards the dining area. "I can probably be there in twenty depending on how soon I can bow out of this."

"I'll be there with a hard-on."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't it, 'I'll be there with bells on'?"

"Probably," he said. "But I'm fresh out of bells."

"Then I guess a hard-on will suffice." She shivered. *Will it ever.*

"See you there."

"Don't be late." She hung up and grinned as she slipped her phone back into her purse.

*Sorry, Quinn. The knight just stepped in and captured your queen.*

## ***Eight***

The warmth of someone lying beside her sent a cold shudder down Kat's spine as she awoke. *Oh joy. Another morning of 'here's your coffee, there's the door'.* This was probably her least favorite part of a one night stand.

In fragments, memories from the night before trickled into her mind, and with a smile she remembered that it was Chris beside her. This was the second time they'd spent the entire night together, and she suddenly realized one of the unsung benefits of *friends with benefits*. The morning after, they were still friends, not strangers trying to exit gracefully without outwardly saying that the odds of seeing each other again were marginally better than a snowball's chance in hell.

She rolled onto her side and watched him sleep. He was on his stomach, his face turned away from her, the comforter draped just above his waist. Some faint red lines crisscrossed his back, and a row of four crescent moons on each shoulder made her breath catch at the memory of the earth-shattering climax that had driven her nails into his skin. Fortunately, she noted, she hadn't broken the skin, but the marks would be there for a few hours.

*Oops*, she thought, suppressing a giggle.

She ran her hand up his back, smiling as he stirred slightly. When she got to his neck, she gently pressed her nails against his skin and trailed them back down his spine. With a startled gasp, he shivered awake.

He shifted, turning his head so he could see her, but stayed on his stomach. "Morning," he murmured, his eyes barely open.

"Morning," she said, letting her nails drifted up and

down his back.

"Mmm, that feels nice."

"So you don't want me to stop?"

"Not unless you feel the need to occupy your hands some other way."

"Like making coffee?"

"Coffee can wait. I like what you're doing."

"You know, with all those lines I left last night, we could play chess on your back."

He lifted his head, glaring at her playfully. "What did you do? Leave a roadmap on me?"

She shrugged, batting her eyes innocently. "I didn't mean to." Letting her fingers trace over the fading crescent moons on his shoulder, she said, "Didn't mean to leave those, either."

"What?" He reached over his shoulder and laughed as he ran his fingers over the grooves. "Jesus, woman, I'm surprised you didn't draw blood."

"I guess I got carried away."

He scooted closer to her, rolling onto his side and draping his arm over her. "Trust me, feeling you come like that was well worth having a chunk or two carved out of my shoulder."

"I thought so too."

"I'm sure you did," he said. "You, my dear, were the one having the orgasm and you weren't the one getting clawed."

"You just said it was worth it, though." She ran her fingertips up his side, laughing when he tensed.

He took her hand away from his side and pulled it up to his lips. He kissed the backs of her fingers. "It *was* worth it. So just don't be surprised if I sink my nails or teeth in sometime while *I'm* coming."

"Christian!" she scoffed in mock horror. "You wouldn't inflict such a wanton act of cruelty on me during lovemaking, would you?"

"Absolutely not," he said. Without warning, he nipped her finger, just hard enough to smart but not enough to leave a mark. When she yelped and tried to pull her hand away, he held it tighter. "I would, however, not hesitate to do something that might leave a mark while I'm fucking the

hell out of you."

"Beast."

"You're damn right," he growled, kissing her neck and nudging her onto her back. "Besides, something tells me you have a higher pain tolerance than I do."

"Oh? What makes you say that?"

He shifted onto one arm and trailed his fingers down her abdomen, then onto her hip. "Just a hunch," he said, tracing the outline of her tattoo.

She sucked in a breath. His feather light touch was almost more intense than the tattoo needle had been.

He moved back and sat up, furrowing his brow as he looked at the tattoo. "How long have you had that, anyway? I didn't even know you had a tattoo until the other night."

She glanced down. "I got it in college."

"It's beautiful," he said, still exploring the raised edges of the Pegasus that extended from her hip partway down her thigh.

"I'm rather fond of it," she said. "Which is good, since I'm stuck with it."

"You have more, don't you?" His gaze moved over her the way his fingers moved over the tattoo. "I could have sworn I saw another one."

"There's one all the way around each ankle."

He ran his hand from the tattoo down to her knee, then gently bent her knee and continued down to her ankle. "I like that one too," he said, letting his fingertips run over the anklet of roses. "Now let's have a look at the other one." He let her ankle go and brought the other up in a similar fashion. Eyebrows lifting, he laughed and said, "Barbed wire? Now that's sexy. I can't believe I never noticed those before."

"You would have had to check out my legs, wouldn't you?"

He winked. "You don't think I have?" He paused. "Come to think of it, I think I did see them, but I always thought you were wearing ankle bracelets."

"I still have one more," she said.

"You do? Where?"

She said nothing. Instead, she rolled onto her

stomach, propping herself up on her elbows and pulling her hair over her shoulder to show him the Celtic knotwork between her shoulders.

"Wow," he said. "That is..." He moved closer. "That is gorgeous." She expected his fingers to touch it just as they had her others, but instead, his hands come down on the bed beside her and she sensed him moving over her. When his lips touched the center of her spine, she gasped and arched her back.

"Like that?" he whispered before kissing her back again.

"What do you think?" she said.

"Hmm, not sure." He moved up this time, kissing his way up to the base of her neck. "I think you do, but I can't be sure."

Every inch of her skin prickled with goosebumps from his touch, which was as soft as it was intense. When he kissed behind her ear, she whimpered and pushed herself up against him, just needing to feel his body against hers.

Pushing back, he took away her ability to form a coherent thought as his hard cock pressed against her. Nibbling her ear gently, he whispered, "I didn't wear your pussy out last night, did I?"

"God, no."

"So you wouldn't object..." He kissed the side of her neck. "...if I put another condom on, pulled you up on your knees, and fucked the living hell out of you?"

She couldn't speak.

She couldn't think.

She did the one thing she could do.

Reached for the nightstand drawer.

## ***Nine***

"Hey, Kat."

Kat looked over her computer screen at Jackie, one of her customer service reps, who leaned in through the office door. She barely suppressed a frustrated groan at Jackie's knitted brow, which signaled more bullshit than Kat felt like dealing with today. She forced a smile. "What's up?"

The knitted brow tightened. "We've got a pissed off customer on line four that wants free shipping on seven hundred pounds of cargo going to India."

Kat blinked. "Have you asked him what he's smoking?"

Jackie laughed, but it was a nervous sound. She was still fairly new to the call center, and hadn't quite learned to roll with the punches.

Sighing, Kat said, "Transfer it to me. I'll take care of it." Jackie's shoulders dropped as she released a relieved breath. It was the signature look of 'Thank God, I'm off the hook' that all of the representatives got when she took over with problem calls. A second later, she was gone.

Kat leaned back in her chair and glared at the empty doorway. *Next time, you're on your own, Jackie.* She really didn't have time for this, not with the hundred or so unanswered e-mails, dozen voice mails, and countless reports and shit she had to address before five today, but it would be less time-consuming to handle it herself this time rather than try to walk Jackie through it.

The call rang through, and Kat managed to maintain a professional attitude in spite of her desire to reach through the phone and strangle the idiot on the other end. Twenty minutes later, she hung up, muttering a string of curses



before taking a deep breath, exhaling, and returning to the stack of reports on her desk.

She had just found where she left off when her phone rang again. Before she was even through with that call, Stan, the accounting manager, appeared in her doorway. She gritted her teeth and focused on her call, trying to ignore both his impatient stare and the way his nose whistled every time he took a breath.

Hanging up, she smiled at him. "What do you need?" *What can I do for you that you could probably do yourself if you limited yourself to nine smoke breaks before lunch?*

"Can I borrow a couple of your reps this afternoon? Accounting needs to—"

She put her hands up. "Stan, I'm already short-staffed and we're slammed today."

He scowled. "It'll just be for an hour or so."

"Sorry." She shook her head. "If I had a full crew and we weren't so busy, you know I would."

His expression hardened and he muttered something that hinted at conceding, but she was willing to bet money his next stop would be her boss's office to ask the very same question. *You were the sibling that always went and asked Dad when Mom said no, weren't you, Stan?*

She put her elbows on the desk and rested her face in her hands, closing her eyes and taking a few long breaths.

"Good morning, Katrina."

The VP's voice made her teeth grind.

She looked up. "Morning, Bill." He was funny that way; insisted on calling everyone else by their full first name, but went by Bill.

"Listen, I've got some complaints coming in about the wait time on the phones in the call center."

"I know," Kat said. "I've got three new people that are still in training, and I'm missing two of my more experienced reps until Tracy's back off maternity leave and Jillian is over the flu."

He nodded, pursing his lips. "Well, the fact is, I've got customers that need problems addressed and orders processed." He gestured over his shoulder at the call center on the other side of the wall. "They can't be taking extra time on calls."

"Bill, I'm sorry, I know. We're just very short-staffed at the moment. Once the new girls are up to speed in a week or so, we'll be better off, but it's going to be rough for a bit. We're doing the best we can." *Which you would know if you ever spent a day in the trenches with them.*

"Send a memo to all of them," he said. "And copy me on it. Remind them that calls need to be taken quickly and efficiently."

*Did you not hear a word I just said?* She opened her mouth, but thought better of it. *Don't argue with him. Not worth it.* "Okay," she said. "I'll send an e-mail around."

"Good." He smiled. "Thanks, Katrina."

Kat glared at the vacant doorway, daring it to become occupied again.

The phone rang.

"Son of a bitch," she muttered. As she took the call, she opened the desk drawer where she kept her purse and dug out her cell phone. Half-listening to the caller on the other end—one of the company's field representatives that seemed more interested in bitching to her than asking for a solution—she texted Chris.

*Feel like hitting something tonight?*

A few minutes later, as the field rep continued whining in her ear, her phone lit up with a new message.

*Another five minutes of this shit,* his message said. *And I'll be hitting the bottle.*

She laughed. *I was thinking along the lines of a few baseballs.*

There was no immediate reply, but she didn't worry. Knowing Chris, he was running between meetings. The day was still young, he'd reply when he had time.

The day was still young indeed, with plenty of time for more bullshit. After two hours of customers, calls, and catastrophes, she'd forgotten all about their brief conversation. It was only when another conversation with the accounting manager had her ready to punch something that she remembered.

She flipped her phone open. His message read: *I have to put in some overtime tonight, but I can meet you at the cages around seven.*

She quickly sent back, *I'll be there, hitting 'send' just*

before Bill came in with yet another crisis that demanded her immediate attention.

~ \* ~

"I'm meeting someone here," Chris told the kid behind the counter at the batting cages. "She should be—"

"Cage four."

"Thanks."

On his way past the other cages, he could tell what kind of day Kat had had. Judging by the violent *crack* of her bat making contact with the ball and the way the chain link fence bowed each time a ball hit, it must have been brutal.

"Bad day?" he said.

"One of the best," she said through clenched teeth. She swung and hit another ball.

"That bad, huh?"

"That bad."

He stepped into the shielded box at one end of the cage, dropping his bat and helmet on the bench. Above him, another ball collided with the fence so hard that it made Chris instinctively duck in spite of the horizontal chain link over his head.

As he pulled on his batting gloves, he watched her. How many times they'd come to this place as platonic friends, he couldn't count, but it was surreal to look at her here, now, knowing what he did about her.

The way her loose T-shirt hinted at her breasts. The way her hips twisted with each swing. The hint of sweat and the flush of exertion that sent his mind to places that had nothing to do with baseball.

When the machine had emptied, she came to the box and dropped her bat on the bench. "All yours," she said, panting slightly. He glanced up just as she took her helmet off, her stringy, disheveled hair tumbling onto her shoulders.

Clearing his throat, he quickly looked away. "So what happened today? Just the usual bullshit?"

"Par for the course in this job."

He nodded, smirking as he reached for his bat and helmet. "I know the feeling. Though I'm surprised you didn't want to go the range if it was that bad."

Unscrewing the cap on her water bottle, she said, "I did, but they have that concealed carry class tonight." She

took a swig of water. "Too fucking crowded."

"Good point." He loaded the machine and headed out into the cage with his bat over his shoulder. It was probably just as well that she'd chosen to come to the cages instead of the range; he'd always thought a woman with a high-powered weapon was sexy, especially Kat. And now that he knew what she was—

"Ready?" she called to him.

He blinked a few times to erase the images that were keeping him from focusing on the present. Adjusting his grip on his bat, he nodded to her, and she flipped the switch on the machine.

He hit the first two and sent them soaring across the cage. Just before the machine released the third, Kat leaned over to get something out of her purse, and Chris completely forgot where he was.

Until, that is, a baseball whistled past him, slamming into the backstop and reminding him to keep his eye on the ball.

After an hour or so, taking turns at the plate, they both paused for a drink. The knots and tension in his neck and shoulders had faded, replaced by the satisfying ache of post-workout fatigue.

Capping his water bottle, he said, "Up for some more?"

She glanced at the clock on the wall and scowled. "I should go. I have to feed my brother's critters."

Chris eyed her. "Dare I ask where he is?"

"Guess."

He rolled his eyes. "Jesus. I didn't think you could snowboard in a cast."

"You can't. He just got it off last week."

"That idiot," Chris muttered. "I'm half-tempted to break his leg myself to keep him off the slopes."

"Tell me about it." She sighed, putting her bat into its bag and pulling off her gloves. "If he'd just learn to be more careful..." She shook her head.

"He'll grow out of it," Chris said with a shrug.

"I hope so." She zipped her bag. "I'd better go."

They both paused, looking at each other, an unusually awkward silence hanging between them.

He smirked, trying to mask his uncertainty. "So, where does stuff like this fall into our 'deal'?"

She cleared her throat. "Well, I assume they would frown on us fucking in one of the batting cages."

"Damn, there goes that idea." He laughed, then said, "I mean, since this is more of a platonic friends setting for us..." He paused. "Am I supposed to just hug you goodbye like a friend, or do I get to kiss you and grab your ass like a friend with benefits?"

"Hmm, I hadn't thought this far ahead." She shifted her weight.

"Maybe we should just keep it to platonic friends when we're out like this, then?"

She nodded. "Probably a good idea."

"I can live with that."

"Good, now give me a hug so I can get to Dylan's before his cats starve."

"Those fat things?" Chris laughed. "They could go months without eating and survive." He hugged her, jumping when her hand squeezed his ass. He pulled back, laughing when she gave him an innocent look.

"What?" She batted her eyes.

He said nothing. Instead, he put his hand on the back of her neck and pulled her into a kiss.

"That's," she paused, licking her lips but barely pulling away from him. "Isn't that against the rules?"

He shrugged and put his other hand on her neck. "You started it." And he kissed her again, gently parting her lips with his tongue.

"You know," she said, touching his face. "It won't take me long to feed Dylan's animals..."

He kissed her again. "Your place or mine?"

## Ten

Chris's date, Wendy, drained the last of her drink and put her napkin on the table. "I'm going to run to the ladies' room. I'll be right back."

Across the table, Chris smiled. "I'll be here." *Please, take your time.* He wasn't sure he could get through another story about some of the more gruesome highlights of her career as an emergency room nurse. Another few minutes and he was going to make a quick escape to the men's room just to have a moment without hearing about what kinds of foreign objects people had lodged into various parts of their bodies.

As soon as she was out of sight, he exhaled. She was cute, she was friendly, but this was definitely not going to be a repeat date. She was just attractive enough that he would have, not long ago, let it venture into one night stand territory—assuming her idea of pillow talk wasn't as macabre as her dinner table conversation—but he had a backup plan now.

*Plan B, thy name is Katrina.* He fished his phone out of his pocket, keeping it under the table as he pulled up Kat's number. Glancing in the direction of the ladies' room to be sure Wendy was still out of sight, he sent Kat a text message. *If you want to get together tonight, call me in ten minutes and play along.*

Seconds after he sent the message, Wendy returned to the table. Sipping her water, she said, "Oh, I didn't tell you about the guy that came in after he crashed his motorcycle and landed on—and I do mean *on*—a fencepost..."

Just when she got to what Chris assumed would be

the gory climax of the story, his phone rang. He rolled his eyes, masking his relief and excitement. "Damn it, I'm sorry. That's probably my office." He pulled the phone out of his pocket, his heart racing when Kat's name showed up on the screen. "Yeah, I have to take this. It'll only be a minute."

"Take your time," Wendy said, sipping her water.

He smiled and flipped his phone open. "Chris Bailey."

"What if I don't want to play along?" Kat's voice made his head spin. *It's on. It is so on.*

"Jim, I'm not on call tonight, you—"

"Oh, you'd better believe you're on call tonight, Mr. Bailey." Kat laughed.

Chris cleared his throat. "Kyle is just as capable of fixing the system as I am. Why—"

"What's wrong with this system, only you can fix, Christian."

He rubbed his forehead, hoping Wendy took it for an aggravated gesture, rather than an attempt to hide the fact that his cheeks were, he was sure, turning red. "Why the fuck aren't you calling Kyle? He's on call tonight."

In a sultry voice, she said, "Because Kyle has a tiny cock and can't find my clit with an anatomy chart and a flashlight."

Chris snorted with laughter. Remembering his aggravated façade, he glanced at Wendy, then cleared his throat. "That lucky bastard. Fine. He owes me big time for this."

"When will you be here?"

*As soon as I bloody well can, baby.* He rubbed the bridge of his nose and scowled. "I, fuck, I can be there in an hour?" He looked up at Wendy. Her shoulders dropped a little and the corners of her mouth pulled down in a disappointed expression. He gave her an apologetic shrug and mouthed "Sorry."

"If you aren't here in the next forty-five minutes," Kat said, almost whispering. "I might have to start without you."

Chris gulped. "Oh. Shit. I, um. I'll be there as—"

"Mmm, I don't know if I can even wait that long," she moaned.

"I'll be there as soon as I can." He snapped his phone

shut before Kat could tease him any further. He glanced at Wendy. "I'm really, really sorry, there's no way I can get out of this one."

"Emergency at work?"

He nodded. "The whole system went down and nobody bothered to tell me that the guy who's supposed to be on call this weekend took off to Vegas."

She laughed. "Lucky him."

"Not when he gets back in town, he won't be," Chris said with a laugh. "Anyway, let me take care of the check, and then I'd better go."

~ \* ~

If Chris didn't already have a hard-on when he arrived at Kat's apartment, he would have gotten one the instant she opened the door.

She wore nothing but a shiny green bathrobe, probably silk or satin, that was loosely tied around her waist and *just* long enough to keep from revealing whether or not she wore panties. The top was mostly open, and panties or not, she was definitely not wearing a bra.

"Oh thank God," she said, putting her hand on her barely covered chest as she let him in. "Here I thought they'd send Kyle again."

"Do you have any idea how hard you made it for me to get through that call?" He growled as he kicked the door shut behind him and pulled her into his arms.

Sliding a hand between them, she squeezed his cock. "I think I have a pretty good idea, yes."

"Tease."

"It only took you a half hour to get here," she said, backing him up against the door as her fingers found his zipper pull. "So whatever I did must have worked."

"What you do always works." He kissed her as he untied her robe. "Besides, I had to get here before you started without me."

She moaned softly and bit her lip as his fingers found her pussy. He circled her clit a couple of times, then slipped fingers inside her, stroking slowly and easily.

"Then again," he whispered, bending to kiss her neck when she let her head fall back. "I think you did start without me."



"No," she murmured. "I didn't do anything until you got here."

"I think you're lying," he said, nipping the side of her neck and pressing his palm into her clit. "I think you've been thinking filthy thoughts..." Her back arched, pushing her semi-covered breasts against him. He kissed her shoulder, flicking his tongue across her collarbone. "And I think you've done more than just *think* those filthy thoughts." He slid his fingers deeper, her pussy accepting them with no resistance.

"Oh, I've been thinking dirty thoughts," she said, half-moaning. "But I haven't done a thing."

"Mmm, are you sure about that?" he said. "Your pussy is telling me otherwise."

She laughed softly and drew his zipper down as she whispered, "That's all from my dirty little mind. See what you do to me when you aren't even here?"

He closed his eyes, taking a long breath through his nose. "I guess it's a good thing I didn't take much longer getting here, then." He kissed his way up her neck to her jaw, then up to her lips. "You might have set the place on fire."

She wrapped her fingers around his cock, taking his breath away with a gentle squeeze. "I think," she whispered, stroking him slowly. "That we might set the place on fire."

"I hope you have insurance."

"I hope you have health insurance." She gently pushed his hand away from her pussy and stepped back. He started to follow, but she kept him against the door with a hand on his chest.

"Stay there," she said. She drew her fingers across her chest, hooking them under the open sides of her robe and letting it slide over her shoulders. With a subtle shrug, she shed the robe.

Chris let out a breath. It didn't matter that this wasn't the first time he'd seen her naked, she still took his breath away every time. The swell of her hips practically commanded his hands to grab them and pull her against his cock, but when he reached for her, she caught his wrists and pushed them against the door beside him.

"Patience, Chris," she said. Releasing his wrists, she leaned back just enough to give herself room to unbutton his

shirt. "Now that you're here..." She opened one button. "We have all night." Another button. "Why rush?"

He sucked in a breath as she kissed her way down his neck, past the hollow of his throat, and down the narrow path of exposed skin that widened with each loosened button. By the time her fingers went for his belt, she was on her knees and he trembled with arousal.

He knew she was going to, knew exactly why she was down there, but when her tongue circled the head of his cock, he gasped at the lightning bolt that shot up his spine. He gripped the doorknob for balance, his other hand grasping her hair as she took his cock deeper and deeper into her mouth.

"Oh God, that's perfect," he moaned, closing his eyes as she fucked him with her mouth. "Jesus, Kat, that's perfect..." He let his head fall back against the door and covered his eyes with one hand, as if the low light in the room was too intense.

As he did, he caught the scent on his fingers, the scent of *her*. He drew in a long breath through his nose, and exhaled. "Kat, let's go in the bedroom."

She stopped and looked up, still stroking with one hand as she grinned at him. "You don't want to stay out here?"

"Not unless you have condoms within arm's reach, because I want to fuck you."

She stood and kissed him. "Bedroom, then."

In the bedroom, she pushed his jacket and shirt off of his shoulders. They both struggled briefly with his belt, then he quickly shed the rest of his clothes as she got a condom out of the drawer and opened it.

"If I didn't know any better," he said against her lips as he rolled the condom on. "I'd think you wanted to get laid tonight."

"Can't imagine what gave you that idea," she said, trailing her fingernails down his chest and abs. She laughed softly as her touch made his stomach muscles contract.

"Just a theory." He nudged her towards the bed. "Now let me test my theory."

She ran her nails up his back, making him gasp. "Get on your back," she whispered.

"Now *that* I'm not going to argue with," he said. He did as she asked and she sat over him, pressing against his cock but not taking him inside her yet. Cupping her breasts, he gently pinched her nipples, grinning as she whimpered softly. He *had* to be inside her. *Now*. "Fuck me, Kat."

"I will," she said, grinning as she pushed against him again. "I-*ooh*..." She closed her eyes, sucking in a breath.

"What? What is it?"

Her hips moved again and she shivered. "Oh, wow..."

"Kat, what—" He started to take his hands away from her breasts, but she grabbed them and held them in place.

She bit her lip and shuddered. "Don't stop...don't stop doing that."

The familiar flush of her face and neck told him exactly what she was doing. He kept playing with her nipples, watching in breathless wonderment as she moved back and forth, pushing her clit against the shaft of his cock. As much as he wanted to be inside her when she came, this was simply too hot to pass up. His cock was going to make her come and he hadn't even fucked her yet. Raising his hips just slightly, he moved with her, and watched the shudders become tremors.

"Oh God," she moaned. Her spine straightened and she gasped. "Oh my God, I'm..." Her eyes shut tight and she whimpered with pleasure as she came. As soon as her orgasm took over, she lost her balance, falling forward slightly. She caught herself, but she'd shifted just enough to lift her hips, and Chris didn't waste the opportunity.

Grabbing her hips, he pulled her down onto his cock, nearly coming himself when her pussy—still in the throes of an orgasm—convulsed around him. He thrust upward, driven by her cries and gasps and the way she tightened around him with each stroke.

"Fuck, you feel incredible," he groaned. "Oh, fuck, you're..." He stopped abruptly when her hips came down, driving him all the way inside her, but also keeping his hips against the bed. He was certainly strong enough to push back, but the movement told him she wanted to take control.

She took one of his hands off her hip and pinned it on the pillow beside his head, then the other. She was breathless, her face still flushed with arousal, but she was

more in control than he was. He desperately wanted to put her on her back and fuck her as hard as he could, but her movements were slow. Smooth. *Controlled*. She didn't move up and down on him, instead rolling her hips forward and back, taking him all the way inside her on each down stroke.

"Oh...my...God..." he groaned. He didn't know what she was doing, what it was about that simple forward-back motion that felt so good, but whatever it was, it drove him nearly out of his mind. His hands flew up to the headboard, grasping the slats for dear life. "Oh God, baby, I'm gonna come, you're..." His voice trailed off into a moan.

She gasped, her pussy suddenly tightening around him, then again. "Me too, oh my God...I'm..." She whimpered, her rhythm faltering as she closed her eyes threw her head back.

Electric anticipation ran up his spine, not just because his own orgasm was seconds away, but because hers was. He had to feel her come one more time, and this time he wanted to feel her orgasm from start to finish. Every last tremor, every last shiver.

Seizing her hips, he dug his heels into the bed and thrust upward.

Her eyes opened and she gasped. "Oh...God..." Her voice bordered on a sob.

Through clenched teeth, he pleaded, "Come, baby, I'm losing it..." Her body trembled, then shook more violently, and her pussy convulsed around his cock. When she screamed his name, he couldn't hold back anymore. His back arched beneath them as he pulled her hips down onto his and roared as he came.

She collapsed on top of him. "Oh my God..."

"My sentiments exactly," he breathed, stroking her hair.

Grinning, she said, "I hope that made up for what I assume was a crappy date."

He laughed. "If I'd known you were this horny tonight, I would've skipped the date altogether."

She kissed him lightly. "Chris, I'm always this horny."

Running his hands up and down her sides, he said, "Do feel free to call whenever you are."

"You'll never get a moment's peace."

"I'll manage somehow."

She kissed him again, then eased herself off of him and dropped onto the bed beside him. "My God that was hot."

"So you said." He kissed her, then got up to get rid of the condom. When he came back he rejoined her in bed, kissing her deeply as he rolled her onto her back. "You're fucking amazing, you know that?"

Still breathless, she said, "You're not so bad yourself."

"I aim to please." He kissed her neck.

"Mmm, your aim is impressive."

He laughed, kissing the hollow of her throat. "You know, the more we do this, the more I think this arrangement is a damned good idea."

"Oh really?"

"Mm hmm." He closed his lips around her nipple, holding it gently between his teeth for a moment as his tongue flicked across it. He was rewarded with a breathy sigh and a shiver, then he moved to her other nipple to do the same thing.

Her fingers ran through his hair. "I didn't think you had any objections to it anymore anyway."

"I don't," he said, kissing her breast and glancing up at her. "But what's not to like about cutting out of a boring date..." He kissed his way down her belly, pausing wherever her skin quivered beneath his lips. "...and going to get some hot..." Another kiss, lower this time. "...*hot*..." Another kiss, still lower. "...sex with an insatiable woman?"

"Who says I'm insatiable?" Her hips lifted slightly when he kissed the top of her thigh. "You satisfy me every time."

"I say you're insatiable," he growled, working his way down her inner thigh. "Because if you weren't..." He flicked his tongue just above her clit, grinning with satisfaction as a shiver ran through her. "Then you would tell me to stop." He dipped his head, letting his tongue explore her, teasing her clit as he savored her tangy-sweet taste.

"I definitely don't want you to stop," she murmured, lifting her hips and pushing herself against his mouth.

"Then I'm right," he said, watching two fingers disappear into her pussy. "You *are* insatiable."

## ***Eleven***

*Ring.*

Kat's eyes fluttered open.

*Ring.*

Her clock said it was just after ten. She groaned. It was too late to be annoyed with whoever was calling, but still much too early to wake someone who'd spent a night at the mercy of Christian Bailey's insatiable appetite.

*Ring.*

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." She gently untangled herself from sheets and Chris, wincing at the dull ache in her hips and arms as she reached for the phone. "Hello?"

"Kat, it's Eileen."

Something in her sister's tone raised the hairs on the back of Kat's neck. She sat upright, fully awake. "Hey, what's going on?"

"Kat, I—" Eileen paused. It sounded like she was taking a breath. Collecting herself, maybe? She sniffed.

Kat's blood turned cold. She'd heard that voice before, that monotone seriousness that barely masked a hint of unsteadiness. Sitting up, she pulled the covers against her chest. It wasn't out of modesty, but to ward off a chill she didn't yet feel, but somehow knew was coming. "Dylan got hurt, didn't he?"

"Yeah." Silence.

She swallowed. "How bad?"

"He lost control on one of the advanced slopes." She sounded like she was talking through clenched teeth. "He hit—"

"*How bad*, Eileen?" Something cold wrapped itself around her heart. She was vaguely aware of movement beside her, then the warmth of Chris's hand on her back. She glanced at him and his eyebrows lifted, an unspoken 'what's wrong?'

"Kat, he—" Eileen cut herself off with a muffled sob. "It was bad. It was real bad."

"Fuck," Kat said, running a hand through her hair and closing her eyes. He'd taken a few bad falls before. He averaged a cast a year, had had a couple of concussions, but Eileen had never been *this* shaken when she called. "Shit, did he break something again? Or did he hit his head?"

Chris's hand moved to her shoulder, squeezing it gently.

Eileen took a breath. "Kat..."

Her sister's voice shook something deep inside her, but Kat ignored it. Swallowed the fear. Tried to reason with the inevitable. "Damn it, I knew he'd break something again. So he'll be in a cast for the spring and summer—"

"Kat—"

*If I don't let you tell me, then it isn't true.* "But then he'll be out of the cast by the time snowboard season rolls around again." Her voice cracked and she sniffed. Chris squeezed her shoulder again and she took a breath. "So maybe this time he'll learn to be more—"

"Kat, he didn't make it."

"What?" Kat stiffened. She blinked, furrowing her brow, trying to comprehend the words, even though she'd known they were coming. "What do you mean?"

"He didn't make it." Eileen cleared her throat, and her voice was strained. "He's gone, Kat."

The words knocked the air out of Kat's lungs and the room spun around her. She didn't know if she collapsed against him or if he pulled her to him, but somehow she was in Chris's arms, his voice murmuring words of comfort just beyond the edges of her awareness.

Eileen's voice penetrated her consciousness in pieces. "...lost control..." "...crashed..." "...it was quick, he didn't suffer..." "...bringing him back to the States tomorrow..."

"Kat, are you there?"

The words that demanded a response besides passive,

uncomprehending acceptance shook her into the present, and for a moment, she wasn't sure if Eileen or Chris had asked. She was aware only of the words themselves, not the voice that had spoken them.

"Kat?" Eileen's voice prodded her.

"I'm here," she said, her mouth dry.

"I need to make some more calls. Are you going to be okay?"

"I..." She didn't know the answer. She didn't even know what she felt. She didn't feel a damned thing. "Yeah, I guess."

"Okay. I'm going now. I'll call you when we know more about the funeral."

They exchanged a few more bits of small talk, saying 'I love you' and 'goodbye' more out of habit than anything. When the line went quiet, the only sound left in Kat's consciousness was her own heart beating.

The phone slid out of her hand. It hit her knee. Some odd, irrational part of her brain, still lost in denial about the magnitude of the news, tried to understand why it didn't hurt. Why she didn't feel it at all. It hit right on the kneecap. It should have hurt. She should have felt something. She should—

Hands tightened around her arms, suddenly reminding her that she wasn't alone. She looked up at Chris, staring at him, trying to remember when he'd arrived. Vaguely remembered that he'd been there all night.

"Kat, what happened?"

Just as her phone had fallen out of her hand, the words slipped off of her tongue. "Dylan's dead."

When the shock hit Chris, when his eyes widened and his lips parted with a startled breath, then it all became real.

Her hand went to her mouth and tears blurred his face. Choking on the words, she whispered, "Oh my God, he's dead..."

Chris put his arms around her, stroking her hair gently as she broke down. "Jesus, I'm so sorry, babe," he whispered. His voice was tight with emotion. "I am so, so sorry."

She didn't know how long he held her like that, letting her cry and curse and bargain with God, but he made no



attempt to pull away. Eventually, she sat up, and only then did he let go. Even then, he kept an arm around her while they sat in silence for a few minutes. Whether the touch was simply to reassure her or to keep her from collapsing, she wasn't sure, but it accomplished both.

Neither spoke as they climbed out of bed, dressed, and went into the kitchen. She leaned against the counter as Chris poured coffee. He handed her a cup, keeping his hand under it until he was satisfied that her shaking hands wouldn't drop it.

"How are you holding up?" he asked, his voice gentle.

She sipped her coffee, tasting nothing. "I don't think it's quite sunk in yet."

He put a hand on her back. "It's going to take some time."

"I know." She looked at him. "How about you?"

He sniffed, then cleared his throat. "Probably about the same. Hasn't quite sunk in."

Setting her coffee down, she put her arms around him and rested her head against his shoulder. He kissed the top of her head and rubbed her back gently, a silent 'I'm here'. It seemed surreal that it had only been a few hours since these same arms had held her in an entirely different way. She shuddered at the thought of being in bed with anyone else, even any of her last few boyfriends, when that call came through. No one could shift from lover to friend like Chris, and like never before, she was grateful for him.

## Twelve

On the way home from the funeral, Chris was quiet. It wasn't an awkward silence, though it wasn't particularly comfortable either. They just didn't talk. He always seemed to know when she didn't want to talk, and was content to drive in silence rather than occupy the space between them with idle chitchat.

The entire week leading up to the funeral was a blur. Now that it was over, she was completely numb. On some level, she knew that she hurt from her brother's death, but she couldn't feel it. She couldn't feel anything except the cold, dull heaviness in her chest.

At this point, she'd give anything to feel something. Even the pain. Just...*something*.

Chris pulled into her driveway, but didn't turn off the car. "Do you want me to stay?"

She didn't want to talk, she didn't want to be around anyone, but she didn't want to be alone. "Please."

He put the car in park and they headed up the stairs to her apartment. Every step took a monstrous effort, her feet leaden with the weight of this damned numbness.

Inside, she leaned against the door for support, taking a deep breath and letting her head fall back.

He watched her quietly for a moment. "You okay?" His eyebrows lifted, and she realized for the first time that his eyes were red. She wondered if she'd cried at the funeral. She could barely *remember* the funeral. Something inside her wanted to cry right then, but it was all she could do to just breathe.

"Kat?"

When his hands touched her shoulders, she exhaled hard, as if she'd been holding her breath all this time, waiting for his gentle, reassuring touch. She put her arms around his waist and he pulled her close. He didn't try to tell her it would be okay, or encourage her to let it all out, or anything of the sort. He simply said the two words she needed to hear more than anything in the world:

"I'm here."

*You're here. I can breathe.* She drew in a long breath through her nose and caught his familiar masculine scent.

Something deep inside her awoke. Something, some lone nerve, broke through the ice. Something...*felt*.

She breathed him again, trying to cling to that glimmer of sensation. He stroked her hair, whispering something she didn't understand. She looked up at him, but instead of repeating what he said, he kissed her forehead.

With that soft, gentle contact, the glimmer became a spark. *You're here. I can feel.*

He pulled back slightly, opening his mouth as if to speak, but she needed him close. Closer.

She grabbed the lapels of his jacket and pulled him into a kiss. He stumbled towards her, putting a hand on her hip to catch his balance as his other hit the door behind her. Even as they regained their footing, his hand didn't leave her hip. In fact, its tense presence relaxed against her as his lips relaxed into her kiss.

After a moment, he broke the kiss and stared at her, eyes wide and lips parted. Her hands still held his jacket.

Neither drew a breath. They simply stared at each other. The redness in his eyes reminded her of everything she didn't feel, of how desperate she was to shake off this numbness.

"Chris," she whispered, drawing him closer. His lips brushed hers, his breath warming her skin, but he rested his forehead against hers, avoiding her lips.

"Should we be doing this?" he breathed. He touched her face, his fingers drawing her closer even as his palm pressed in, as if he couldn't decide whether he should push her away or pull her to him.

"I don't care." She tightened her grasp on his jacket, afraid he'd pull away.

"But with—Kat, the funeral..."

"I know."

"We've both lost someone, Kat, especially you, we—"

"Chris." She brought her head back so she could look him in the eye. "The last few days have been hell."

"I know, that's why—"

"Please, just let me feel something *good*."

He sucked in a breath. For a moment, she thought he was going to speak, to say what he needed to say to bow out of this, but he didn't. He didn't say a word.

All at once, he pushed her up against the door and kissed her. With every touch of his lips or his hands, with his hard cock pressing against her hip, with his hot breath against her skin as they panted between kisses, she *felt*. God in heaven, *she felt*.

And she needed more.

As he kissed her neck, she shoved his jacket over his shoulders. He shrugged once, quickly, to free his arms from the sleeves.

"Oh God..." she whispered, chewing her lip as his belt buckle jingled, gasping as his hand slid under her skirt. Pinning her against the door, he guided her leg around his waist, then the other, supporting her hips with one hand as he reached for her panties with his free hand. He didn't bother taking them off. Instead, he hooked a finger under them, pulled them aside, and before she even had a chance to shiver with anticipation, he was inside her.

He groaned against her neck, a tremor running through him as he forced himself deeper into her. It was an unusual angle, and he didn't have quite the same freedom to move as he usually did, but it was enough, more than enough. The friction was uncomfortable at first, but it didn't matter, because it just served to remind her that he was inside her. He was *there*. She felt *something*. And with each stroke, the friction diminished until his cock slid easily in and out of her pussy.

Tears filled her eyes as pleasure and pain mingled inside her. Gasping for breath, she moaned, "Oh God, Chris, don't stop, please don't stop..."

"I won't stop." He panted against her neck, exhaling sharply each time he thrust into her. "Oh Jesus, you feel so

good, I *can't* stop..."

She let her head fall back against the door, holding onto his shoulders for dear life as numbness gave way to a spine-melting orgasm. Her gasps and cries sounded somewhere between moans of pleasure and sobs, and maybe they were a little of both.

"Oh God, oh God, Kat, oh God," he moaned, thrusting harder as his body shook. A shudder ran through him, driving his cock deeper inside her, and just as he came, he gasped. "Oh *fuck*."

Alarm pierced her delirium. *That didn't sound like a man aroused*. Kat's eyes flew open, and the look on his face was one of sheer panic. Her heart raced. "What? What is it?"

"Shit." He exhaled. "Condom."

Her mouth went dry. "Oh, fuck..."

He eased her to the floor and stepped back. They both fixed their clothes, avoiding each other's eyes.

He ran a shaking hand through his hair. "Jesus, Kat, I'm sorry, I—"

"It's not your fault." She folded her arms across her chest, trying to keep from trembling. "I didn't think about it either."

He touched her shoulder and she recoiled. Instantly he lifted his hand away. "Kat..."

"Chris, I'm sorry," she said, not sure if she was apologizing for forgetting about the condom or pulling away from his touch. "Shit. I'm..." Her throat ached and her eyes burned with the sudden threat of tears.

They were silent for a moment. Finally, he whispered, "Do you want me to stay or go?"

She clenched her teeth, swallowing hard to keep herself together as she blinked back tears. She didn't know if she wanted him to stay or go. She needed him there as her friend, but couldn't deal with his presence as her lover after they'd done something so stupid.

He touched her shoulder again, lightly at first, as if testing the water. When she didn't flinch, he squeezed gently. "Kat, do you want me to go?"

A single tear blazed a hot trail down her cheek. Without a word, she nodded.

"Okay," he whispered. He released her shoulder and

kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry."

As the door closed behind him, she let out a breath. An icy shiver traveled up her spine. The room had been crowded, stifling, with his lingering presence, but now that he was gone, it was entirely too empty.

Somehow, she made it to the couch before her legs collapsed out from under her. Hugging one of the throw pillows to her chest, just desperate for something to hold onto, she let everything come crashing down on her.

Through the tears and violent, gasping sobs, she ached for the numbness she'd been so desperate to escape.

## ***Thirteen***

They avoided each other for days after the funeral. Neither called, neither texted. That wasn't to say that Chris wasn't constantly on Kat's mind, but she simply couldn't work up the nerve to contact him. One minute she was furious with him. The next, with herself. Then she wanted reassurance from him, just a sign that he was still there, as her friend, her lover, *something*, only to imagine herself choking him the next minute.

When her friend, Natalie, called to say that their group of troublemakers was getting together at the usual watering hole, Kat didn't have to ask if Chris would be there. Chris and Natalie's husband, David, worked together and had been friends since the dawn of time.

She hesitated to accept the invite, but gave in. Sooner or later, she was going to have to face him. Might as well get it over with.

Staring at her reflection as she got ready to meet the group, she let out a breath. On the one hand, it seemed ridiculous to be so spun up over what had happened, but on the other, the possible consequences were anything but small. She sighed, watching her own shoulders sag in the mirror. The odds were slim that she was pregnant, but they still weren't odds any gambler would bet serious money on.

*And I'm betting a hell of a lot more than money on this.* Even if she wasn't pregnant, the questions remained about what this could do to her friendship and relationship with Chris.

Whatever happened, she had to face him eventually. They had to discuss this and they had to figure out where to

go from here.

"The only way out is through," she told her reflection. Picking her purse up off the counter, she headed out to the taxi that was waiting in the parking lot.

~ \* ~

As soon as she walked into the club, every shred of her awareness was instantly drawn to him.

He had his arm slung over the back of a chair at the table the group had commandeered, his other hand wrapped around a beer as he laughed at something that David was saying. His casual, relaxed posture sent a mix of relief and fury through her. *Thank God, he's still his usual self. How dare he be so calm and collected?*

Natalie saw her and waved, prompting the guys to glance in Kat's direction. When Chris's eyes met hers, his smile fell and his gaze dropped. He shifted in his chair, his entire demeanor changing from casual and laidback to visibly uncomfortable. Irritated, even.

Kat joined everyone at the table, exchanging greetings with all but one, and ordered a drink.

*This was a mistake. I should have stayed home. We should have gotten together alone and sorted this out.*

The conversation went on around them, but didn't seem to involve either of them. Chris went quiet. Kat stayed that way. She listened to everyone talk, but didn't feel the need to contribute. She didn't know whether or not he looked at her, because she looked anywhere but at him.

"What? You getting another migraine or something?" Greg asked after Chris offered a terse, monosyllabic answer to something David had said.

The temperature seemed to drop at the table, so she guessed that Chris was glaring at Greg, but she didn't look up for confirmation. His voice low, Chris growled, "No, I'm fine."

"So you always say right up until you can't see straight," Natalie said. She laughed and Kat cringed. Migraine or not, Chris and Natalie could barely stand each other anyway.

"Kat, you can usually tell," David said, elbowing her. "Is this Chris being a dick or Chris getting a migraine?"

Kat looked up from her drink, which had fascinated



her for the last few minutes. She glanced at Chris, his neutral expression irritating her even more than a smug or angry look would. At least then she'd have a reason to be tempted to throw her fascinating drink at him. She sighed, dropping her gaze again. She had no business being angry at him. It was just as much her fault as it was his. But every time she looked at him, he reminded her how angry she was at herself.

*Reckless sex to mourn a reckless death. How apropos.*

"Kat?" David asked, nudging her again.

"Doesn't sound like a migraine to me," she muttered.

"You know, Chris," Natalie said. "With as many of those as you get, you really should cut out the alcohol. I've heard it makes it worse."

Chris rolled his eyes. "Yes, I've heard. Alcohol's not a trigger for me, so..."

"Well, okay," Natalie said matter-of-factly. "But maybe if you didn't..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Chris snapped. "Everyone's a fucking doctor. Look, alcohol doesn't trigger them. Alcohol has nothing to do with it." As if to emphasize his point, he took a long swallow of beer. "See? No migraine."

In spite of herself, Kat laughed. Their eyes met across the table, and his smile faded as hers did.

Then his eyes shifted to the stairwell across the room. He looked back at her, then back at the stairwell. When his gaze returned to her, he lifted his eyebrows in an unspoken question.

Taking a deep breath, she nodded. To the rest of the group, she said, "I'm going up to the terrace for some air."

"Me too," Chris said, pushing his chair back. Their eyes met again and apprehension sent her pulse soaring. Her trembling knees tried to convince her to stay, but she stepped away from the table and pushed her chair in.

*The only way out is through.*

Neither spoke as she followed him past the dance floor to the stairs leading up to the rooftop terrace. As soon as they were outside, she paused just to take a breath of the cool, clean air. Even with people smoking nearby, it was always refreshing after the stuffiness of the club and its sweaty, over-perfumed inhabitants.

The rooftop terrace was mostly open with a few areas covered by a narrow awning extending a few feet in front of the door. Tiki torches flickered around the perimeter, which was surrounded by a brick railing that was roughly chest-height on Kat. She'd often questioned the wisdom of having an open-air place like this in a club where the liquor flowed like it did, but she hadn't heard of anyone falling over the side.

Chris shouldered his way through the crowd to one of the slightly more secluded sides of the U-shaped terrace. It was still thick with people, but there was a bit more breathing room than the area by the door.

He stopped and faced her. "We need to sort this out."

"Do you really want to do it *here*?"

He looked around, then shrugged. "Why not? I'd rather discuss it here and now than keep this bullshit going."

She chewed the inside of her cheek. It didn't seem entirely appropriate to discuss their sex life out in public like this, but the terrace was—to a lesser degree than the inside of the club—loud and crowded. There was a certain amount of privacy granted by such noise and distraction, no matter what they discussed, she doubted anyone nearby heard or cared.

And more than that, now that they were here and he'd opened the door, she couldn't wait any longer. If anyone overheard, fine. She just needed this out of her system.

"Okay." She leaned against the railing. "Let's talk."

He pursed his lips. "Look, we made a mistake, I made a mistake, and I'm sorry."

"So am I," she said, speaking just barely loud enough to be heard. For a moment, neither said anything more, the noise around them emphasizing the silence between them.

Finally, he said, "I should have been thinking straight that day. You had more of a reason to lose your head than I did—"

"Chris, you had just as much reason as I did. I lost my brother, you lost your friend."

"Then why have I been getting the cold shoulder all night?"

"And I haven't?" They exchanged icy looks. Then she dropped her gaze and sighed. "I'm sorry. I just..." She made

a sharp, frustrated gesture in the air, still avoiding his eyes. "I guess it freaked me out."

"Yeah, me too," he said, lowering his voice. "It was a mistake. But I don't want it to fuck up what we have."

She looked at him then. "What we have, as in, our friendship? Or..." She swallowed. "Or whatever this is?"

He didn't hesitate. "Both."

Her heart thudded. "So you," she paused "You don't want to change what we're doing?"

"Do you?"

"I..." *Well, do I?* The only thing she'd regretted about this entire arrangement was that one moment of carelessness. Everything else was perfect. The sex was great. Their friendship was better than ever. Or, it had been before this point.

"Kat?"

She took a breath and looked down at her wringing hands. "I don't know what we should do. What do you think?"

He touched the side of her face, the warmth of his hand taking her breath away. She closed her eyes. *Of course I still want this. How could I not want you to touch me?*

His hand moved to her jaw and he gently lifted her chin. "Look at me, Kat," he whispered.

Swallowing hard, she opened her eyes.

His voice softened. "Kat, I don't want to stop this because we made a mistake in the heat of the moment."

"Except we don't know if it's going to be that easy to just put in the past and forget about."

His lips thinned and he nodded. "I know. But either way, what's done is done, and if we have to face it later, we will. It doesn't mean that this whole thing was a mistake."

"Are you sure it wasn't a wakeup call to tell us to stop?"

He shook his head. "I think it was just a wakeup call to remind us to be careful. But I know you, you know me, we're not going to let it happen again." His hand went from her chin to the side of her neck. "But that's the *only* thing I don't want to happen again."

She didn't resist when he drew her towards him. She slid her hands around the back of his neck and as Chris

wrapped his arms around her, she realized that she hadn't resisted because *she* was the one who had pulled *him* into the kiss.

## ***Fourteen***

Their combined weight slammed his front door shut. Kissing her frantically and breathlessly, Chris pinned her hands beside her head, fingers intertwined with hers. His cock pressed against her hip, sending shivers of anticipation from her clit to every nerve in her body.

"Fuck, I want you so bad," he growled against her lips. "So much I want to do to you..." He kissed her neck, pushing his cock against her hip again. "But I just want to be inside you."

She hooked her leg around his waist. The position was uncomfortably familiar, but she didn't care. They wouldn't forget this time.

"Come on," he said, stepping back and releasing all but her hand. "Let's go in the bedroom."

Unsure if her legs would carry her that far, she followed him.

As they crossed the living room, he stopped. "Fuck it, the bedroom can wait. I can't." Grabbing her hips, he turned her around and bent her over the back of the couch, nudging her knees apart as he pushed her skirt over her hips.

"Chris," she said, breathless and dizzy with need even as icy panic swept through her. "Condom."

Foil ripped. "One step ahead of you."

She whimpered with anticipation as he grasped her hip with one hand. The head of his cock pressed just slightly into her, then his other hand was on her hip, and a second later, he thrust into her. The instant he was inside her, something deep down—some knot of tension, some apprehension that had been there so long she'd forgotten to notice it—came

undone. The long sigh she released was as much from arousal as it was relief.

With every deep, powerful stroke, he assured her of the one thing she didn't realize she still needed to know.

*I'm here.*

Her hair twisted in his fist as his other hand gripped her shoulder. Delirious with pleasure, she pleaded, "Harder, Chris, fuck me *harder*."

With a throaty growl, he slammed into her even harder, knocking the breath out of her as she clawed at the cushions below her. The couch bit into her hips, but she simply didn't care, not with the way his cock hit her G-spot so deliciously, painfully *perfectly*.

"Oh God, Chris," she moaned, her eyes welling up from the pain, the pleasure, and his very presence. "*Harder*."

His hands moved to her hips and he gave her everything he had. As the room spun around her and white light crept into the corners of her vision, her breath caught and she shuddered. Then her knees buckled and, with the faintest whimper of his name, she came.

Chris gasped, his fingers gripping her hips even tighter. "Oh fuck, I'm gonna come," he moaned. "I can't..." Another moan, louder this time. "I can't hold back." A heartbeat later, just as her own orgasm peaked, Chris groaned, then grabbed the couch for balance as his own knees shook beside hers.

They were both unsteady on their feet, so they made a half-hearted effort to straighten their clothes, then collapsed on the couch together. She rested her head on his shoulder, listening to his heart pound as his trembling fingers ran through her hair.

"I guess even booty calls can have makeup sex," he said, kissing the top of her head.

"If this is what makeup sex is like with you, I'll fight with you any day of the week."

He chuckled. "We don't have to make up for me to fuck you like that." He paused and when he spoke again, his tone was more serious. "I'm glad we're on the same page again."

She played with one of the buttons on his shirt. "So am I. I wasn't sure what was going to happen after..." She

looked up at him. "You know, what happened after the funeral."

He touched her face. "I know, I wasn't either. And it's been driving me crazy." He took a breath. "To be honest, I've been worried sick about you. This was one of those times when I was supposed to be there as your friend, but I fucked up as your lover."

"We both fucked up, Chris," she said.

"I know," he said, running the backs of his fingers up and down her cheek. "But it meant I couldn't be there for you when you needed me."

"But you're here now."

He smiled. "Yeah, I am." He kissed her forehead. "How are you holding up, anyway?"

She shrugged. "As well as can be expected," she said, her voice low. "It's just going to take time. What about you?"

"About the same." He swallowed. "It's just, for the last few days..." He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I wasn't sure if I'd lost one friend or two. I think that was the hardest part."

"Well, as you said," she said, sitting up so she didn't have to crane her neck to look at him. "I'm here now. So are you."

He smiled, putting his hand on the back of her neck and drawing her into a gentle kiss. "I missed you," he said.

"I missed you, too," she whispered just before he kissed her. After a moment, she pulled back and met his eyes. She took a breath, started to say something, but as his fingers moved into her hair and the tip of his tongue ran along the inside of his upper lip, words escaped her, so she kissed him again.

Their gentle kiss deepened and Chris's other hand slid around her waist to her back, pulling her onto his lap. She ran her fingers through his hair, pushing herself against him as his cock hardened between them.

When he bent to kiss her neck, she asked, "How many more condoms do you have with you?"

"Two," he whispered against her jaw. "But plenty more in the bedroom."

"The ones in the bedroom can wait."

"Oh?" He cupped her breast through her shirt. "For

what?"

She sat back and pulled her shirt off before coming back down to kiss him again. "Until we're done with the other two."



## ***Fifteen***

"Shitty day?" Kat asked as she leaned her gun case against the wall.

"One of the best," Chris muttered, thumbing another round into the clip.

"Ah, one of those." She adjusted her ear protection, wincing as it snagged in her hair. "The kind of day that warrants... Damn it, can you help me with this?"

"Yeah, sure." He set the clip down and carefully freed her hair from where it was caught. "Better?"

She fiddled with the ear protection once more, then nodded. "Yes, thank you. Long hair's a bitch."

"Well, then it suits you, doesn't it?" He grunted as she elbowed him. "My point exactly."

"Jackass," she said with a laugh. "So this was the kind of day that warranted spending an evening putting hot lead through paper?"

"Exactly."

She raised her eyebrows and set a few boxes of ammunition on the bench. "So what happened?"

He shrugged. "Just the usual bullshit. You know how it goes. Managers that want to manage the unmanageable, clients that want us to alter space and time to meet their demands, employees that, well, you know how employees are."

Rolling her eyes, she nodded. "Do I ever? I may have to fire one if she doesn't get her head out of her ass, and the last thing I need right now is an empty desk in the call center." She nodded down the range towards his target, squinting behind her safety glasses. "How's your grouping

tonight?"

"Don't know yet," he said, snapping the clip into his pistol. "I just got here."

She stepped back as he raised his weapon. He squeezed off a few rounds, lowering it for a moment to check his grouping. Scowling at the four holes that were more or less at the center of the target, but not grouped quite tight enough to touch, he raised the pistol again and finished the clip. When he was finished, he gave the target one last look, dropped the clip, and put the gun on the side of the bench.

"You're still flinching," Kat said, looking at his target, arms folded across her chest.

"What? No I'm not."

"Yes you are." She stepped up to the bench, pulling her rifle out of its case. "Mind if I keep using your target?"

He gestured dismissively. "Fire away." As she loaded her gun, he considered what she'd said. "Am I really flinching that bad?"

She nodded.

"Damn," he said. "I've never had that problem before except with that gun."

"Maybe the trigger pull is too heavy." She shouldered her rifle, aiming it downrange but glancing back at him. "Why don't you try mine and see if it's any better? The forty-five is in my bag." With that, she turned her attention downrange.

Chris stood back and watched her. Just like he had at the batting cages, he let the sight of her doing something he'd watched hundreds of times before, take him someplace else. He'd always thought it was beyond sexy to watch a woman shoot, but now, he couldn't help but notice the way her body jerked slightly with each recoil of the gun. A familiar sight, but not just because he'd seen her shoot countless times. He was used to holding her hips when her body jerked like that. *Oh, if I could get away with it, Kat, I would bend you over that bench...*

He shook his head, tearing his gaze away from her body before the temptation became too much. Hell, it was already too much. The security cameras could probably see what she was doing to him.

Whatever it was that drew him to the range tonight,

he couldn't remember. When she'd finished shooting and they traded places, he put his hands on her waist and let his hips brush hers as he moved past her.

She grinned and turned around, glancing down before looking at him. "I thought your concealed weapons permit expired."

He winked. "Don't need a permit to carry that."

She gave him a playful look. "You know, maybe I'm not in the mood for a night at the range after all." She wetted her lips and squeezed his cock through his jeans.

He gasped, grabbing the bench for balance. "My sentiments exactly. Maybe we should get out of here, then?"

She winked. "Sooner the better."

They packed up their guns, paid for their lane, and headed out. Since Kat's place was closest and they both had guns in their trunks, he followed her to her apartment drop off her weapons. Then they rode together to his house.

~ \* ~

On the drive to his place, he gave her a sly grin. "You know, I have to confess something. Even before we started sleeping together, I thought you were hot with a gun."

Her cheeks burned and she laughed. "Really?"

"God, yes. There's just something about a woman with a high-powered weapon that's..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "The number of times I've thought about bending you over the bench..."

"*Christian Bailey!*" She laughed. "You dirty bastard."

He put his hand on her leg and glanced at her. Shifting his attention back to the road, he headed off the freeway onto the main drag that led towards his house.

Anticipation rippled through Kat. "I'll bet you'd fuck me while I was shooting," she said, grinning with satisfaction as his fingers twitched on her thigh and the car accelerated just slightly. "You could hold my hips steady while I fired away."

He squirmed in his seat. "Tease."

"Pity the range master is always there." She trailed a fingertip over the back of his hand. "I wonder, with you fucking me up against the bench, how *tight* my groupings would be."

Squeezing her thigh again, he said, "Assuming I didn't

fuck you so hard you couldn't see the target anymore."

She sucked in a breath. "You know, that might even be worth the risk of getting caught."

"Don't tempt me."

"Don't tempt you? You've never objected before."

He laughed. "You know what I mean."

"Right. Don't tempt you at the gun range. Duly noted." She paused. "But you didn't specify anything else, so..." Freeing her arm from the shoulder strap of her seatbelt, she pulled her shirt off.

He looked at her, eyes widening, then faced the road again. "Now that's cruel."

"Just because you can't look doesn't mean you can't touch."

He grinned. "Don't mind if I do." Reaching across the console, he cupped her breast, running his thumb over the fabric until he found her nipple. He circled it gently. "Pity you'll have to put your shirt back on before we get out of the car."

"Then you'll just have to take it off of me again, won't you?"

He glanced at her shirt on the seat. "That's not an expensive shirt, is it?"

She furrowed her brow. "Why?"

He chuckled. "Because it might get ripped."

"Oh really?"

"Yes, really."

"Hmm, maybe I should save you a step, then." She slid down in the seat. It was dark, but the streetlights could still give an eyeful to someone who looked at the right moment. Then she reached back and unsnapped her bra.

He released a breath as her bra went slack in his hand. Closing his fingers around it, he gently tugged it off of her arms, then cupped her breast again. His voice was a hoarse whisper. "I can't guarantee we're going to make it through the front door now."

Trailing her fingertips down his forearm, she said, "Do you have condoms with you?"

He cursed. "No. Do you?"

"Not one."

"Then I guess we'll have to get in the house, won't

we?"

"I guess we will." But as he pulled into his driveway, she unbuckled her seatbelt and, as soon as the car was in park, moved across the seats, kissing him deeply before he'd even unbuckled his own seatbelt.

He kissed down her neck to her breasts, gently rolling her nipple between his teeth. "You're an evil woman, you know that?"

"And I think you like it."

"Oh..." He breathed against her breast. "I do. I definitely do." He flicked his tongue across her skin, then looked up at her. "Put your shirt on."

She gave him a playful grin. "What? Why?"

"Because we need to get inside the house so I can get inside you."

"Not yet." She ran her fingertips up his thigh, then squeezed his cock through his jeans. She smiled against his lips when he gasped as she found the zipper pull.

"Kat, please, I don't want to wait. If I don't get inside you—" He gasped again as her fingers closed around his cock, gently freeing it from his jeans.

"Do you want me to stop?" she asked, kissing him lightly as she stroked him.

"Oh fuck..."

"Do you want me to stop?" She stroked a little faster. "Yes or no, Chris?"

"No. Please, don't..." He closed his eyes, letting his head fall back. "Don't stop."

A second later, she took his cock into her mouth.

"Oh my God," he groaned, his fingers running through her hair. "Fuck, babe, I'm too turned on for this. I'm never gonna last this way."

She squeezed him and moved faster, running her tongue around the head of his cock before lowering her head to take more of him.

"Oh my God," he whispered. "Oh my fucking God, Kat, don't...stop..." His fingers twitched in her hair as his cock twitched in her mouth, sending a tingle of electricity straight to her clit. The more it turned him on, the more it turned her on, and she went faster, faster, still faster until his back arched off the seat and he cried out. "Oh *fuck!*" His hand

tightened suddenly in her hair and a second later his cock pulsed against her tongue as he came.

When she sat up, he pulled her into a deep, desperate kiss. Panting in between kisses, he said, "Put your shirt on." Another kiss. "Put your fucking shirt on. We're going inside *now*."

## ***Sixteen***

On Friday night, most of their usual group had other plans, but Kat and Chris met David and Natalie at the club for drinks. It had been a hell of a week for everyone at their respective jobs, and a little liquid rest and relaxation was just what the doctor ordered.

When Kat and Natalie arrived, David and Chris were already there, having come directly from work, which was a few blocks away. As the girls sat, David stood up. "I'm going to the bar, anyone want anything?"

"Just Coke for me," Kat said.

"Looks like someone's on designated driver detail tonight," Natalie said with a smirk.

"*Someone* has to get him home in one piece." Kat looked at Chris, expecting a smartass response, but his attention was elsewhere. Not on anything in the room, just...elsewhere. Kat raised an eyebrow. "Chris?"

"What? Oh, sorry." He cleared his throat, glanced at her, then looked at David. "Get me a rum and Coke."

"On it." David disappeared into the crowd.

Kat leaned closer to Chris. "You okay?"

Grimacing, he rubbed his neck. "I'm fine. Just tired as shit."

"Long week?"

He gave an almost imperceptible nod, flinching slightly. "Hell of a week."

"What's wrong with your neck?"

He pulled his hand away from his neck, almost slamming it onto the table. "Kat, I'm *fine*. Lay off."

She winced, but not because he'd snapped at her. This

was all too familiar.

"Jesus, Chris, take it easy," Natalie said.

Chris released a breath through clenched teeth. "Fucking hell, can a guy not have a stiff neck without everyone giving him the third degree?"

Natalie snorted. "I never thought a stiff neck was a symptom of PMS, but maybe I was wrong."

Chris started to speak, but Kat put her hand up, giving him a look that made him think better of saying whatever it was on the tip of his tongue. She turned to Natalie. "Why don't you go see if Dave needs help carrying all of our drinks?" Natalie started to protest, but Kat gave her the same look that had silenced Chris. With a petulant huff, she left.

Kat was quiet for a moment, surreptitiously watching Chris. "You know, I think I'm in the mood for a Jell-O shot. Want one?" *Please say no. Please say no.*

"I think I could go for that."

*Shit.* Chris hated Jell-O shots unless he had a serious craving for something sweet, and that only meant one thing. Kat grabbed her purse off of the seat. "I have a better idea. Why don't we get out of here?"

He let out a sharp sigh and turned towards her, wincing as if he'd moved too quickly. "Kat, I'm really not in the mood for—"

"I know you're not. That's why we're leaving. I'm taking you home. Move."

He didn't. "What? Why? We just got here."

"Because you're getting a migraine."

He glared at her. "I am *not*, I'm fine..."

"Don't argue with me. Get your coat."

He started to roll his eyes, but instead closed them and rubbed them with his thumb and forefinger.

"See?" She nudged his arm. "Now let's go. You don't want to be in here when it hits you, and I'd like to get you home before you start getting sick."

"Kat, you're overreacting." His tone was a low, angry growl, but the words slurred just enough to let her know she was right.

"No, I'm not. We're leaving."

"Oh for fuck's sake, Kat, I'm fine, this is—"



"Let me put it this way," she said. "I'm leaving. If you're a hundred percent sure this isn't a migraine, feel free to stay, but you're on your own getting home if it turns out I'm right." She stood, draping her jacket over her arm. "It's your call, but the Migraine Express is leaving *now*."

Scowling, he picked up his coat and they headed for the door. She caught David's eye. He gave them a puzzled look, but she gestured at her temple, then at Chris, and he nodded in understanding.

Neither spoke on the way to the car. She was certain he was thinking of all kinds of things he wanted to say, but didn't dare until they were in the car. At least then she couldn't leave him stranded.

He pulled on his seatbelt. "I think I'd know if I had one coming on."

"You would think." She kept her voice even and calm. She'd long since learned to ignore anything he said in this condition. Migraines did more to his head than just hurt. She turned the radio all the way down, then started the car. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught his subtle flinch when the engine turned over.

"It's just been a long week," he said. "I could really use a night *out*, you know, not home with a babysitter."

"Mm hmm." There was no point in arguing with him. The person sitting next to her was not the normal, sane Chris.

After a while, he went quiet. She glanced at him. His elbow rested below the window, his hand over his eyes.

"You okay?"

"I'm *fine*," he growled.

She didn't push the issue. His attitude only confirmed what she already knew. She was surprised she'd gotten him out of the club at all without much of a fight.

When they reached his house, she followed him up the front walk. He stumbled on one of the porch steps, but she put a hand on his back, steadying him. As he pulled his keys out, she plucked them out of his hand, tightening her fingers around them to keep them from jingling.

Once inside, she guided him through the darkness to the couch. "Wait here for a minute."

He didn't protest, easing himself onto the couch. She

wincing for him. If he was this quiet and pliable, the pain must have already set in.

Satisfied that he was more or less comfortable for the moment, she hurried upstairs to his bedroom. Flipping on the light, she did a quick sweep of the room, closing the blinds, turning his bright alarm clock away from the bed and draping a small towel over it. She turned off the light and checked one last time, making sure any hint of light was off or covered.

Gripping the banister, she felt her way back down the stairs and went into the living room. Fortunately, she knew his house almost as well as she knew her own, but even that didn't stop her from misjudging exactly where the corner of the dining room table was. She clipped her hip on it, pressing her lips together to keep from yelping. It smarted, but she could deal with it.

In the living room, moving blindly towards him, she stumbled over one of his shoes, which she hadn't realized he'd taken off. She carefully caught herself on the coffee table, trying not to jar him or the couch. As she did, her hand bumped a small plastic bottle, knocking it over and rattling the contents.

"Shit, sorry," she whispered.

"It's okay."

She didn't bother righting the bottle. *Well, that saves me rifling through the house to find his pills.* "Can you stand?" she asked, keeping her voice as low as possible.

"Yeah."

"Okay, come on." She held his arm as he rose and kept an arm around his waist on the way up the stairs. Judging by the weight of his hand between her shoulder blades, he needed the support. His balance was usually one of the last things to go before he was completely down for the count. The nausea was coming next and knowing Chris, he wanted her gone before it did. It used to make her nervous to leave him like this, knowing the worst was yet to come, but he didn't like anyone around while he was in the throes of a migraine. It would pass, just as it always did.

She led him to his bedroom, helping him find the bed in the total darkness.

"Give me your phone," she whispered.

"My, my phone?" His words were slurred.

*Shit, you are fading fast, my friend.* "You still have it on you, don't you? Or did you leave it downstairs?"

Fabric rustled as he seemed to search for his phone. "Here."

She found his hand in the dark and pulled the phone free. Turning away and covering it as much as she could, she opened it and put it into silent mode.

Movement behind her caught her attention, but it sounded deliberate, as if he was shifting position, not losing his balance. The bedspread crinkled softly and a muffled whisper suggested that his head was on the pillow.

She closed his phone, careful not to snap it shut, and waited until the LCD went dark before setting it on his nightstand. In the darkness, she could vaguely make him out. He laid on his back now, his hand over his eyes.

Barely whispering, she said, "Do you need anything else?"

"I'll be fine." He spoke through clenched teeth, taking long, deep breaths.

"I'm leaving now." She squeezed his hand. "If you need anything, call me."

"I will."

## ***Seventeen***

Chris opened his eyes slowly, bracing himself for the onslaught of morning light, but the room was much dimmer than he expected. Though he was relieved that there wasn't enough light to reignite the fire between his temples, confusion tangled his thoughts. It couldn't still be dark out, could it? He'd been awake for countless brutal hours before sleep had finally taken over. The pain and nausea were mostly gone, so he must have been out long enough to take the edge off.

*Fuck, I didn't sleep through an entire day again, did I?* Frustration and anger pierced the dull, throbbing fog. He'd lost more than a few days to migraine stupors, and it pissed him off every time. Migraines were bad enough when they didn't steal entire days of his life, let alone fuck up his sleep schedule for the subsequent couple of days.

Closing his eyes, he gingerly turned his head from side to side, testing for stiffness in his neck and the possibility of more pain shooting up into his head. Only an annoying ache remained in his neck. Careful not to move too quickly, he raised his head and opened his eyes.

The blinds were drawn, sealing out all but a blinding razor edge of daylight. He flinched and rubbed his eyes.

*When the hell did I drop the blinds?* He could have sworn they were open before. Sitting up slowly, trying to get his bearings, he looked at the clock on the nightstand. Strangely, it was turned away from the bed, a hand towel draped over it.

*I didn't rearrange the furniture downstairs while I was out of it, did I?* He picked up the hand towel and turned the

clock around. It was a little after one thirty. He sighed. Over half the day gone, and it would be hours before he waded out of this migraine hangover enough to be fully functional again.

"Another day sacrificed to the migraine Gods." His throat was raw and his own hoarse voice grated on his exhausted, frayed nerves. He wasn't sure how many hours he'd actually slept and how many he'd spent wishing he was dead, but he felt like he hadn't slept in a month.

Cursing under his breath, he picked his cell phone up off the nightstand. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the LCD screen, but eventually it came into focus.

There was a text message from Kat. *Let me know when you're alive again. If you need anything, call me.*

The last part ricocheted through his mind, sparking some deadened synapse out of the haze, and he remembered Kat bringing him home sometime before the blinding hell had fully set in.

*"If you need anything, call me."*

Bit by bit, the night before came back, the fragments drifting together to form a semi-coherent picture. The club. Kat's sudden insistence that they leave. The relentless strobe effect of passing streetlights clamoring against the inside of his skull like angry wasps until he couldn't keep his eyes open anymore.

Looking back, he should have seen it coming. It always seemed so obvious in hindsight, but maybe it was just the migraine itself that kept him from putting the symptoms with the cause. By the time any of it set in, the fog was already descending and the pain well on its way.

Kat knew before he did. She always did. David and Natalie sometimes caught on, but Kat always knew. By the time one piece was in place, she knew the next three moves.

"That woman knows me better than I know myself." Hitting her number on speed dial, he flinched in anticipation of the shrill beep from the keypad, but it didn't come. He wondered when he'd put the phone on silent mode.

"Hey," she said, picking up on the first ring.

"Hey."

"How are you feeling?"

"Like someone beat the shit out of me."

"I'll assume that means you're feeling better then, since you don't feel like they're *still* beating the shit out of you."

"You know me too well."

"I know you when you have a migraine." She paused. "That was a bad one, wasn't it?"

"I've had worse, but yeah, it was a bitch." He glanced around the room. "By the way, thanks for closing the blinds and putting something over the clock."

"Glad it helped."

"It definitely did."

"Well, it's good to hear that you're back in the land of the living. Do you want any company?"

"I can't promise I'll be very good company."

"You're never good company."

He laughed softly. "Fuck you."

"Somehow I don't imagine you're up for that yet."

"You're right about that." He paused, rubbing his eyes. "But yeah, if you want to come hang out, you know where to find me."

"Give me an hour or so."

"I'll be here. Let yourself in."

"Will do."

After he hung up, he looked around the room again, at everything she'd done to keep any light from making his night of hell any worse. Guilt twisted his gut as he vaguely remembered arguing with her and snapping at her at the club. As she did every time, she calmly ignored his protests, informing him in no uncertain terms that they were leaving.

He sighed and got up, holding onto the nightstand for a second until he was sure his feet were under him. Then he went into the bathroom to take a shower. At least then he'd feel, and maybe even look, slightly closer to human by the time she got there.

The woman had the patience of a saint compared to others who'd been around him in that condition. A few years back, he'd dated a girl who would quietly tolerate him until the worst was over. There was nothing quite like being in the midst of a migraine hangover while groveling for forgiveness from someone who simply didn't understand what it did to him.

Kat got it. She ignored anything he said, did everything she could to keep his surroundings dark and quiet, and made a quick, stealthy exit before the worst started. Another girlfriend from his past insisted on being right there with him, constantly, trying to give him comfort and not understanding that her presence only made it worse. The sound of her voice, the touch of her hand, even the simple knowledge that she was in the same room, assaulted his senses.

Hot water ran through his hair and down the back of his stiff neck, relaxing the tired, tense muscles and melting the lingering ache. Why the hell couldn't he find a girlfriend that understood him, even when he was possessed by the migraine demons the way Kat did?

After he'd showered, shaved, and dressed, he went downstairs to find something to eat before she came over, then settled on the couch to watch television. There was nothing interesting on, but it was easier on the eyes than trying to read and it numbed his still-aching brain.

The front door opened, then closed. Chris clicked off the television as Kat came into the living room.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," she said with a smile.

"Thanks."

Kissing him lightly, she joined him on the couch.

He gestured at the chess board on the coffee table. "I'd suggest a game, but I think chess is a bit cerebral for me right now."

She giggled. "What does that have to do with your migraine?"

"Quiet, you." He elbowed her playfully. "By the way, thanks for the ride home last night."

She smiled. "No problem. But you owe me a rum and Coke."

He cocked his head. "Wait, I thought I ordered the rum and Coke that never came."

Nodding, she winked. "You did. But next time we go out, I get one for my trouble."

He cringed. "Was I really as much of an ass as I remember?"

"Chris, you're always a dick when you have a

migraine."

"Is that how you know it's coming?"

"Among other things."

"Whatever I said, I'm—"

"Chris." She touched his leg. "We've been through this a million times." Her thumb moved back and forth on the side of his leg. "You don't have to apologize."

"I know, but..."

"Stop arguing with me." Her eyebrows lifted and her lips tightened, bringing to his mind a vague image of a similar, but decidedly less good-humored look of the night before.

He smirked. "Or the Migraine Express will leave without me?"

She laughed. "You know I wouldn't leave without you. Not when you're like that."

"What? So you'd leave me stranded any other time?"

She shrugged. "If I had a reason, yes."

"I would never give you a reason to do that."

"With enough alcohol in you, you might." She winked.

He scoffed in mock offense. "I'd come get you anywhere, at two in the morning, with a foot of snow on the ground. I can't believe you'd even think of *abandoning* me somewhere."

"You're a big boy, you'd find your way home."

"Bitch."

"Jackass."

"You know, I'm not going to tolerate this rampant abuse."

"You will, and you'll like it."

Chris laughed. "Wicked woman." He kissed her forehead, then leaned back, draping his arm across the back of the couch. "Well, like I said, I can't promise to be great company today."

She shrugged. "I wouldn't expect too much after last night."

"Good, keep your expectations low, and I won't disappoint." He laughed. "I hope that only applies post-migraine and not in the bedroom."

"The low expectations or the disappointment?"

"Well, I certainly hope I don't disappoint..."



"Definitely not," she said with a grin, leaning across the couch to kiss him. "But, I assume that's still out of the question at the moment?"

He nodded, laughing. "Unless your expectations are *really* low right now. So in the meantime, you're stuck with me and my witty conversation."

"I'll manage, I think."

The conversation meandered to this and that, talking about friends and work and everything else they usually discussed, simply enjoying each other's company. As much as he hated to have someone around when he was in the midst of a migraine, he rather liked having company afterward. The presence of another human being was comforting at that point, a quiet reassurance that the storm had passed.

At some point, Chris opened his eyes, wondering how long it had been since he'd closed them. As he swam out of disoriented darkness, the first thing he was aware of was the vague throbbing between his temples that spiked when the light invaded, then faded rapidly as his eyes adjusted. The second thing he noticed was the comfortable warmth of Kat beside him.

He glanced at the clock over the television. It was almost nine.

"Damn, sorry, I guess I fell asleep."

She murmured something, then lifted her head. "It's okay. So did I."

"Did I bore you to sleep?"

She laughed. "Hardly. Just tired."

"Tell me about it."

Gently freeing herself from his arms, she sat up and stretched, twisting a kink out of her back. "I probably got more sleep than you last night, but not by much."

His eyebrows lifted as he rubbed his neck. Most of the pain was gone, but an annoying tightness remained. Falling asleep in an odd position hadn't helped. Watching her, he said, "What kept you up?"

"You."

He blinked. "What do you mean? I was here."

"I know." She rubbed her lower back gingerly, then looked at him and shrugged. "What? You think I don't worry

about you?"

"I didn't think you'd lose sleep over it."

She leaned towards him and kissed him lightly. "I always do."

*You're not helping my conscience, Katrina.* "So I killed your evening out and kept you up all night? Jesus, I'm sorry."

She touched his face and grinned. "And when you're feeling up to it, you can make it up to me."

"Oh, I will. Believe me, I will." He kissed her, drawing it out for a moment. Then he paused, running his fingers through her hair. "Well, as long as you're here, you're welcome to stay the night."

"So even after I threatened to abandon you, you're not going to throw me out of bed?"

He laughed. "No, but I'm not going to throw you *into* bed tonight, either."

"You mean, sleep together, but actually..." She scoffed melodramatically. "*Sleep?*"

He laughed. "Yes, exactly."

Kissing him lightly, she said, "I can live with that."

## ***Eighteen***

Swimming out of sleep and into reality, Kat became aware of Chris's body against hers. Wondered how long he'd been right beside her. Her skin still tingled vaguely where they made contact, as if he hadn't been there long and her nerves were still acknowledging the intrusion.

She was on her stomach and his hand and forearm rested on her back, warming her skin through her T-shirt, so he must have been on his side. He stirred a little, probably just shifting in his sleep, maybe passively responding to a movement she didn't remember making as she awoke.

When his fingertips trailed down her back, the resultant goose bumps rousing her completely, she knew he was awake. As consciousness set in, she realized it was that gentle, slow touch that had brought her out of the darkness in the first place.

Nuzzling her neck, he whispered, "I didn't wake you, did I?" The grin in his voice told her he knew the answer.

She tried to sound annoyed in spite of the smile tugging at her mouth. "Yes, you did."

Against her skin, his lips pulled tight and a soft huff of laughter warmed the back of her neck. He ran his hand down her back. "You're not mad at me, are you?"

"Hmm, it depends on what you're going to do now that you have me awake."

"Well," he said, his hand moving under her shirt. "I wasn't planning to let you go back to sleep anytime soon."

She laughed softly. "Then I hope you're going to make it worth my while to stay awake."

"Oh, I will." His hand moved up her back, pulling her

shirt with it as he kissed just behind her ear. "You know I will."

"You always do."

He pushed his hips against hers, taking her breath away with the heat of his hard cock behind the cool silk of his boxers. She raised herself just enough to let him pull her shirt off. Once it was gone, she started to roll over, but his hand on her back held her still.

"No," he whispered. "Stay just like that."

"But I want you to kiss me."

"I will," he said. "That's why I don't want you to move."

Before she could question him, he kissed between her shoulder blades. He kissed his way down her back, pausing on each vertebra to make a tiny circle with the tip of his tongue or simply plant a lingering kiss. The gentle touch of his lips seemed to bring every nerve in her spine to life, igniting each in turn like runway lights. His hand slid down her side, grasping her hip as she arched her back.

His lips still touched the small of her back. "Turn over." The vibration of his voice traveled up her spine and her body obeyed him before her own mind could even give the order. He raised himself off of her, giving her room to move, and his lips were against her belly before she'd even settled back onto the bed. Every kiss took him lower, lower, still lower, until his stubbled chin grazed the fabric of her panties, making her breath catch.

Grasping her hips gently, he let his thumbs hook under her waistband. Slowly he drew it down, pulling over her hipbones, his lips following the elastic while his hands traveled down the backs of her thighs. Fingers, fabric, and lips worked their way down, pausing long enough to let his fingertips make light, breathtaking circles on the backs of her knees.

With a flick of his wrist, her panties slipped off her feet, but his lips never broke away, kissing the inside of her ankle. Working his way back up, inch by exquisite inch, he explored her skin, finding erogenous zones with his tongue, his lips, his fingers. Every place he touched sent electric shivers up the lighted runway that was her spine. Why did he effortlessly understand her body in ways no other man cared

to?

His hand slid up her calf to the inside of her knee, parting her thighs with the very lightest suggestion of pressure from his fingertips. Sheets bunched in her hands as his lips traveled up her thigh, each soft kiss lasting longer than the one before.

As his tongue dipped into the groove between her hip and thigh, and his fingers slipped inside her, just barely brushing against her G-spot as they took slow, smooth strokes. *Not yet*, his fingertips told her G-spot. *I will, but not yet*. He kissed his way towards her pussy and his fingers drew nearer and nearer to that perfect place, that perfect pressure, but still remained just out of reach. *Not yet*.

Her entire world centered on what his tongue and fingers were—and weren't—doing. She couldn't even remember to breathe except when a shiver made her gasp.

The heat of his tongue met her pussy, but avoided her clit. *Not yet*.

Her spine arched off of the bed.

Crooking just slightly, his fingers, finally gave her that delicious pleasure she craved, but only for a second. *Not yet*.

His tongue inched closer to her clit. His fingers bent a little more with each stroke. *Not yet*.

At the exact same instant, his lips closed around her clit and his fingers beckoned against her G-spot. *Right now*.

By the time his tongue made its first slow, delicate circle around her clit, she was drunk off of his touch, reality swirling into a blur of white light and punctuated by the occasional gasp for breath when her lungs reminded her she needed air.

Through the delirium, some vague memory of Chris's migraine flickered through her mind, and she bit back a scream, suddenly worried he might still be sensitive to sound.

*Can I scream? Can I scream?* Biting her lip, she moaned.

His tongue and fingers dared her to even *try* to stay quiet.

"Oh God, Chris..." Her fingers tangled in his hair as each gentle flutter of his tongue lifted her hips off the bed. "Oh my God, oh my God..." He didn't flinch at all at the

sound of her voice. In fact, every moan and whimper made him intensify his efforts, circling her clit faster, beckoning against her G-spot, until she couldn't remember why she'd even thought to hold back.

"Oh, fuck, I'm coming!"

He didn't stop until she begged him to, and a second later, he was over her, kissing her deeply with the sweetness of her pussy on his tongue. As he kissed her, she pushed his silk boxers over his hips, and he groaned as she stroked his cock.

"I want to be inside you *now*," he said. He kicked his boxers off and reached for the bedside table, rifling around in the drawer until he found what he was looking for.

"Obviously you've recovered?" she said as he rolled the condom on.

He laughed, lowering himself over her. "I have." He kissed her. "And now I'm going to make up for last night."

She bit her lip as his cock teased her pussy. "I think you already have."

"Nope, not yet." He sucked in a breath through his teeth as he pushed into her. "Haven't even started."

Whimpering softly, she said, "Then what was..." Her voice caught. "What was everything you just did?"

"That," he said, withdrawing slowly. "Was just because I can't get enough of the way you taste."

She tried to speak, but he thrust into her, knocking the air out of her lungs.

"*This*," he whispered through clenched teeth, pulling out and slamming into her again and again. "Is for last night."

## ***Nineteen***

"Are you waiting for someone?"

Kat turned around and instantly recognized Paul from his online photo. *He actually looks like his photo. That's a plus.* She smiled. "You must be Paul."

His uncertain expression immediately shifted to a warm smile as he shook her hand. "Then that answers my next question." He cleared his throat and gestured at the restaurant's packed lobby. "Listen, I was thinking, this place is awfully crowded tonight, but there's a Thai restaurant up the street..."

Kat's heart skipped. "I *love* Thai food."

"You do?"

"Absolutely. Let's go." As they walked down the street, making small talk along the way, Kat couldn't help but grin at her good luck. Attractive? On-time? Likes Thai food?

*Oh yes, tonight looks very promising.*

~ \* ~

"Emily?"

The blonde turned around and smiled. "You must be Chris."

He returned the smile. "I am." *And this evening already looks promising.* Before he'd gotten her attention, he'd checked her out. Just as she was in the photos she'd sent him, she was petite but curvy, and very sexy. He liked her smile even better in person than in pictures.

She glanced at the hostess's podium. "There was a wait for tables, so I put us on the list. Should be another fifteen minutes or so."

He gestured dismissively. "No need to worry about

that."

She cocked her head.

To the hostess, he said, "We have a reservation for two. Under Bailey."

The hostess looked at the reservation list and nodded. "Your table is ready, Mr. Bailey. Right this way."

He exchanged a quick glance with Emily. The lift of her eyebrows and the way the corner of her mouth pulled up told him he'd just scored a few points for planning ahead. *Good God, am I the last man on the planet that knows how to make reservations?*

~ \* ~

"Damn, this place is crowded too," Paul said as they walked into the Thai restaurant.

Kat scowled, glancing around the dimly lit and ostentatiously decorated place. It looked like a few people were waiting for tables, but the strong smells of curry, peppers, and coconut oil made her mouth water.

"I don't mind waiting," she said.

He shrugged. "Works for me. I'm not in a hurry." He put their names on the list as Kat found a seat on one of the bright blue faux leather benches beneath a richly colored painting of a temple. A moment later, Paul joined her, draping his arm across the back of the bench, but not actually touching her.

"They said it'll be ten or fifteen," he said. "You sure you don't mind waiting?"

She glanced around the restaurant, then at his arm behind her on the bench. Thai food with a man who wasn't afraid to make a subtle, but unmistakable first move, yet wasn't pushy?

"No, I don't mind waiting."

~ \* ~

"So you said in your e-mail that you've been single for a while?" Emily said, swirling her wine slowly before taking a sip. Her gaze subtly shifted to his hand and he wondered if she was checking for an imprint or tan line on his left ring finger.

"I haven't had a girlfriend in a year or so." Chris closed his menu and put his hands over it, laying his left hand over his right and watching as she, just as he



suspected, gave it a surreptitious look. "But I've never been married."

"I'm surprised," she said, smiling. "I can't imagine a guy like you staying single this long."

He laughed and shrugged. "Just haven't found the right girl."

At that, her posture and expression both relaxed a bit, and her mouth pulled into a smile that suggested approval. "So you're not one of those guys that's afraid of commitment?"

*Danger, Will Robinson, danger!*

He cleared his throat. "Afraid of it? No. But, I'm not one to rush into it either." He sipped his wine. "What about you?"

Setting her wine glass down, she took a breath. "Oh, I've been married. Have I ever..."

~ \* ~

The waitress came up to the table to take their orders, and Kat barely suppressed a sigh of relief at the interruption. From the moment she'd agreed to stay instead of finding a less-crowded restaurant elsewhere, Paul had graced her with endless tales about his thrilling travels to some of the more exotic parts of the world. At first, it was interesting. She always loved hearing about places she'd never been, but Paul, she'd discovered, possessed an extraordinary ability to turn any story into a chest-puffing, feather-ruffling brag about what he had done to single handedly make it the most exciting event *ever*. Somehow she doubted he was the first person in the world to pose in front of the Leaning Tower of Pisa and make it look like he was holding it up, but he seemed rather proud of it.

"Can I take your order?" the waitress asked.

"Khao khluk kapi," Paul said. He *might* have impressed her with his ability to flawlessly pronounce the name of a Thai dish except that he shot her a look that said, "Isn't that impressive?" which immediately cancelled out that effect. What a shame that someone so attractive killed it by being so full of himself.

*You're off the menu for boyfriend potential, but you might still get a one night stand out of me if you lick your lips like that again.*

"How many stars?" The waitress asked as she scribbled it on her notepad.

"One, please." He gave Kat another grin. She had a feeling he was reining back the spice on his meal in case she didn't like spicy food. Nothing killed an evening faster than kissing someone who'd just eaten something extra spicy.

"And you, ma'am?"

Kat handed the waitress her menu. "I'll just have the Pad Thai. Four star, please."

"You know, make mine four star, too," Paul said. *Just as I suspected.* Even someone as desperate to show off as Paul wasn't stupid enough to risk burning his date's mouth when he kissed her. But now that she'd turned up the heat, so did he. Which meant he was planning to kiss her.

*You're still in the game, Paul, just don't talk me to sleep before my food gets here.*

"Four star?" Paul said when the waitress had gone. "Brave woman."

"I prefer my Thai food hot." *And as a bonus, it'll probably be more exciting than my present company.*

"Ever tried five star?"

She grimaced. "I'm not that brave."

He laughed. "You know, when I was in Thailand a few years ago..."

As he launched into another soliloquy about his worldly travels, Kat gritted her teeth and forced herself to smile through the boredom. *Maybe I should have ordered five star...*

~ \* ~

"So that's why I finally decided to divorce him, and it's just been messy as hell ever since." Emily gestured with her wine glass—was it her third or fourth?—and nearly hit the waitress as she walked by.

Chris swallowed hard. So far, he'd learned that she'd been engaged three times and married once. In between comments about her exes' immaturity, lack of commitment, and fear of settling down, she cast him pointed looks that suggested that her earlier question about fearing commitment was not entirely in jest.

Why did he always attract the women who were newly single and bitter? Something told him that if he kept seeing

Emily, the hints about engagement rings would start before the sun went down on their third date. *She's not a gold digger, she's a damned rock hound.*

"...and when his mother found out we were divorcing?" Emily rolled her eyes, gesturing wildly with her wine glass again. "Lord, I didn't think a cell phone could hold that many voice messages. I mean, she went crazy." She shook her head. "But that's not the worst of it..."

*Wouldn't it be easier to just stay home with Kat and forget all of this bullshit?*

Silently, he pleaded with his phone to vibrate. It would give him an excuse to duck out of *this* conversation for a moment, but with any luck, it would be Kat. *Why do I even bother making plans on Friday nights?*

"Unfortunately the judge gave us joint custody, but hey, that means I get every other weekend, so I can go out."

*Oh God. Kat, please, save me.*

~ \* ~

"...but fortunately, I knew some guys there from when I was stationed in the area, so they hooked us up. Got us private tours of some of the palaces and temples in the region."

"Sounds very nice," Kat said. She took another bite of her pad Thai, but even the four star spice couldn't quite take the sting out of her boredom. Her cell phone stayed still and silent in her pocket in spite of repeated pleas for it to vibrate.

*Chris, if you call me right now, I will give you the fuck of your life just for getting me out of this.*

~ \* ~

On their way out of the restaurant, Emily stumbled. Chris put his arm around her waist to steady her. "You know, maybe I should call you a cab," he said.

"No, no, I'm fine. It's these damned heels." She gestured at her shoes.

*You also drank three times as much as I did.* "No, really, I don't think you should drive. Here, I'll pay for it."

"You don't have to do that," she slurred.

"Do you want me to drive you home?" He held onto her a little tighter as another step didn't land quite as well as she probably thought it would.

"You can drive me home," she said, a playful lilt in her

voice.

"Why don't I do that, then?" he said, smiling as he led her to his car. She wasn't incoherent, but she was definitely too drunk to drive. She'd sobered up a little since before dinner, when she'd managed to draw the attention of half the restaurant during a long diatribe about her ex-husband's courtroom antics. Chris wasn't entirely sure where the alcohol stopped and the crazy started.

After he'd eased her into the passenger seat, he went around to the driver's side, pausing to check his cell phone for missed calls.

None.

He was tempted to send Kat a text message. It was after nine, but still plenty early enough to get together with her if she was available.

*If she was available.*

*And if she is, she'll call.* He slipped the phone back into his pocket and got in the car.

~ \* ~

"I really had a good time tonight," Paul said as they stopped beside Kat's car.

"Me too," she said, hoping she didn't seem too excited about the fact that their date was over.

"Maybe we can get together again?"

*Dream on.* "I, um, my schedule's a bit packed this week, but I'll e-mail you."

He smiled. "Sounds good." He put his hand on her waist. "I'd definitely like to see you again."

"Like I said, shoot me an e-mail."

"I will." He tilted his head and leaned in to kiss her.

She returned his kiss, which sent pleasant shudders through her, but she couldn't be sure if the tingling in her mouth was from the kiss itself, or the fact that they'd both had four-star Thai food. Either way, at least that kiss was one redeeming feature of the evening.

After a moment, she gently pulled away and whispered, "I should really go."

His hand stayed on her waist, but he didn't try to pull her back to him. "If you want to, we could go back to my place."

*Oh, Paul, my darling. You lost your shot at a one night*

*stand after you spent fifteen minutes telling me about finding someone's dropped contact lens in the gardens of Versailles.*

"I really shouldn't," she said. "I've got an early morning tomorrow."

"Okay then," he said, kissing her lightly. "I'll e-mail you."

"Good night," she said.

"Good night." He walked away as she got into her car. Alone, she pulled her phone out of her pocket, cursing under her breath when there were no missed calls. She hoped Chris was having an enjoyable evening, but at the same time, she hoped his date was a bust.

*Whatever she's doing for you tonight, I promise you I'll do it better.*

~ \* ~

"Careful, careful!" Chris steadied Emily as they made it up the last few steps to her apartment. He kept his hand on her arm even after they arrived at her door, making sure she stayed upright.

"Thanks for the ride home," she said, grinning as she fished her keys out of her purse. "If you want to stay, I don't have my kids tonight, so—"

He put his hand up and shook his head. "Much as I'd love to..." *In the same way I'd love to beat my head repeatedly against the wall.* "I really shouldn't."

Her shoulders sagged and lips twisted into a disappointed frown. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "Maybe another time." He instantly regretted it when her eyes lit up.

"So you'll call me?" she said.

*Not in this lifetime.* "I've got your number." *Didn't say I'd use it, but I have it.*

Evidently satisfied with his answer, she opened her front door. "Okay. Good night, Chris."

"Good night, Emily." He kissed her on the cheek, but before he could pull away, she put her arms around him and kissed him full-on. In spite of himself, his breath caught, and it wasn't just surprise. Her lips were gentle but insistent, and against his will and better judgment, his arms went around her waist and he let her tongue separate his lips. *Oh hell, you had to be a good kisser, didn't you?*

~ \* ~

On her way home, Kat glanced at her phone a few dozen times. *Call him? Don't call him?*

She chewed her lip. It wasn't as if he'd ever told her not to call. Quite the contrary. He knew as well as she did that dates often meant booty calls. If he didn't want to hear from her, his cell phone would likely be turned off.

But what if she called and he was with someone else? Even if he didn't get her call until the next morning, how humiliating would that be? *"I was in bed with someone else. Sorry your night didn't turn out so well."*

She groaned aloud. No, she'd wait to see if he called.

~ \* ~

When Chris finally freed himself from Emily's kiss, his good sense came back to him and he remembered why they were at her door in the first place. Holding her shoulders gently—partly to keep her from kissing him again, partly to keep *himself* from kissing *her*—he said, "I really have to go."

She smiled, licking her lips. "You'll call me?"

"I have your number."

*And Kat, you have mine. Use it. Please, for the love of God, use it.*

~ \* ~

Keying into her apartment, the first thing Kat noticed was the clock over the television. It wasn't even ten o'clock, but every passing minute made disappointment tug a little harder at her gut. He wouldn't call after eleven. He'd either assume she was still out, or that she'd gone to bed.

Or, he'd gone to bed.

With someone else.

"Fuck," she muttered.

~ \* ~

It was ten fifteen when Chris pulled into his driveway, and still she hadn't called. Of course, the phone worked both ways, but he was not without his stubborn pride. It was one thing to call when he knew she was home for the evening and say his date didn't work out. It was another thing entirely to call and say, "My date's a bust, care for a shag? Oh, you're with someone else. Sorry to interrupt. Have fun!"

He rolled his eyes and cursed under his breath as he walked into the house. Glancing at the clock, he dropped

onto the couch. If he didn't hear from her by eleven, he'd assume she wasn't available.

~ \* ~

Around ten thirty, Kat couldn't take it anymore. She was horny, wound up, and needed Chris. Picking her phone up off the table, she found the speed dial for his number, but hesitated.

~ \* ~

"Fuck it," Chris said as the clock hit ten thirty. He flipped his phone open, pulled up her number, and, with his thumb over the "send" key, paused.

*What if she's still out?*

~ \* ~

*What if he's with another woman?*

~ \* ~

*What if she left her phone on and I interrupt?*

~ \* ~

*What if the woman gets upset?*

~ \* ~

He put his phone down. *If she's free, she'll call.*

~ \* ~

Sighing, she put her phone on the table. *If he's free, he'll call.*

~ \* ~

At ten forty-five, he headed up to get ready for bed. "Whoever you are," he said into the silence. "You are one lucky bastard tonight."

~ \* ~

She stood and went into her bedroom. "Whoever you are," she whispered. "I hope you know how lucky you are."

## ***Twenty***

"We really are pathetic."

Kat moved her bishop into place and looked at Chris. "Why are we pathetic?" She paused, hiding a satisfied smirk at the frown he suddenly directed at the board. "Well, I know why *you're* pathetic, but—"

"Quiet, you." He glanced up and laughed. "I should know better than to try to carry on a conversation with you while we're playing."

"You could take a vow of silence and I'd still beat you."

He smirked. "Promise?"

"At chess, you dirty bastard."

He snapped his fingers and shook his head. "Damn." For a moment, he was quiet, contemplating his next move while she watched him in silence.

They'd both had dates that evening. Or so he thought, anyway. Chris had a date, but she'd cancelled at the last minute. Kat hadn't made any plans at all, but made him think she had a date. She didn't want him to know she was deliberately leaving a prime date night vacant in hopes of a booty call.

Still looking at the board, he said, "So you don't think it's pathetic anymore? Staying in on a Friday night to move little black and white pieces around on a board?"

"No, staying in on a Friday night and playing chess was pathetic back when neither of us was getting any action." She shrugged. "Now it just means we're spending a nice, quiet evening in, sharing some good conversation, good wine, halfway decent chess and—" She shrugged again. "We both have a sure thing."



He laughed, sliding his knight across a few spaces and picking up her pawn. "So you're just playing because you know that I'll fuck you at the drop of a hat?"

"No, I'm playing because I know I can trample your ass without even paying attention." With that, she moved her queen and took Chris's knight. "I'm *here* because I know you'll fuck me at the drop of a hat."

"Pity I don't have a hat handy." He winked, then moved his rook.

~ \* ~

Sitting back on the couch, he watched her over his wine glass as she decided on her next move. Maybe it wasn't so pathetic to stay in for the evening playing chess rather than going out on the prowl. It was less of a headache than a date. He shuddered at the memory of his evening with Emily. And as Kat said, they both had a sure thing this way. Why not cut out all the bullshit, relax for an evening, and then spend the rest of the night covered in sweat and each other?

She'd probably think he was pathetic, though, if she knew that the date he'd had tonight never existed. He knew she had plans, so he had told her he had a date so she wouldn't think he was just sitting at home in case she called for a booty call. Which, of course, was exactly what he'd planned to do.

But then he'd worried that she wouldn't call if she thought he was out on a date too. So, he'd sent a text message shortly before he left work, letting her know that his 'date' had cancelled. Never in his life had a text message aroused him more than when three simple words lit up his LCD screen:

*So did mine.*

And here she was.

~ \* ~

He looked at the board, then at her. "I can't think of many other women that would be in the mood for sex after playing chess."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "Guess some people don't do the switch from cerebral to primal quite as smoothly as we do."

She reached for her wine, her eyes still fixed on the board. "I think chess makes for great foreplay."

"Why? Because by the time we're done, we're both frustrated and aggravated?"

"No," she said. "Chess has its primal points too."

"Chess? Primal? How so?" He raised his eyebrows as he sipped his wine.

"What's more primal than a game of offense and defense?" she said. "Sure, the strategizing and all of that is intellectual, but the thrill of the hunt? The panic of being backed into a corner? Trapped? Having someone find and exploit your weaknesses to their own advantage?" She grinned at the stunned expression on his face. "One of the most civilized games on the planet, and it all boils down to flirting with fight and flight."

He shook his head and sipped his wine again. "I think some of the world's chess masters might disagree with you."

"Their brows sweat just as much as yours does, Christian. Dress it up as a civilized game of strategy all you want," She slid her queen across the board, positioning the piece perfectly to take his rook if he left it there. "But it's nothing more than toying with base instincts."

"Toying with *me* is more like it," he said, scowling at the board.

"That's kind of the idea," she said with a grin. "I like the hunt, and I like to play with my food."

He laughed, but she didn't miss the shiver that went up his spine. "Only you could make chess sound dirty."

"Anything can be dirty, and chess is no exception. And as far as I'm concerned," she paused, lifting her wine glass to her lips. "Chess is just foreplay." She rolled a sip of wine around on her tongue for a moment, then smiled. "Besides, it reminds *you* who's in control."

"Oh really?" Then he grinned. "Very true, I suppose, since the king is the most important piece on the board."

"Most important, maybe, but by no means is he the most powerful player." She picked up her queen. "The queen, my friend, is the most powerful." To emphasize her point, she moved her queen to claim Chris's rook. "Check."

His lips tightened into a frustrated scowl. Then he moved his king out of harm's way.

"No matter where he goes," she said, inching her queen across the board. "She's there to remind him that *she*,

not he, is the one in control." She tapped the queen on the board, and then released it. "Check."

He chewed his lip and glared at the board, eyes flicking at each piece in turn as he sized up the situation. Then he moved his king another space. "So you're saying your queen is a dominatrix?"

"Maybe," she said with a shrug. "That's not to say the king is unimportant." She gave him a playful smirk. "After all, when the king goes down, game over."

"Au contraire." He grinned. "When the king goes down, the game is just getting started."

"Touché," she said. "But until such time as he does go down..." She moved her queen again. "He just has to take whatever the queen dishes out. Check."

~ \* ~

He moved his king again, this time taking a diagonal step behind his bishop. If the queen moved to put him back into check, she'd be open to attack from the bishop. Resting his elbows on his knees, he folded his hands and looked up, giving her a smug grin. "I can take whatever you, or your queen, can dish out."

"So you say," she said. "But no matter where you go, or how fast you try to run away..." She reached for a rook that had blended benignly into the background in all of Chris's efforts to keep his king away from her queen. Watching him, not the piece she moved across the board, she said, "The end result is always the same." The rook stopped.

"And what result is that?"

"Queen takes king." She took her finger off the rook. "Checkmate."

"Except your *rook* won," he said with a smirk. "So while it's checkmate, the queen hardly did the taking."

"The rook is just a castle," she said. "A wall. My queen backed you up until you hit that wall. And now, with your back against the wall and nowhere else to go..." She reached across the board and flicked his king over. "Queen. Takes. King."

He swallowed. "Now I can't be sure if I've won or lost."

"Depends on which game we're talking about." She grinned and stood, stepping around the coffee table and

putting her knee next to him on the couch. "If it's chess..."  
The other knee came down beside him as she sat over him.  
"You're fucked."

Running his hands over her hips, he gently pulled her  
all the way down onto his lap. "And the other game?"

"If it's *that* game..." She ran her fingers through his  
hair. "Then you're also fucked."

Wetting his lips, he whispered, "So which game are we  
playing?"

"The one that *starts* with you getting fucked."

## ***Twenty One***

Kat let out a long sigh. "Oh my God, that feels good."

"I'm not even touching you." Chris eased himself into the hot tub beside her.

"I was talking about the water."

"Come on now, you're going to make me jealous." He sipped his wine, then set it on the side of the tub.

She laughed. "If you're jealous of a tub full of hot water, then you've got some insecurity issues, Christian."

He shot her a playful glare. "Well, I just won't turn the jets on, how about that?"

Smirking, she said, "Or you could leave me alone with the jets for a few minutes."

"What?" He rolled his eyes and sighed, feigning exasperation. "Haven't I already done *enough* for you tonight?"

"I'm always ready for more, you know that."

"Dirty woman."

She scoffed with mock offense. "I beg your pardon! I am *not* a dirty woman."

He laughed into his wine glass. "Then I'm a pure, unspoiled virgin."

"Yeah, that'll be the day."

"Exactly. I'm no virgin and you are a dirty, dirty woman." He set his glass down again and reached for her. Pulling her into his lap, he gave her a knowing look as he rested his hands on her hips. "In fact, my dear, I think you're even dirtier than you've admitted to me."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He grinned. "I think you do."

Raising an eyebrow, she said, "Oh?"

"Come on, tell me."

She trailed her nails lightly up and down his abs and chest. "I don't know what there is to tell that you don't already know."

His hands moved from her hips up her back, the water rippling gently against her skin as droplets fell from his hands. "I know a lot of things about you that you've never told me."

"Oh?" Her hands stopped on his chest. "Did someone kiss and tell?"

"Oh yes," he said. "They told me a lot of things."

She cocked her head. "Who, and about what?"

He drew her towards him and gently took her nipple between his teeth. "Someone who knows a lot about you and the sexy, dirty things you've done. And do."

She whimpered softly as he flicked his tongue across her nipple. "Tell me, Bailey."

"I know you've kissed another woman." He paused, closing his lips around her nipple and sucking it just hard enough to *almost* hurt. "And I know you've dabbled in some BDSM."

A nervous flutter in her gut made her breath catch. "Chris..."

He smiled. "No one told me, Kat, don't worry."

"Then how did—" She gave him a playful glare. "Nice bluff. You're just trying to trick me into admitting things."

"Oh no, I'm not tricking you at all," he said, moving to her other nipple and sucking gently. "Because I know you've done it. And you've all but admitted to it anyway, so you might as well confess."

"Okay, you got me." She ran her fingers through his wet hair. "I've kissed a woman, and I've been known to dance with the devil of BDSM. But how did you know?"

He grinned. "I have my ways."

She tightened her grasp on his hair and pulled his head back, keeping her breast just out of his reach. "*How?*"

As casually and matter-of-factly as possible, he said, "You told me."

"I know," she said, rolling her eyes. "I told you just now."

"No, you just confirmed what I already knew." He tried to flick his tongue across her nipple, but missed when she pulled away.

She laughed, putting her hands back on his chest to keep him back. "Come on, tell me. How did you know I'm into BDSM?"

"That was easy," he said, looking damned proud of himself.

"Was it?"

He nodded. "You left evidence." His hand left her back and he gently picked her hand up off of his chest and brought it up to his lips. He kissed her palm, then the inside of her wrist. Meeting her eyes, he ran the tip of his tongue just below the heel of her hand. "Handcuffs," he whispered, his breath cool against her wet skin.

In that instant, she remembered the welts she'd tried—evidently unsuccessfully—to cover up. She ran her hand down his other arm and brought his hand out of the water, kissing his palm just as he had done.

"Well, if you knew what left those welts..." She made a circle on the inside of his wrist with the tip of her tongue. "Then something tells me you've seen them before..." She kissed below the heel of his hand. "Or you've had them yourself."

"Maybe a little of both." He kissed her palm again, then nipped the side of her hand. "I can be a sub just as much as I can be a dom."

"Preference?"

He paused, pursing his lips, then looked at her. "If I had to pick, I'd say sub."

She leaned forward, keeping her breasts just out of his reach and grinning when he tried, but failed, to take one of her nipples into his mouth. "So you like it when a woman is in control?"

He let a frustrated breath out through his teeth. "Absolutely." He swallowed hard. "So do *you* like it when a woman is in control?"

"I like being in control, yes."

A devilish grin pulled at the corners of his mouth. "That wasn't what I asked."

She raised an eyebrow. "How did you know about

that?"

He gave her a toothy grin. "So it's true, then?"

"Yes, it is. How did you know?"

"The lipstick on your blouse and the side of your neck at the club one night wasn't the same color as the lipstick you were wearing."

She smiled. "You're very observant, aren't you?"

"So it was someone else's lipstick?"

"Well, unless I was just really drunk and got more of it on my shirt than on my face."

"Doesn't explain the different color."

"Maybe I was trying something new."

His grin turned into a cocky smirk. "Oh, I think you were, but that something wasn't a new lipstick color."

She laughed. "You make it sound like that was the first time I'd ever kissed a woman."

"So you make a habit of these wild acts of sexual deviance?"

"I wouldn't call it a habit as much as a hobby."

He chuckled. "You're even dirtier than I thought."

"And you love it." She kissed him. "So there you have it. I confessed." She took a deep, melodramatic breath. "I've kissed...a *woman*."

"And did you like it?"

"I wasn't sure," she said. "So I had to try it again." She kissed him. "And again." Another kiss. "And again."

His lips barely leaving hers, he asked, "Do I ever get to see you kiss another woman?"

"Maybe." She laughed. "It's not like that's the dirtiest thing I've ever done with a woman."

His eyebrows jumped. "Oh *really*?"

"I've done more than kiss a woman, Chris." Her lip brushed his.

He swallowed. "Do tell."

"I know what a woman's kiss tastes like." She kissed him, just her lips against his, no tongue. "I know what a woman's nipple feels like against my tongue." She bent and kissed his neck, then sucked his earlobe between her teeth for a second before letting it go. "I know what another woman's pussy feels like around my fingers." He sucked in a breath, his body tensing, and she flicked her tongue just



below his ear. "And I know what a woman tastes like right when she comes."

A shiver ran up his spine and he let out a ragged breath. She couldn't be sure if it was from what she said or the fact that she was breathing against his skin, but the reaction satisfied her nonetheless. She kissed him deeply, letting him draw her tongue into his mouth and wondering if he was imagining what her kiss tasted like after she'd gone down on another woman. Judging by the shudder that went through him, that may very well have been the case.

Barely whispering, she said, "So now you know what a dirty woman I am."

His voice trembled. "And I *love* it."

She sat up, looking him in the eye. "So, now that I've confessed to some bisexual experimentation and having a thing for BDSM, it's your turn to fess up."

"And I confessed to BDSM, so we're even."

"No, I'm still one ahead of you." She leaned forward and kissed him again. "I know there's more filth lurking in that colorful past of yours."

"I have nothing to confess." He batted his eyes. "Clearly you're the dirtier of the two of us, so I bow down to your superior—"

"You're a terrible liar." She laughed. "Now tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Anything. Something dirty that you've done."

"Do you really think I've done anything as dirty as kissing someone of the same sex?"

"*Have* you kissed someone of the same sex?"

His eyes never left hers. "Does it only count if I was sober, it wasn't a bet, and I initiated it?"

"Yes."

"Then yes, I have."

She blinked. "Really?"

He nodded, his cheeks coloring a little. "A few years back."

"Have you ever—?"

"No."

"You don't even know what I was going to ask."

"Yes, I do," he laughed. "And no, I didn't."

"So, what, you and another guy were bored one night,

so you decided to give it a go?"

He chuckled, his cheeks darkening a little more. "Well, it wasn't *quite* like that."

"So what *was* it like?"

He shrugged. "I was curious." He trailed his fingertips up and down her back, letting droplets of water trickle down her spine. "We kissed to see what it was like, made out for a while. Never went any further than that."

"Did you ever do it again?"

He shook his head. "Wasn't my thing. I mean, it was fun, I'll give you that, but I just never felt any desire to do it again." He put his hand on the back of her neck and brought her down to kiss him. "Kissing another man is fun, but it's got nothing on kissing a woman." His tongue parted her lips and his fingers wandered into her hair.

"I don't know," she murmured. "I think men are better kissers than women."

"Oh?" He kissed her lightly. His other hand cupped her breast, his thumb running back and forth over her nipple.

She bit her lip, suppressing a moan. "Women are too gentle. I mean, I like kissing women, don't get me wrong, but I like a more..." She paused. "*Aggressive* kisser."

His fingers tightened in her hair and he pulled her closer. "Then that's one more thing we both have in common, isn't it?" He didn't even give her a chance to breathe before he kissed her deeply, passionately, bordering on violently, and she returned it with equal fervor.

He broke the kiss and grinned at her, running his tongue across his lips. Breathing hard, he whispered, "Tell me more."

"More? About what?"

"I want to know all the dirty things you've done." His hand disappeared beneath the water and she closed her eyes as his fingers trailed up her inner thigh. "*All* of them."

She grinned, trying not to shiver as his fingers gently parted her pussy lips. "Why would you want to know that?"

"Because it turns me on," he growled. "It turns me on knowing how wild you are." He cupped her clit with his palm and released a hiss of breath as his fingertips slipped inside her.

"Oh God, Chris." She rocked her hips, pushing her clit

against his hand.

"Tell me, Kat," he whispered against her collarbone. "Tell me all the things you've done in the past."

She sucked in a breath. "I can't...not while..." She gasped as his fingertips found her G-spot. "Not..."

"Not while I'm doing this?" he pressed a little harder to emphasize his point.

She murmured something in the vicinity of a 'yes'.

"You can't remember?" he asked, his voice tinged with both arousal and amusement. "Or you can't speak?"

"Can't..." She gasped. "Can't...fuck, Chris, you can't expect me to..." She closed her eyes, letting her head fall back as his fingers moved just a little faster against her G-spot. "To talk while you're doing that."

"I can," he said. "And I will. Because I love watching you like this."

She moaned with a mixture of frustration and spine-melting arousal.

"Ever been caught fucking someone?" he asked against her neck.

She struggled to understand the question. "I...once...yes..."

"Mile high club?"

"No."

"Done a video?"

She swallowed. Wet her lips, and tried to breathe.

"Come on, Kat, tell me," he teased, rubbing her G-spot just enough to destroy what little ability she had left to speak.

Taking a breath, she managed to say, "No, no videos, no-*oh God*, Chris, that's—"

"Threesome?"

Whimpering softly, she nodded.

"Ooh, that's sexy," he said. "Two men or two women?"

"I—" She gasped as his palm moved on her clit. "Both." He must have been pleased with that answer, because his hand moved just a little faster.

Barely whispering, he said, "Ever had an orgasm in a hot tub?"

Her teeth chattered and her breath came in short, desperate gasps. "N-no." She thought his fingers were

twitching inside her, but realized it was her pussy convulsing around them, tightening and releasing, tightening and releasing, pushing his fingertips against her G-spot each time.

"Yes, you have," he whispered.

"No," she moaned. I never have."

"You have," he said through clenched teeth, moving his fingers faster. "I know you have, Katrina, because..." *Faster*. "You're having one..." *Faster*. "Right..." *Faster still*. "Now."

"Oh God..." she moaned, falling against him as everything inside her *shattered*. The neighbors probably heard her, her own neighbors probably heard her from halfway across town, but she didn't care because it just felt too fucking good.

Before she even had a chance to catch her breath, he said, "We need to go back inside." His voice was strained just as hers had been moments before.

"What? Why?" She couldn't imagine trying to stand now, trying to do anything remotely resembling walking while the aftershocks of an orgasm like that rippled through her. "Chris, I—"

"We have to go inside." His voice trembled with desperation. "Because all the condoms are in there."

## ***Twenty Two***

That Friday night, an hour or so after Chris and Kat joined their friends at a table near the dance floor, he noticed someone checking her out from the safety of the bar across the room. Chris was almost certain that the guy was looking at Kat, and when he made eye contact with him, he was sure of it. His relaxed stance—an elbow on the bar, hips and shoulders cocked slightly—straightened and his smile fell as his eyebrows jumped. His expression changed from that of a man interested in a woman to that of a man trying to decide if he was encroaching on another man's territory.

Chris realized how close he was sitting to Kat, that his arm was slung over the back of her chair. He wasn't touching her, but their casual intimacy walked the line between friendly and territorial. An outsider could easily read it as, *back off, she's mine.*

He shifted slightly, angling his body away from Kat's and putting an arm on the table between them, creating an implied barrier. He gave a subtle nod to the guy at the bar. *She's all yours.*

Moments later, Kat turned around. Chris glanced over his shoulder and exchanged a brief look with the guy from the bar, who was now right behind her. The newcomer's eyebrows jumped and his body stiffened a little, probably still uncertain if Kat was completely available.

It was only when Chris turned away, engaging Sarah and Greg in a different conversation, that the newcomer got the nerve to ask Kat for a dance.

~ \* ~

"Care for a dance?" A subtle southern accent drew

each word out for an extra fraction of a second.

Kat gave him a quick look up and down, taking in as much of his fit physique as his clothes would allow. *And pass up the chance to be up close and personal with that body? Are you nuts?* "Of course," she said. He offered her his hand and she took it as she rose. Over her shoulder, she told her friends, "I'll be back."

"Take your time," Chris said, winking. The newcomer's hand tensed slightly in hers, and when she turned back to him, he glanced past her, suddenly hesitating.

"Lead the way," she said, gesturing towards the dance floor. He hesitated again, then smiled and led her out to the floor.

"Name's Blake," he said.

"Kat."

"Kat," he drawled, saying it as slowly as was possible with a monosyllabic name, as if trying it out. Tasting it. "What's that short for? Katherine?"

"Katrina."

"Katrina." The way he drew her full name out made her knees weak, and he didn't seem to mind at all when she leaned into him for support. "I've always liked that name."

She shrugged. "I've always had a love-hate relationship with it."

He laughed. "I suppose it doesn't have much novelty for you, does it?"

"Not so much." *But you can say it anytime you want with that accent.* She wondered if he talked dirty in bed. *Oh dear Lord, a southern accent whispering dirty things in my ear while I come. Be still, my beating heart.*

"So that guy you were sitting with," Blake said, his eyes darting towards the table across the room. "He's not your—?"

"Who, Chris?" Kat laughed, glancing back at the table. She shook her head. "We're just friends."

"I see," he said, his body relaxing slightly as he nodded. "I didn't want to step in where I wasn't welcome."

"Such a gentleman."

"Or a slimeball masquerading as a gentleman to deceive you." He winked and she laughed.

"Somehow I doubt that."

"No one ever seems to believe me when I say that." He gave a theatrical sigh and shook his head.

"So where are you from? That's not a local accent I hear."

He smiled again. "Georgia, born and bred." His cheeks colored a little and he dropped his gaze. "Can never quite cover up that accent."

"Don't cover it up on my account," she said.

He met her eyes again. "You don't mind a southern accent?"

"Don't mind it? Are you kidding?"

He smiled, crinkling the corners of his eyes and melting something deep inside her. "I like you already."

One dance turned to several. Eventually, Blake led her towards the bar, away from the crowded floor. "I'd love to stay for a few more dances," he said. "But I have a plane to catch tomorrow morning."

Kat's heart sank. "Heading home?"

"Oh no, I live here. Just off on business for a few days. But," he paused. "When I get back, I'd love to get together again. Say, over dinner or drinks?"

She smiled. "That sounds nice."

He pulled his phone out of his pocket. "What's your number?"

After Blake left, Kat wandered back to the table. Immediately, she noticed Chris's absence. She glanced around, but didn't see him.

"Where's Chris?"

Natalie inclined her head towards the stairwell. "I think he went up to the terrace."

Kat's gaze swept over the table and she realized everyone in the group was still present. "By himself?"

"I think so." David paused to sip his beer. "He was checking out some chick earlier but—" He craned his neck. "Nope, she's still by the bar, so he must have gone alone."

Glancing at the stairwell, Kat scowled. "Shit, he's not getting another migraine, is he?"

"He seemed okay," Natalie said. "Just a bit quiet."

Kat chewed her lip. "Fuck, that's not good. I'm going to go make sure he's okay."

~ \* ~

Chris rested his elbows on the railing in one of the few quiet corners of the terrace. It was an unseasonably warm evening, so the terrace was crowded and noisy tonight.

"You disappeared." Kat's voice startled him.

He looked over his shoulder and smiled. "Just needed to get away from the noise for a bit."

A concerned expression tightened her lips. "You're not getting a migraine, are you?"

He laughed. "I don't know, you tell me."

"Well, you're not being an ass and I haven't seen you indulging your sweet tooth, so I guess you're okay."

"Thank you, Dr. Morgan."

Her eyes narrowed, but her smile broadened. "You weren't overcome by the need to punch a guy who was encroaching on your territory, were you?"

He laughed. "You're not my territory, Kat." *But another minute of that and I might have done something to get myself arrested.* "So what happened with him? Dud?"

She shrugged. "Nice guy. Sexy accent."

"So now you're a sucker for accents?"

"I've always been a sucker for the right accent."

"Define the right accent."

"Southern. Preferably a southern *gentleman*."

He snorted. "Since when do you like gentlemen?"

"I like it when gentlemen talk to me in a decidedly ungentlemanly fashion."

"So if I talk dirty to you in a southern accent—?"

"You are not a gentleman, Christian."

He laughed. "So what happened with him? Didn't like him?"

"I didn't say that." She smiled. "He had to cut out early."

"Get his number?"

"I gave him mine."

"So he *is* a gentleman."

They fell silent for a moment, both looking out at the skyline. Chris chewed the inside of his cheek. She had him dead to rights. Right or wrong, jealousy was the reason he'd come out to the terrace. Not only that, but he'd spent half the night trying to work up the nerve to ask her about something, and had just about done so when the newcomer



came along.

*Well, she's here now. This is as good a time as any.* Taking a breath, he broke the silence. "You know, I was thinking about our conversation the other night." He paused. "In the hot tub."

She grinned. "I've thought about that conversation a lot. Probably not so much for the conversation as the rest of it." She winked.

He chuckled. "I've thought about both," he said.

"Long and hard?"

"That's how I think about everything."

She laughed. "So what specifically were you thinking about?"

Pursing his lips, he was quiet for a moment, gazing out at the city before looking back at her. "How long has it been since you've done any BDSM?"

She thought for a moment. "I haven't done any of the serious hardcore stuff in a few years, but I've had my hands tied to a few pieces of furniture in the last year or so." She paused. "Why?"

He sipped his drink, glancing away for a moment and shrugged. "Just...curious."

"I know you better than that, Chris. What's on your mind?"

He rolled his drink around in his mouth, then swallowed it. "Would you be game for a little 'playing' together?"

She exhaled. "Thought you'd never ask. What did you have in mind?"

He shifted his weight. "I'm not into the serious hardcore stuff."

"So racking you and forcing you to sing show tunes is out of the question?"

"Very much so."

"Well, there goes that plan."

He laughed. "Evil wench."

"You knew that long, long before you saw me naked, Christian."

"Good point." He laughed. "I'll be honest, though, I like this kind of thing, just, you know, nothing too outrageous. Just tease me, then fuck me."

She grinned. "So you like foreplay with a safe word?"

He laughed again. "That about sums it up."

"I'm always game for that. So, what *isn't* out of the question?"

He shrugged. "Little bit of bondage, little bit of dominance, that kind of thing. Nothing too involved."

"Tie you to a chair and tease the hell out of you?"

"That I could go for."

"Good to know. At least I know you've done handcuffs before."

"Indeed I have."

"Into pain?"

"Some."

"Define 'some'."

"Don't beat the shit out of me, but I have a thing for fingernails."

She lifted her hand and flexed her fingers, clicking the ends of her long nails against each other. "That I can manage. What about a blindfold?"

At that, he tensed slightly, drawing a breath through parted lips.

"Okay, no blind—"

"No, I could go for that."

"Are you sure? If it makes you nervous..."

He touched her arm. "I can handle it." *With anyone but you? Not a chance.*

"Chris, I don't want you doing something you're not comfortable with."

"Isn't the whole idea to push my limits?" He winked. "I'll be fine, Kat. It's just not something I've done before."

"Okay, you're calling the shots."

"Well, technically you'll be calling the shots."

"True."

"So, do you want to?"

She seemed to consider it for a moment, then nodded. "I'll bring my cuffs over tomorrow night."

"I have cuffs."

She grinned. "How many pairs?"

He laughed. "I only have two hands, Kat."

She nudged his ankle with the toe of her shoe and grinned again. "How many pairs?"

He swallowed hard. "Just one."

"I'll bring mine." She paused, then looked at him with a devilish twinkle in her eye that made his hands shake. "Better yet, why don't you come over to my place?"

## ***Twenty Three***

As Chris pulled into Kat's apartment parking lot, his phone beeped. He flipped it open.

*The door's open,* the text message read. *Let yourself in and wait for me in the dining room.*

He swallowed nervously and got out of the car. Though he enjoyed this kind of power-exchange, he wasn't without some apprehension. Part of the thrill for him came from giving up control, letting someone else push his limits, mostly by tapping into the depths of the primal and instinctive: Vulnerability. Pain. Immobility.

For him, this voluntary surrender of control was a way of staring the fight-or-flight instinct down and saying "No, I want this, and I will have it".

Though it was entirely consensual and deeply pleasurable, it still unnerved him enough that his hands shook as he held the railing on the way up the stairs to her door.

The apartment was eerily quiet, the click of the door echoing down the seemingly empty hall. "Kat?"

No answer.

He left his shoes and jacket by the door and went into the dining room as her message had ordered. Everything that normally covered the table—candles, tablecloth, a few stacks of books and papers—was gone. The polished mahogany was completely bare except for a black blindfold and a piece of paper.

He picked up the paper.

*Put this on. Take everything else off.*

Swallowing hard, he put the note back on the table

and looked at the blindfold. That was one thing he'd never done, never successfully, anyway. He and his last girlfriend had tried blindfold play, but it just made him too nervous. He was willing to try it with Kat, though. He trusted her.

Still, if anything about this pushed the limits of his comfort zone, it was that deceptively benign piece of black satin sitting on the table.

As ordered, he stripped, laying his clothes on the table beside the note. There was something oddly disconcerting about disrobing there, in her dining room. The sense of exposure surprised him. No one was there except Kat, wherever she was, yet he hesitated with each item of clothing he removed. Being naked and in someone else's arms wasn't nearly as vulnerable as this isolated nudity.

Silently reminding himself that he trusted her, he slid the blindfold over his eyes, adjusting the elastic until it was comfortable. As comfortable as a blindfold could be, anyway, and disorientation set in, amplifying his vulnerability.

A hollow click followed by a dull tap straightened his spine. Then another. Again, closer this time. His mind scrambled to find the sound in his memory, trying to place it in the realms of familiarity, to still the primal fear of the unknown.

*High-heeled shoes on a hard floor.*

Kat's presence raised the hairs on the back of his neck. A mental picture of the apartment flickered through his mind. The only hard floor nearby was the kitchen. She was in the kitchen. Behind him.

The sound of her footsteps dulled as she moved from hard floor to carpet. Now they were in the same room. Excitement and nervousness tied his stomach into knots and his heart pounded.

He couldn't see her, he could barely hear her, but he was aware of her. Aware of her coming closer, walking past him. Walking in front of him. Past him again. It had to be his imagination, but he was certain he felt the weight of her stare as she circled him like a shark. He shivered and a quiet but sharp exhalation told him she found it amusing.

She stopped, said nothing, did nothing. Even her breathing was near silent.

Seconds went by. Maybe minutes, he couldn't be sure.

Metal clanged against something solid, like multiple pieces of—of something falling against a hard surface, the sudden sound strafing his every nerve ending and making him suck in a startled breath.

*Find it, find it, I know that sound, what is it?*

"You know the rules?" Her voice was calm, even, quiet.

"Yes." *Come on, come on, what was it?*

"What are you not allowed to do unless I specifically say so?"

"Touch you." *Coins?*

"What else?"

He swallowed. "Come." *Silverware?*

"Remember the safe word?"

"Checkmate." *Handcuffs.* Something in his mind settled as the sound went from unknown to familiar, but the realization that it was handcuffs ignited an entirely different kind of nervousness in him. He'd known ahead of time that there would be cuffs, and he'd done it before, but now they weren't just *going* to be there. They *were* there.

"You okay?"

He nodded.

Something beside him moved, dragging across the carpet towards him. The only thing he could think of that would make that sound was the heel of her shoe, but then something bumped the backs of his knees. It wasn't enough to knock his legs out from under him, just a nudge to make him aware of a presence behind him.

"Sit."

An image of one of the dining room chairs went through his mind. He reached behind him, finding the back of the chair and easing himself down to it. He half-expected her to make him sit without the guidance of his own hands, but she made no move to stop him. That gave him some reassurance. Though she was more than willing to taunt his senses and give his instincts a run for their money, she must have understood the innate fear of falling backwards. He'd surrendered his sight, she conceded the ability to move back without fear.

The chair was cold against his skin and he sat up straight to keep his back off of its surface. Her hands were

suddenly on his shoulders, and before his mind could process that contact, she pushed him against the icy back of the chair.

He grunted. "*Fuck.*"

"Cold?" she whispered,

"You could say that."

She laughed, her warm breath fluttering across his cheek and raising goose bumps on every inch of his skin. "Comfortable?"

"Not particularly."

"Good."

He sensed movement, instinctively bracing himself for...whatever was coming.

The presence of her skin near his warmed the side of his thigh a second before her leg touched his. Then the other, the chair creaking as she moved. She was standing over him, he guessed, straddling him. There was something unusual about her skin against his. An odd texture he couldn't quite place. His fingers wanted to investigate, to see what the subtle coarseness was, but that was against the rules. He gripped the edges of the chair, forcing himself not to touch her.

"Give me your hand."

He hesitated. He knew she was there, right in front of —over him, but he couldn't be sure exactly where. If he raised his hand, he ran the risk of touching her.

"*Now.*" The icy, commanding tone made his breath catch. If he hadn't already been rock hard, that alone would have done it.

Keeping his hand out to the side, he raised it slowly, cautiously, searching for any telltale heat to let him know he was too close.

Fingers closed around his wrist, her grasp firm but not uncomfortably so. "Relax your hand," she said. "Don't move your fingers or try to press any harder than I let you, and don't try to hold onto anything."

*Press any harder? Hold on? To what?*

She squeezed his wrist. "Understand?"

He licked his lips. "Yes."

She guided his hand down. His pulse soared as she set his palm against her leg. Now he understood her command.

It took every bit of control he had not to press his fingers into her flesh, to stroke her skin. It was about as easy as putting something against his tongue and not tasting it.

Swallowing hard, he kept his arm as relaxed and passive as possible as she drew it down, letting his fingertips drift across her skin, allowing him to touch but not explore. A coarse, alien surface met his touch and he instinctively curled his fingers to examine its surface. Kat immediately jerked his hand away from her skin, the sudden lack of contact tingling against his fingertips.

"What did I say?" she growled.

"Sorry," he said. "I—I'm sorry."

"If you do it again, I won't let you touch anything else."

The tingling in his skin intensified. "I won't do it again."

She said nothing. Their hands moved again. He was vaguely aware of the chair creaking, the sound barely drifting into his consciousness. Blindness was a strange thing; every sound, no matter how minute, registered.

A moment later, the coarse surface reentered his senses. Gritting his teeth, he kept his fingers passive, trying to identify the material with nothing more than the vague hints she let him feel. Then the surface changed, giving way to a rippled texture that alternated between what felt like rough fabric and warm skin.

*Fishnet stockings.*

The realization made his fingers seek confirmation, but he resisted, instead stiffening his hand to lift off of her leg, hoping she would be more forgiving of that error than a forbidden touch.

She pulled his hand completely away from her skin. "What was that?"

"I was trying not to..." His voice caught when her leg moved, almost imperceptibly, against his, as if she'd shifted her weight slightly. "I was trying to keep..." Their hands were moving again, in the air, not touching anything yet.

"Trying to keep *what*?"

"To keep..." Warmth registered against his fingertips, signaling the tantalizing nearness of skin. Of *her*.

"Say it, Christian."



"From touch..." The faintest sensation of softness whispered across his fingertip, not nearly enough to differentiate between skin, clothing, or imagination. He took a breath. "From touching you the way you told me not to."

She said nothing. Evidently she was pleased with his answer, because she let him touch...something. He was disoriented enough that he couldn't even tell if he was reaching directly in front of him, to the side, up, down. All he knew was that he was touching her. Somehow, some way, he was touching her, but something still divided her body from his fingertips.

His fingers drifted passively over a strange surface. It was cool and warm at the same time, too slick to be skin, too smooth to be fabric. A solid ridge, its texture much rougher than the other surface, nearly prompted his fingers into pressing against it to understand it, but he resisted. She guided his fingers over the ridge, and cold, abrasive metal met his touch. Now she drew his hand up, following the narrow path of metal.

*Zipper.*

*Patent leather.*

She flattened his hand against it and led his palm back to the patent leather, over the gentle incline that he immediately recognized as her breast.

*Corset.* He shivered. How many times he'd fantasized about seeing her in a corset, he couldn't count. And now here she was, in a corset, but he couldn't see her. Gritting his teeth, he let a breath out through his nose.

She moved slightly, the corset squeaking, and he realized that was what he'd heard earlier when he thought the chair had creaked.

Abruptly, his hand was lifted away from the corset and she stepped back, releasing his wrist and breaking all contact with him. "I think that's enough of that," she said, a grin in her voice. She paused. "You want to touch more, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to see what I'm wearing?"

He chuckled. "If you were going to show me, you wouldn't have blindfolded me." He sensed movement. The corset creaked beside—behind him? Then the warmth of her face was beside his.

"That wasn't my question." Her tone suggested that he would be wise not to be a smartass again. "Do you want to see it or not?"

He took a breath. "Yes, I do."

Her breath cooled his skin at the same time that the nearness of her face warmed it. "Too bad."

Clenching his jaw, he said nothing.

"You're imagining it, aren't you?"

Sarcasm threatened to seep into his voice, but he didn't dare. Though her tone was playful now, couldn't be sure what she was trying to do. Finally, he said, "Yes."

"What color?"

He furrowed his brow, a mannerism he'd never thought twice about but suddenly seemed completely absurd with a blindfold on. "What?"

"In your mind," she said, her voice vibrating just below his ear. "What color is the corset?"

This had to be some sort of mind game. Some way of fucking with his head, trapping him into giving a wrong answer so that she could punish him somehow. Punish him by withholding, and she'd already withheld enough to drive him mad.

"Answer the question." The sharpness returned to her voice.

He licked his lips. "Black."

She laughed, letting her lip brush the side of his neck, nearly making him whimper. "Come on, Chris, be more creative than that."

He thought quickly, trying to decide what color it could possibly be.

She spoke against the raised hairs on the back of his neck. "Just think. It'll come to you." And her presence left his side, the air beside him suddenly chilled with her absence.

Handcuffs rattled nearby. The sound was already committed to his memory from earlier, and although it wasn't as loud and jarring as before, it still set his nerves on edge. He steeled himself against the cold metal on his skin, but even that mental preparation wasn't enough to keep his blood from turning to ice when the first bracelet closed around his wrist.

He expected her to bring his hand back to shackle it to

his other, but instead, she kept his arm straight. The cuff snapped against a rung below him, the vibration surging up his spine. She moved around him, her presence registering even when she made no sound. A moment later, his other hand was cuffed to the chair in the same fashion. It was an odd choice of positions for his hands, leaving them at his sides rather than binding them behind him. Given the rather sharp edges on the chair back, it was probably the more comfortable option, too.

Particularly if he was going to be held this way for any length of time.

Her hand touched his knee, pausing just long enough for his startled reaction to come and go, then slid down his leg to his foot. Cold metal encircled his ankle, the cuff creaking as she adjusted the tightness. A second later, a vibration told him that she'd fastened the other end of the handcuffs to the leg of the chair.

When she did the same to his other ankle, the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end again and a primal sort of panic uncoiled in his gut. Until now, he'd only been bound by a verbal agreement to stay. Now, he was truly bound to this experience.

Naked. Immobile. Vulnerable.

Completely at her mercy.

Queen captures king.

A memory flickered through his mind of Kat triumphantly flicking his black king off the board after yet another victory.

"White," he said.

"What?"

"Your corset. It's white."

She laughed. A moment later, the gentle touch of her lips against his almost drove him insane with desire. Just before she completely pulled away, she whispered, "You're better at this game than I thought."

## ***Twenty Four***

She walked around him again. Stopping behind him, she put her hands on his shoulders, letting them run down his chest and abs. "Have you ever wondered, Chris, what happens to the king after the queen captures him?"

He opened his mouth to speak, but paused when her tongue flicked against his ear.

She didn't wait for him to say anything. "Do you think she takes him back to her castle?" She kissed the side of his neck. "Maybe takes him home to be her little plaything?" Her fingertips made light circles on his abs, making the muscles quiver. "Torments him for her own entertainment?" She raked her nails across his skin.

"Oh...fuck..." He breathed. Though the pain startled him, the shudders it sent rippling through him were anything but unpleasant.

"I think I like tormenting him for my own entertainment." She flicked her tongue between his shoulder blades as she drew her nails across his pectorals, the conflicting sensations vying for his focus.

Then she came around in front of him and sat over him, straddling him and dragging her nails down his chest and abs again. Her touch alternated between almost ticklish to digging her nails in hard enough he thought she'd draw blood, and every bit of it drove him insane with both pleasure and frustration.

Then she stopped. Her center of gravity shifted a little, as if she'd leaned back. For a long moment—a few seconds? A full minute? Longer? Nothing happened. She didn't move. She didn't make a sound.

Just inches in front of his face, something metal jingled quietly. Then a sound like cloth slowly tearing. No, not tearing. Not cloth. Something...

*The zipper.*

Clenching his fists, he strained against the handcuffs as he imagined her slowly drawing the corset zipper down. He desperately wanted to see her with the corset on, he wanted to see her breasts, he wanted to see her.

Her body shifted again. He suspected she was leaning forward, a suspicion confirmed when an odd material scraped the side of his face. Metallic. Abrasive. But warm.

*The zipper. The side of the zipper. The open zipper which means she's right there, right there, so fucking close, Jesus Christ...* Just knowing how close her exposed breasts were to his lips made his mouth water.

Her body moved, cool air touching his face as she leaned back and widened the gap between them. She touched his face, her hands on either side, letting the very edges of her nails brush across the light stubble of his jaw. The scratching sound, imperceptible in anything but this heightened state of awareness, made his arms prickle with goose bumps.

Then her fingers moved up the sides of his face. They caught the elastic of the blindfold and kept going, pulling it off. He blinked a few times his eyes adjusting to the light. When at last he could focus, he couldn't breathe.

The corset—white patent leather, just as he'd predicted—was open, held together only by the last inch or so of the zipper, the sides partially obscuring her breasts. Below the zipper, a simple white garter belt hugged her hips, but she had bothered with neither panties nor thong. Everything from hips to mid-thigh was bare except for the thin strip connecting the belt to the white lace of her thigh-high stockings.

Movement pulled his attention to her hands, and his lips parted as he watched her draw the zipper down. It caught briefly at the very end, but she gave it a slight tug, and it separated. Chris's cock twitched as the corset fell away.

Instinctively, he tried to reach for her, to touch her breasts, but the handcuffs caught his wrists, jingling as he

swore under his breath.

"Am I frustrating you, Christian?" she said, grinning.

"Yes."

"Good." She put her hands on his shoulders and leaned forward, bringing her nipple so close to him that his own sharp exhalation ricocheted off of it and warmed his lips. Then, she backed away just slightly, widening the narrow canyon between her nipple and his lips. *No, come back. Yes, give me room to breathe without tempting me to break the rules. Damn you, Kat...*

"My God, I want you." The words rolled off his tongue before he could stop them.

"I know you do." She bent and kissed him, sliding her tongue between his lips. Unaccustomed to kissing her without touching her, his hands opened and closed, searching the vacant air for her skin, her hair, *anything*.

She whispered, barely breaking the kiss. "In fact, I think I'll let you have what you want."

His eyes widened and his lips parted with disbelief. She stood, disappeared behind him for a moment, and when she returned, the condom in her hand made him salivate. She was going to fuck him. Thank God, thank God, she was going to fuck him.

She stroked his cock slowly, making his entire body tremble. With the devilish grin she gave him, he thought she was going to go down on him, but then she turned her head and tore the condom wrapper in her teeth.

"I guess I should help you with this since your hands aren't readily available," she said with a smirk. He didn't even have time to think of a smartass retort before she rolled the condom onto his cock.

"Oh fuck," he whispered.

She turned around so she was facing away from him, then straddled his legs and lowered herself onto his cock. She took him into her pussy inch by agonizing inch. Biting his tongue, he willed himself not to come, to hold back, to abide by her rules, but she felt so good, her tight pussy accommodating his cock like they were made for each other.

Leaning back, she whispered in his ear. "Jesus, you feel good, Chris."

The only response he could muster was a low growl,

one of both relief at being inside her and aggravation that he couldn't fuck her hard and fast like he ached to do.

"If your hands were free," she whispered, rising slowly before coming back down just as slowly on his aching cock. "You could touch my clit." Rose and fell. "Do the things you did to me in the hot tub." Rose and fell again. "And you could do it while you were fucking me at the same time."

Closing his eyes, he let his head fall back. "Oh my God..."

Kissing his cheek, she moaned, "Your cock is right against my G-spot, Chris." She rose just a little, gasping and shivering. "If your fingers were on my clit..." She whimpered. "You'd make me come."

He clenched his teeth. "Then let my hand go."

"Why would I do that? My hands aren't cuffed."

He swallowed hard as her shoulder moved against his chest, and a second later, her pussy tightened around his cock in the same moment that she let out a hiss of breath.

"Oh Jesus, Kat, you're going to make me come if you do that."

"No, you're not allowed to come," she said, her voice strained but still in control. He had never, ever imagined it was possible to be so frustrated, least of all while he was deep inside a woman, but there he was.

"If you make yourself come with me inside you—" He groaned as her pussy again tightened around him. "You're *going* to make me come."

"Do you want me to stop?" Her hand moved faster, her pussy gripping his cock as her spine arched off of his chest. Another minute of that, and he'd be gone.

"No," he said. "But if you come..."

She stopped abruptly. Stopped, and stood. He growled with frustration as the handcuffs kept him from reaching for her and pulling her back to him. Facing him, she licked her lips. Her skin was still flushed with arousal, her breathing rapid and shallow as it always was when she was close to an orgasm, but she was still infuriatingly in control. Of herself. Of him. Of *everything*.

"I wouldn't want to make you come yet, would I?" she said. She leaned over him, resting her hands on his thighs and keeping her lips just out of his reach.

He closed his eyes, gritting his teeth and whimpering softly as his body screamed for release.

"Look at me."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

Sucking in a breath through chattering teeth, he said, "Because I'm too fucking turned on to look at you without touching you." He thought her breath caught, but couldn't be sure.

"I'll put the blindfold back on," she said. "I'm the one that decides when you see and when you don't."

Something in her voice resonated through his mind. Something that belied her maddening exterior of calm and controlled.

"Look at me, Chris." There it was, that edge, that hint of unsteadiness.

He opened his eyes, searching hers for the desperation he heard in her voice, but finding none. *Come on, Kat, give me a sign. Show me you're losing it as much as I am. I know you are.*

That sign came when she took a long, unsteady breath, but it was the only concession she made. "I'm not done with you yet."

He held her gaze but said nothing.

"I'm going to undo the cuffs," she said, adopting the icy, commanding voice that made him want to lose control. "But the rules still apply. All of them." Her eyebrows lifted. "Am I understood?"

He nodded.

She eyed him for a moment, as if searching for resistance. Then, apparently satisfied that he would be compliant, she put her hand on his knee and knelt beside him.

The cuff on his ankle moved, loosened, then fell away. He let out a breath, closing his eyes. After a series of clicks, his other ankle was free.

As freedom clicked closer and closer, he realized he'd long since forgotten about his vulnerability. The one thing that drove him out of his mind now was not a primal need to be uncaged, but a need to be inside her.

She reached for one of his wrists, but paused. "We're



not done yet, Chris," she said. "The rules still apply."

He chewed his lip. "Kat, I have to fuck you. I can't wait."

She bent and circled the tip of her tongue on the inside of his elbow, making him growl with frustration. "Tell me you'll follow the rules, or I won't let your hands go."

He nodded.

"Say it."

*You think I can speak like this?* Then he remembered the way he'd made her talk in the hot tub while he fingered her to orgasm. He took a deep breath. "Yes, I'll follow the rules."

She released his hands and he rubbed his wrists gingerly. Judging by the angry red crescent moons on each hand, he was going to have some familiar welts the next day.

"Get up."

His eyes never leaving hers, he rose.

"Bedroom." She gestured down the hall. Nodding, he obeyed.

Once they were in the bedroom, he stopped, looking at her and awaiting her next instruction. She gestured towards the bed and his heart jumped into his throat as he followed her to it. *Please let me inside you, please let me. God, I can't wait anymore.*

But she stopped beside the bed, facing him. "There's one last thing you have to do."

The ache in his cock was beyond unbearable, but he nodded anyway. "Tell me."

She ran a single finger down the center of his chest, over his abs, making his muscles tense and quiver. Then she trailed it along his erection. He was so aroused that the sensation of her fingertip registered as if the condom wasn't even there.

"Look at me, Chris."

He hadn't even realized he'd closed his eyes. Taking a deep breath, he opened them. "Tell me what you want me to do."

"Just one thing," she whispered, leaning back against the bed. "One simple thing." She lifted herself onto the bed, then gestured for him to come closer. When he did, she

wrapped her legs around his waist.

"Jesus, Kat, I want to fuck you," he moaned, his entire body shaking as she drew him closer. His cock was inches away from her pussy now. The restraint it took to keep from grabbing her hips and slamming into her was physically painful.

"Look at me," she said again.

He did, blinking to bring her into focus.

"The last thing you have to do..." She reached for him, sliding her hands around the back of his neck. "Is *fuck me*."

He was inside her before his conscious mind registered the words. Something understood, something made sense of it, or maybe he just couldn't hold back anymore. He didn't know, he didn't care, all he knew was that he was finally fucking her.

He ground his teeth, trying to keep from coming just yet; though he wasn't sure if her rules still applied, he wouldn't come until she did. "Oh fuck, Kat, you feel..." But he could only groan.

"Harder," she moaned, her back arching. "Oh God, I'm..." Her entire body seized with a powerful climax, her pussy tightening with every deep thrust he took.

His orgasm was a breath away, but even through the oblivion that threatened to take over at any moment, he knew he was still her submissive. The rules still applied until she said otherwise, but he couldn't hold back anymore. He was going to come, he had to come, he needed to come...

"Oh God, Kat, oh my God, tell me..." He faltered, struggling to speak. Then he looked her in the eye and whispered, "Tell me I can come. Please, tell me..."

"Yes, Chris, oh God, *come*..." she moaned, and before the words were even out, a violent shudder surged through him and he roared as he came deep inside her.

He collapsed against her. "Jesus Christ," he murmured.

Her fingers ran through his hair, her chest rising and falling rapidly beneath him. Neither spoke, they just breathed.

When his legs would finally hold him up, he quickly got rid of the condom. Breathless and spent, he joined her in bed. She rested her head on his chest and they caught their

breath as he let himself ease back into the familiar calm of safety and security.

He realized though, that he *hadn't* felt unsafe or insecure. Though she had tripped his primal responses to being vulnerable and cornered, he'd known with complete certainty, on an intellectual level, that he was safe. Anytime he'd engaged in this kind of activity with other women, there had always been that nagging doubt in his mind, that paranoia that once he was physically at her mercy, she might take advantage of it. To do what, he was never really certain. All he knew was the unsettledness of knowing that she *could*. It was a feeling like he'd jumped out of a plane and didn't know if his parachute would really open.

That never crossed his mind with Kat.

He had surrendered to her with total, unwavering trust.

With other women, it was the vulnerability that kept him from relaxing enough to fully enjoy being dominated. With Kat, he'd relaxed, and he'd enjoyed it more than he'd ever thought possible, but now he was left with this unnerving feeling of accidental intimacy, as if something between them had deepened while they weren't looking.

He'd done his level best to follow every rule she'd laid down tonight. He didn't touch her. He didn't come until she allowed it. He'd followed her every command.

But something told him he'd broken a different rule.

## ***Twenty Five***

"So what moved you out of Georgia?"

"Followed the money." Blake winked at her over his menu. "Found a job up here that was too good to pass up."

Kat laid her menu on the table, folding her hands across it. "Must have been a damn good offer to pull a southern boy out of the South."

He chuckled, closing his menu and putting it on the edge of the table. "Obviously you've never been to Georgia in the summertime."

"Or any time of the year, for that matter." She smiled.

"It's hot enough to make the devil faint," he said. "That's why I like it here. Cooler, not so humid." He winked. "The only thing hot around here is the women."

She laughed. "Glad we don't disappoint."

"Definitely not." He paused. "So what do you do?"

She gave a theatrical sigh. "I bend the laws of physics, turn water into wine, and generally spend most of my days in the trenches of psychological warfare."

His eyes widened. "I assume you mean all of that metaphorically."

"No." She shook her head. "One hundred percent literal. I'm a customer service manager."

He laughed. If there was anything sexier than his accent, it was that quiet but heartfelt laugh, not loud enough to make a spectacle of himself, but still the sound of someone who could find humor in anything. *I'll bet he laughs like that when he's teasing a woman and making her beg.*

She shivered.

He sipped his drink. "Sounds like hell," he drawled. "I

don't know how you put up with it."

"They give me a few bucks every couple of weeks for my trouble."

He raised his glass in a mock toast. "Well, that makes it all worthwhile, doesn't it?"

She laughed. "I don't know if it makes it all worthwhile. You never told me earlier, what do you do?"

"I design equipment for operating rooms." He paused. "Well, that's not entirely true. I'm part of the *team* that designs it. I mostly work on the logistics of integrating with existing equipment and all of that other nonsense."

"So if I'm ever having surgery and something goes wrong, I can blame you?"

"If it goes wrong, they weren't using my equipment."

"Touché."

He chuckled. Then he folded his hands on the table and leaned a little closer to her. "I have to be honest, I've been doing the online thing for so long, I haven't been out with someone I've just met in a long, long time."

"I know the feeling," she said, smiling. "I'm used to going out with someone and at least knowing something about them first."

"Who knew the internet would render normal, civilized dating obsolete?"

She laughed aloud. "There's nothing normal or civilized about dating."

"Then you, my dear, have been dating the wrong men."

"In that case, I suppose you've been dating the wrong women, if you're still single."

"Touché." He winked and her heart skipped. Picking up his glass, he said, "I've actually only been dating again for the last couple of years."

"Divorced?"

He nodded, sucking on an ice cube for a moment. "Twice, actually."

*Oh shit. That's never a good sign.* "Hoping the third time's the charm?"

"Eventually," he said. "I'd like to get married again someday, I'm just not about to rush back into it."

"So, what happened, if you don't mind my asking?"

"First wife and I were young, stupid, and didn't understand what being married really meant." He shrugged. "So we went our separate ways."

"And the second time?"

"Second wife and I married for the right reasons and divorced for the *same* ones."

Kat cocked her head. "Which were?"

He smiled. "We got married because we were in love and wanted to make each other happy. We divorced because we loved each other enough to know that we couldn't make each other happy. We both wanted very different things out of life."

Kat shook her head. "For someone who's been married twice, you sound remarkably..." She trailed off, trying to find the word.

"Not bitter?"

"Yes, that."

He laughed and shrugged. "Nothing to be bitter about. Live and learn. It wasn't easy, but I don't regret it."

She smiled as she picked up her drink. "That's quite refreshing, actually. I think every man I know who's worn a wedding band in the past would just as soon never hear the word marriage again."

"Maybe that's it, then," he said with a sly smile. "I never wore my wedding rings."

Kat choked on her drink.

He laughed. "Sorry, sorry, I should've waited 'til you swallowed."

She snorted with laughter, trying to clear her throat.

His cheeks colored a little and he rolled his eyes, chuckling. "Okay, you know that's not what I meant."

Kat took another drink, then wiped her eyes. "What can I say? I have a dirty sense of humor."

"So I see." He grinned. "Not a problem, so do I."

"Good," she said. "Then we'll get along great."

"I think we will," he said with a nod. "So, same question. Ever been married?"

She shook her head. "I was engaged once, for a few months."

"So what happened?" he asked, picking up his drink.

"I decided a three carat engagement ring wasn't big

enough."

It was Blake's turn to choke on his drink. As he coughed, he gave her a horrified look, which she met with a laugh.

"Now we're even," she said.

"So we are." He coughed one last time before taking another drink. "Okay, so what really happened?"

"Same thing as your second marriage," she said. "Just wanted different things out of life."

The conversation meandered between topics, continuing through and beyond dinner until the restaurant was getting ready to close.

As they walked through the mostly empty parking lot, he fished his keys out of his pocket and clicked the remote. A few cars down, the taillights on a silver Jaguar flickered.

"A Jag?" she said, grinning at him. "Very nice."

He smiled and shrugged. "I'd be content with something a bit more understated, but a friend talked me into it."

"Your friend talked you into a Jag?" She laughed, admiring the sleek sports car. "I could think of worse things."

He chuckled. "That's what I get for going car-shopping while my friend's in town. I swear to God, I think he flew here from Scotland just to twist my arm into this thing."

"I need more friends like yours," she said. "I take it he drives one, then?"

Blake nodded, brushing a phantom piece of dirt off of the car's immaculate bumper. "His is black, though. Silver's easier to keep clean."

She admired the Jag for a moment, then glanced at her own car and wrinkled her nose. "Mine's a bit anticlimactic compared to yours."

At that, he grinned and slid an arm around her waist. "I didn't ask you out because of your car," he said softly.

She let herself be drawn closer to him. There was still a little space between them, much more than there had been on the dance floor the night they met, but that was a different time and place. A few inches of distance meant something completely different in a deserted parking lot than it did on a crowded dance floor.

His other hand came up and gently tucked a stray

tendrils of hair behind her ear. "I'd really like to see you again."

She shivered at his touch. "You have my number."

"So you have no reservations about me using it?" He smiled, drawing her a little closer.

"Absolutely not."

"Then I will use it." He tilted his head and kissed her gently, his mouth still against hers for a moment. Then his lower lip moved, pushing ever so slightly against hers, then again, as if gently encouraging her to do the same. When she parted her lips and followed his lead, his tongue ran along her upper lip, enough for him to taste her kiss if he wanted, but he wasn't going any further until she invited him. *My God, he even kisses like a gentleman.*

Her arms went around his neck, pulling his body closer. His fingertips brushed beneath her jaw, creating a gentle shiver. The tip of her tongue slid under his, drawing it between her lips. As the kiss deepened, his fingers ran through her hair and the hand on her back pulled her closer. Gentleman or not, he made sure she knew exactly what she was doing to him.

"Listen, I know it's a first date," he whispered. "But if you want to go someplace else..." His lifted eyebrows finished the question.

At that moment, Chris's face flickered through her mind and guilt knotted in her stomach. She didn't even understand why she felt guilty. Because she was considering sleeping with Blake without telling him she had a regular lover on the side? Or because she would be sleeping with Blake behind Chris's back?

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

"Kat?" He touched her face.

She dropped her gaze and loosened her embrace slightly. "I, um..."

"If you don't, I won't push you," he said, the softness of his voice emphasizing the way he drawled every word. *God, what I wouldn't do to hear that accent whispering dirty things in my ear.*

She had way too many flings and one night stands under her belt, not to mention *one* too many casual lovers that she was feeling anything but casual about lately, to



hesitate this much, but something was holding her back. Better to err on the side of no.

She wet her lips. "I can't."

His body relaxed against hers with an ever so slightly disappointed breath. "I would like to see you again, though."

She smiled. "Absolutely."

After a good night kiss that almost—*almost*—convinced her to change her mind, they parted ways.

As she turned the key in the ignition, her lips still tingled from Blake's kiss. It occurred to her then that this was the first time she hadn't spent the whole date wondering how soon she could call Chris for a "well, no luck tonight" booty call.

She wasn't sure just how she felt about that.

## ***Twenty Six***

"You're not going to use this to blackmail me someday, are you?"

"Don't give me a reason to blackmail you," Kat laughed as she unsnapped her bra and watched him adjust the settings on the video camera. "And this will stay our dirty little secret."

"Just remember, you're in it too." He pushed a couple of buttons and eyed her over the camera. "So anyone who sees me, sees you."

"Well then you know your secret is safe with me," she said, lying back on the bed.

"Why? Are you saying you'd be embarrassed if the whole world saw me fucking you?"

She grinned. "Well, can you blame me?" She winked and he rolled his eyes. "I can't believe you talked me into this."

"Oh, yeah, really had to twist your arm there." He chuckled and joined her on the bed.

She batted her eyes. "You did!"

"I did not." He set the camera beside them and lay over her, kissing her deeply as his cock pressed against her thigh. "Unless of course you don't want me to fuck you."

"I didn't say that." She ran her nails down his back, grinning as he shivered.

"So then I don't have to twist your arm." He nibbled the side of her neck and cupped her breast as he rested his weight on one arm.

"Not to fuck me, no."

He lifted his head. "You really *are* okay with this,

aren't you?"

"Absolutely." She smiled. "If I wasn't, I never would have let you anywhere near me with that thing." She nodded towards the camera.

"Good," he said, kissing her neck again.

"Now get a condom on and fuck me."

"Absolutely not." He took her nipple between his teeth, flicking it gently with his tongue.

"What do you mean, absolutely not?" She moaned and squirmed as he sucked her nipple. "Chris, don't fucking tease me..."

"It's not teasing," he said, kissing his way across her chest to her other nipple. "It's foreplay."

She wriggled beneath him. "But I want you inside me."

"And I want to document my incredible foreplay skills for posterity." He glanced up and winked at her. "Now get that camera rolling or I'll have to start all over."

She felt around on the bed for the camera, wondering if she'd even remember how to use the damned thing. He picked it up and put it in her hand.

"Red button is record," he said, his voice vibrating across her belly as he kissed his way down.

She furrowed her brow, trying to focus as his soft kisses destroyed her ability to think, let alone work any kind of electronic equipment. *Red button, red button, red button.* After a moment, she found it: The bright red button that was right in plain sight.

She turned it on and trained the camera on him just as his head dipped between her thighs. "Oh God," she moaned, her hips lifting off the bed as his fingers slipped inside her.

"Like that?" he said against her clit, his voice reverberating through every nerve in her body.

"I love it," she moaned.

"Good, because I love the way you taste," he growled.

"I can't promise these shots will be all that steady," she said, gasping as he closed his lips around her clit. She put a hand over her eyes, the other holding the camera, hopefully pointed in the right direction. "That's...*ooh*..."

The hand holding the camera dropped to the bed as

her other went to his hair to pull him against her pussy. She just felt too damned good to care what the camera saw or heard. All she wanted was the release his mouth promised her, and with each delicious circle of his tongue and gentle beckon of his fingers, he brought her closer.

"Just like that," she moaned. "Don't stop, don't...ooh, God..." His fingers moved almost imperceptibly inside her, adding just a hint of extra pressure to her G-spot, and she was over the edge.

When she could finally breathe again, she said, "Fuck me, Chris. *Now*. I can't wait."

"Then I won't make you wait." He brought himself up and kissed her deeply, letting her taste herself on his tongue. Breaking the kiss, he reached for a condom and sat back to put it on.

As he did, she remembered the camera that was still in her hand. Propping herself up on one elbow, she giggled and zoomed the camera in on Chris as he rolled the condom on. "And here we have Chris putting a condom on, because we always play like responsible adults."

"Don't film that, what's wrong with you?" he laughed.

"Anything you do can and will end up on film, my dear," she said. She leaned forward, putting the camera inches away from his cock. "Look at that technique—smooth, but fast, clearly an expert. Why, Christian, one would think you'd done this before."

"Give me that thing," he said, pulling the camera out of her hand.

"I was about to say the same thing," she said as she laid back. "But I wasn't talking about the camera."

He chuckled. "Oh, I'm going to give it to you, all right. Now get on your knees."

"What? You don't want my face on camera?" She gave him a playful glare before she sat up and shifted onto her knees.

"Of course I want your face on camera," he said, running his hand up and down her back and making her shiver. "But I want to get a shot of this angle first."

"I suppose I can let you fuck me this way, for art's sake," she said.

"For art's sake, my ass," he laughed. "You love it this

way and you know it." With that, he steadied her hip with one hand and thrust his cock into her. Keeping his hand on her hip, he moved slowly, pulling all the way out before pushing his cock in as deep as he could.

"Now you can finally see what I get to see," he whispered breathlessly, the humor in his voice replaced by a low, unsteady current of lust. "Jesus, Kat, you just don't know how hot this is..."

"Tell me," she said.

"I'm going to do better than that, I'm going to show you," he said. "Oh my God, this is fucking gorgeous."

"You'll show me later," she said, biting her lip as her breath caught. "I want you to *tell* me now."

"You want me to tell you?" he growled.

"Yes," she moaned.

The camera beeped and a second later, Chris shifted his weight. He set the camera down a safe distance away from them on the bed. Then he leaned over her, moving only from the hips now as he kissed the back of her shoulder. His hand slid down her arm before coming to rest on the bed. With his free hand, he gathered her hair and draped it over one side of her neck.

"When I fuck you like that," he whispered against the back of her neck as he slowly pushed into her. "I can watch your pussy take every last inch of my cock..." The tip of his tongue made a tiny circle at the base of her neck, making her gasp. His lips barely leaving her skin, he said, "And when you come, I can see every shiver..." His free hand snaked around her hip. "Every goose bump..." Two fingers circled her clit and he sucked in a breath as she arched her back against him. "Until you throw your head back and *scream*."

She whimpered, digging her fingers into the bedspread as the first quivers of an orgasm rippled up her spine.

"But there's one thing missing this way," he said, kissing the side of her neck. "I can't see your face when you come." His fingers moved away from her clit. "Get on your back."

He started to pull out but she moved with him, grabbing his hand to keep it on her hip.

"I want you on your back." He nipped her shoulder.

"I want..." She gasped as he slid deeper, then pulled

out again. "I want you to fuck me." Another gasp as she thought he was going to pull the way out, followed by a relieved moan when he pushed back in. She took a breath. "Just like this."

"You feel incredible this way," he said, his lips brushing her ear. "And you're fucking beautiful this way." He withdrew slowly, holding her hip so she couldn't follow him. "But the way you look when you come..." He kissed her shoulder, pulling out enough that only the head of his cock remained inside her. "...Christ, I could come just thinking about it." He slid back in just a little, just enough to take her breath away. Nuzzling her neck, he pleaded, "Kat, let me watch you come."

The desperation in his voice melted her resistance. Unable to speak, she nodded and pulled forward, letting him withdraw all the way. She turned over and they both sank to the bed together. Kissing her deeply, he took a few quick, deep strokes, then whispered, "I want the camera to see you come too."

"I don't care who sees it," she moaned. "Just...keep...fucking me..."

"I want you to see it," he said. Sitting up, he pulled her hips up against him and reached for the camera. "I *have* to get this on tape," he said. "You just..." He let out a long sigh as his cock slid deep into her. "You just don't know how gorgeous you are when you come."

Holding her leg against his hip, he fucked her faster, leaning back just enough to angle his cock *perfectly* against her G-spot.

"Oh my God," she cried. "Oh fuck, Chris, that's..." She sucked in a breath, closing her eyes as intensity overwhelmed her. "Don't stop...don't stop..."

"I won't stop, baby, I won't," he said, his voice strained. "Fuck, just watching you this way is gonna make me come."

She didn't speak, didn't even try. The only thing she managed to do was draw one last, ragged breath and whimper softly before everything went white. She was vaguely aware of Chris moving faster inside her, of his voice telling her how good she felt and how fucking amazing she looked when she came. Then his body shifted and a moment

later, both hands grabbed her hips and he slammed into her, thrusting harder and faster as his voice crescendoed from a deep growl to a throaty roar.

With a shudder, he exhaled and eased himself down on top of her. "Oh my God, that was hot," he said, kissing her jaw.

"We didn't get a shot of your face when you came, though," she said.

"Well damn, you're right." He kissed her lightly. "Maybe we'll have to do another take."

"I think we should. As many takes as we have to."

"Of course," he said. "This video has to be perfect. Porn star perfection."

"Then we should get started again." She nudged his shoulders. "Come on, take two. Action!"

He stared at her incredulously. "Give me a few minutes, you damned slave driver."

"Okay fine," she said, rolling her eyes with mock exasperation. "You have five minutes."

He laughed and let his head fall onto her shoulder again. "Give me ten, and I'll make it worth the wait."

"Deal."

## ***Twenty Seven***

The chessboard was set up, black and white pieces arranged into neat rows and ready for battle. The wine rack was fully stocked, as was Kat's nightstand drawer.

The only thing missing was Chris.

Kat kicked back on the couch and turned on the television, scanning the movie channels for anything that would kill a few hours. Not that a few hours would be enough. Chris was out of town on business for the next two weeks.

She let out a long breath, wringing her hands as she tried to think of something to do. The range and the batting cages were still open for a few hours, but weren't nearly as much fun alone.

*I could go to bed early, but that's not nearly as much fun without him either.*

She groaned. Was she really this pathetic? Chris was gone for a couple of weeks and suddenly she didn't know what to do with herself?

It occurred to her that David was on the same trip, so Natalie was probably free. Kat wrinkled her nose. She loved Natalie to death, but the last thing she felt like listening to tonight was her friend prattling on about how miserable it was when David was out of town.

She didn't want to listen to Natalie's theatrics, and if she commiserated, then her friend might catch on that there was something going on with Chris. Natalie and David had suspected for years that they were secretly dating. It had even become a running joke amongst their group of friends. Their longstanding suspicions were a perfect cover for what was going on, but if Natalie noticed that Kat really was pining for Chris, she might catch on.

Tapping her toe on the coffee table, she looked around her apartment, wondering if her CD's needed alphabetizing,



or laundry needed folding, or if she should start on her tax return a few months early.

It occurred to her that she could go through the boxes of Dylan's things in her spare bedroom, but that was just too depressing to think about. Going through his apartment with her parents and sister was more than enough. Those boxes had been untouched since the week after the funeral, and they were just going to have to stay that way for a while.

She shoved all thoughts of her brother's death out of her mind. She wasn't nearly deep enough in a bottle—or three—of wine to think about that. *Oh, wouldn't that be a pleasant night? Diving into Dylan's things while I'm pining for Chris—wait, I am not pining for Chris, I'm just bored and horny.*

"Fuck this." Swallowing the lump in her throat, she got up off the couch and went into her bedroom to change clothes and go out. She wasn't sure where she was going or what she was going to do, but she wasn't staying home. Too much in her apartment reminded her of people that weren't here, so she didn't want to be here either.

But of course, before she could decide what to wear and just how much to make herself up, it would help to decide where she was going and with whom. She groaned aloud. *I'm really getting pathetic.*

She laid across the bed on her stomach and propped herself up on her elbows as she scrolled through her cell phone.

"Let's see who tonight's victim will be," she muttered, starting at the bottom of the list and working her way up.

*Stella? No, she won't be able to get a sitter on short notice.*

*Raye? She's probably out with Joe.*

*Jennifer? Gina? Deidre?*

Every name prompted reasons and excuses why this or that person wouldn't be available, or she didn't want to hang out with them, or—

Her thumb stopped.

*Blake.*

She chewed her lip and her stomach tied itself in knots at the thought of calling him, but couldn't think of a reason *not* to call him. Except, of course, for the fact that if an

evening with him went south, she didn't have her booty call to fall back on.

She stared at his number, trying to work up the courage to call him. For the life of her, she couldn't decide if she was afraid that he would or wouldn't be available.

She couldn't put her finger on just why, but the very thought of getting together with Blake always unsettled her. It wasn't that *he* made her nervous. Quite the contrary. She was completely at ease with him, and everything about him told her he was exactly what she'd been looking for.

Yet strangely, just facing his number on her phone created an odd, uncomfortable prickle at the base of her spine, as if she knew, but didn't fully understand, that seeing him was a step towards something else. Even after a single date and a few phone calls, every bit of contact they made seemed like an irretraceable step down a road she wasn't sure she wanted to go.

*Christ, I'm turning into a commitment-phobe.* She laughed at the thought.

His number seemed to taunt her on the screen.

*Go ahead. See if you can get through a date without the failsafe fallback of Chris. Maybe you'll even get up the nerve to take Blake up on the offer he made last time.*

"Guess if it doesn't work out," she muttered as she hit 'send'. "I'll just have to take care of myself."

"Hey gorgeous," Blake said.

"Hey," she said, her cheeks burning as if she was suddenly embarrassed to have called him. "I, um, are you busy tonight?"

"Nothing that can't wait. Why?"

"Want to get together for drinks?"

~ \* ~

When she arrived at the swanky but quiet lounge, Blake met her eyes from a corner booth and smiled. He stood as she approached, greeting her with a kiss on the cheek and waiting for her to sit before he took his own seat again.

"It's good to see you," he said.

"Likewise," she said. "Sorry for the last minute invite."

He laughed. "If I minded, I wouldn't be here."

After they'd made small talk and ordered drinks, Kat

said, "So what would you be doing if you weren't here?"

His cheeks darkened. "Probably wasting another night I'll never get back playing online games with people I've never met."

"Really? You didn't strike me as the gamer type," she said.

"What? You mean like fantasy RPG's and all of that shit?"

She nodded.

"I'm not *that* kind of gamer." He scratched the back of his neck and his cheeks turned a little redder as he dropped his gaze. "Actually I'm usually playing online chess."

Kat almost dropped her drink. "You're kidding."

"No, I'm not," he said. "I'm not very good at it, but I enjoy it. So now you know my deep, dark, boring secret."

She cleared her throat and half-muffled her voice with her hand. "State chess champion three years in a row in high school."

His eyebrows jumped. "Seriously?"

Nodding, she said, "A friend and I get together and play all the time. In fact—" She bit her tongue before she could add the polite "you should join us sometime." Now wouldn't that be awkward? She cleared her throat again. "You'll have to tell me where this site is."

He leaned back in his seat, swirling his wine glass slowly as he gave her an amused look. "So you're a chess fanatic. I knew there was a reason I had to meet you that night."

"Is that so?" She grinned.

"I rather like intellectual women," he said with a smile.

She folded her hands on the table and leaned towards him. "I think chess is a bit more than intellectual, though."

Closing some of the distance between them, he sat up and let his hand rest gently on her wrist. Not holding it, just touching it. "I've always thought of it as strictly intellectual, but do tell."

"Well, I..." She stopped abruptly, her cheeks burning. It hadn't fazed her in the slightest to tell Chris about it, but the idea of describing chess as a form of foreplay to Blake made her balk. She dropped her gaze to her—their—hands. "It's really ridiculous, but..."

"I'd love to hear it anyway." His fingers moved on her wrist, sending a shiver down her spine to a place that was anything *but* intellectually stimulated.

It wasn't sharing her off-the-wall take on chess that made her uncomfortable. Kat was usually a shameless flirt, and was never embarrassed about double entendres and sexual undertones in conversations, but with Blake, every suggestion, no matter how subtle seemed to be an implicit nod, a step towards accepting...something. Something that hovered just beyond the edges of her awareness and seemed to get a little closer each time she let herself flirt with him.

*What the hell is wrong with me? Why am I trying to keep this guy, of all guys, at arm's length?*

"Come on," he said, gently squeezing her wrist. "I want to hear this." He cocked his head and smiled, the warmth of his expression creating all kinds of warmth he didn't need to know about just then.

*You're already committed, just say it.* "Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you about how ridiculous it is." She took a breath, kept her eyes on their hands, and explained her admittedly strange theory about chess, the thrill of the hunt, and its subtle way of teasing the fight-or-flight instinct. When she'd finished, she looked up at him, expecting a puzzled expression or laughter.

Instead, he took a sip of wine and slowly rolled it around on his tongue. The motion of his jaw made her chin tingle at the memory of his stubble brushing against her skin.

Dropping her gaze, she shifted in her seat and cleared her throat. "Anyway, there's my ridiculous theory about chess."

"I think you're onto something," he said.

She looked up. "Really?"

He nodded. "Absolutely. And think about it, which games are more exciting?" His fingertips ran up and down the back of her wrist. "The games that are just a few quick moves followed by an anticlimactic checkmate?" His smile turned into a devilish, spine-melting grin. "Or the games that go on for a while?"

Kat swallowed. "The longer the game, the better."

"Exactly," he said.

His thumb slid under her wrist, gently grasping it. "A fast game with a quick payoff is fun," he said, leaning a little closer. When their eyes met, before he even continued speaking, she knew the conversation had long since stopped being about chess. "But the longer the hunt..." He turned her hand over and covered her palm with his. "The greater the thrill."

~ \* ~

In the parking lot, neither made any effort to leave, and neither approached the question of whether they were leaving in one car or two. Long, gentle kisses punctuated the flirty conversation that had spilled out of the lounge and into the cool evening air.

"I'm glad you called me tonight," he said, resting both hands on the small of her back.

"Me too," she said. "I had a good time."

He smiled. "Maybe one of these nights, you'll have to show me a few of your chess strategies."

She swallowed hard, forcing herself to keep smiling in spite of her nerves. "One of these nights, I think I will."

His hands moved to her hips, not releasing her completely but loosening the embrace enough to let her know he'd caught the underlying message in 'one of these nights'. He ran his fingers through her hair. "So when can I see you again?"

"The sooner the better," she said, and she meant it. The more she saw him, the sooner she'd get over this inexplicable resistance.

"I'm traveling again this week," he said. "But I'll be back on Thursday."

"Maybe Friday night, then?"

"Sounds good to me," he said. "I'll give you a call when I get back in town, and we can make better plans then."

"Sounds good," she said with a smile.

They were both silent for a moment. Then he leaned a little closer and said, "I should let you go." He kissed her again, parting her lips gently with his tongue and slowly exploring her mouth. It was the kind of long, sensual kiss that suggested he wanted his last taste of her for the night to last as long as possible.

And it was, as she suspected, the last kiss of the evening. Moments after they separated, she was in her car and he was walking towards his, casting one final glance over his shoulder and smiling at her before he got into his own car.

As she watched the silver Jaguar pull out of the parking lot, she cursed under her breath. He probably would have agreed in a heartbeat if she'd suggested going back to her place. He was certainly aroused—and *dear God, the man isn't lacking below the belt*—when he'd kissed her, but he was following her lead.

Shivering, she debated calling and asking him to come back and follow her to her apartment. As horny as she was, why the hell couldn't she convince herself to sleep with him?

*Chris isn't here. I'm too stupid to fuck Blake even though I want him so bad it hurts.*

She started the car and put it in reverse.

*Looks like I'm on my own tonight.*

## ***Twenty Eight***

Chris sipped his beer and kept his eyes trained on the big screen TV on the other side of the pool tables. He didn't care about the game that was on, didn't even know who was playing, but it gave him something to focus on rather than staring into his beer bottle.

After two long, long weeks, the trip was finally over. Just one more night and he could go home.

*Kat. God, I need Kat.* He took a long swallow of beer to cool himself down as thoughts of her—of everything he intended to do to her as soon as he had her in his arms—sent his body temperature soaring.

His other co-workers didn't seem content to wait one last night before they relieved some tension even though, of the ten guys the company had sent on this trip, Chris was the only total bachelor. Six were married, one was engaged, and two had serious girlfriends. Yet he was one of only four that *wasn't* out on the prowl right now.

Randy was in the corner getting close enough to a blonde to put his third (or was it fourth?) marriage in jeopardy. Bruce and a brunette were wrapped around each other over a pool cue as he gave the kind of lesson that his fiancée probably wouldn't be thrilled about. He thought he saw Kyle meandering towards the parking lot with a redhead on one arm and a blonde on the other. God only knew where the other guys were.

By all rights, Chris could be sampling the local cuisine and finding someone to help him spend his last night in town tangling the sheets of his hotel bed. The only woman in his life right now was Kat, and they were hardly exclusive. The whole point of their arrangement was to take the edge off of the frustration of dating.

And it worked. Chris had barely dated at all since they started sleeping together. The more he was with Kat, the

more he wanted her, and the less he wanted other women. Ever since the night she cuffed him to the chair, when he found himself surrendering to her without hesitation, no other women even registered on his radar.

*Oh, sweet irony.* The rules allowed him to sleep with any woman he wanted, but forbade him from telling Kat that he wanted her for more than just sex.

*Get a grip, Bailey. Most guys would kill for this kind of arrangement, don't piss it away.* Draining his beer, he looked around the bar, studying each woman in turn.

*Pretty. Nice breasts. Looks like... Oh, wedding ring.*

*This one's hot. Not much of an ass, though. More fun if I can grab onto her hips. Just like Kat's.*

He shook his head, cursing under his breath. *Kat isn't here. Get over it.* He continued surveying the bar patrons.

*She looks feisty. I'll bet she's a screamer. Wonder if she swears like Kat when she comes.*

*That one's sexy, but... Oh, look at those nails. She could leave a roadmap on my back just...*

He rubbed his eyes, letting out an exasperated breath. Why did he bother? Though he was free, more so than any of his co-workers, to fuck any woman in this bar that would have him, he couldn't do it.

*What can I say, Kat? You're just too damned good in bed.*

Just twenty-four hours and he could be with her again.

Twenty-four long, *long* hours.

He glanced around the room one last time, looking for that one elusive woman that stood a chance of keeping his attention off of Kat's absence for a few hours, but every woman in the room registered the same: *Not Kat.*

Sighing, he paid the bartender and headed back to the hotel.

*Looks like I'm on my own tonight.*



## ***Twenty Nine***

Kat reclined alone on Chris's couch and tapped her foot on the coffee table. She tried to ignore the clock above the television, but that was about as easy as ignoring the maddening ache inside her. Every nerve ending in her body tingled, as if they all knew he would be there soon and were rehearsing their responses to his touch.

Chewing her lip, she glanced at the clock for the thousandth time. He'd texted her as soon as his plane was on the ground, which was over an hour ago. Any minute now, he'd be there.

Kat shifted impatiently. She'd offered to pick him up at the airport, but he'd insisted on getting a cab.

"I'd take you up on it," he'd said over the phone the night before. "But we'd never make it out of the airport parking lot."

And so she waited, going out of her mind each time a car passed by outside. His street was normally quiet, but today, there must have been a car passing by every other minute, taunting her senses with the promise of *him*.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and reminded herself that looking at the clock would only make the time go by slower. She'd waited two weeks, a few minutes wouldn't kill her.

A car slowed down outside. Kat sat up straight. The muffled squeak of brakes put every one of her senses on high alert.

A car door opened. Her heart raced.

A trunk lid slammed. Her head spun.

Muffled voices exchanged a few brief words she

couldn't understand, but the words themselves didn't matter as much as the message they conveyed.

*He's here.*

Footsteps scuffed on the porch steps and Kat flew to her feet. When the front door opened and she met his eyes, the ache inside her intensified and her clit pulsed with anticipation.

Neither said a word as Chris kicked the door shut and let his suitcase and garment bag tumble haphazardly to the floor, and a second later, she was in his arms, tasting his kiss and just breathing him.

"God, I missed you," he said before kissing her again.

"I missed you," she murmured against his lips as she pushed his jacket off and fumbled with the first couple of buttons on his shirt.

"Let's get upstairs," he said.

"I don't think we're going to make it that far," she said, her voice as unsteady as the fingers that struggled with the buttons of his shirt.

"Yes, we will," he whispered. "And we should, because wherever we are when we finally go down..." He kissed the side of her neck, making her gasp when his hand slipped under the back of her shirt. "...and I fuck you like I've been dying to..." He pressed his cock against her hip. "I promise you, we won't be moving anytime soon."

"Then we'd better get up there," she moaned, grasping his shirt. "Because I'm about two seconds away from pulling you down right here."

He raised his head and grinned as he gestured towards the stairs. "After you."

They hurried up the stairs. Just those few seconds of separation were too much for her, and as soon as they made it to the bedroom, they came together in a frantic, desperate kiss.

They struggled with clothes, trying to unfasten, unbutton, and undress with hands that wanted to hold, stroke, and feel. Fabric tore and they both froze.

Chris pulled back, furrowing his brow as he looked down. Then his eyes widened in horror. "Shit, I ripped your shirt."

She grabbed his shirt with both hands and pulled it

apart, sending buttons ricocheting off the nightstand and headboard. "There," she said. "That makes us even." Before he could respond, she tightened her grasp on his shirt and pulled him down onto the bed with her.

"Oh my *God*, I love it when you're like this," he growled.

"Then I hope you're not going to leave me like this," she said, panting against his lips.

"Jesus, no," he said. "I'm going to take full advantage of it and fuck the hell out of you."

His desperate promise sent a violent shiver through her, lifting her spine off the bed as she clawed at his shirt.

"Condom," she said. "Now."

"Let's get these clothes off first," he said. She lifted her hips and he made quick work of getting her jeans out of the way. He nudged her thighs apart with his knee and she thought he was going to take care of his own jeans or reach for a condom, but instead, he moved down and kissed her hipbone. As his fingers slipped inside her, he growled. "I have been *dying* to taste your pussy again."

She wanted to protest, to beg him to fuck her *right now*, but the second his lips closed around her clit, the bedspread bunched in her hands and the violent tremors rippling through her almost levitated her off the bed. Her clit and G-spot responded to his touch as if they hadn't been touched in months, as if she hadn't made repeated efforts to take the edge off over the last few nights; it didn't matter how many orgasms she'd given herself thinking about the things he did to her. None of it held a candle to the intensity that Chris, and *only* Chris, so effortlessly created.

"Oh God, Chris, oh God..." She sucked in a breath as every nerve exploded with pulsing cold fire. "Oh God, *I'm coming*..."

He kept her orgasm going with his fingers on her G-spot even as he sat up and reached for a condom. "Fuck, I've been waiting two weeks to taste you like—"

Sitting up, she seized his shirt with one hand and kissed him, desperately seeking her own taste on his tongue as her orgasm kept thrumming at his fingertips. When he withdrew his fingers, she gasped and collapsed back on the bed.

"Oh my God," she moaned. "I missed that."

"You and me both," he said, his voice shaking as he quickly got rid of his jeans and rolled the condom on. Lowering himself over her, he kissed her neck and collarbone as she wrapped her legs around him.

He took her with one quick thrust, then stopped, closing his eyes and shivering. "Oh my God..."

For a moment, neither breathed. Neither moved. Her pussy was still electrified from her orgasm, and that single stroke was almost enough to make her come again.

Slowly, he withdrew, taking her breath with him. His arms quivered as he pulled almost all the way out, and then slid back in. He exhaled hard, his eyes screwed shut in an expression that bordered on being one of pain.

"Oh God," he moaned when he was all the way inside her again. "You feel so good."

She could only whimper in response, rolling her hips back to draw him deeper. She clawed at his shirt, desperate to touch him, to feel his skin, but what was left of his shirt was still in the way. "Too many clothes," she murmured, finally finding her voice. "Fuck, get this shirt off."

"I'm not going to argue with that." Still inside her, he sat up, pulling the rest of his shirt apart. She followed him, kissing him hungrily as she pushed his shirt over his shoulders. They both struggled with the buttoned sleeves, getting one of his hands free, then the other. Once they were both free, he put his arms around her and they fell together.

He slid his hands under her back and held her shoulders from beneath. She hooked her ankles in the small of his back, pulling him deeper as he kissed her breathlessly. They moved together, every stroke faster and harder than the last, their mouths still touching until they were both panting and moaning too much to keep kissing.

"Faster," she pleaded, her building orgasm bringing tears to her eyes as she rocked her hips in time with his rapid, powerful thrusts.

"Any faster and I'll come," he groaned. "Jesus, baby, I can't..." He exhaled hard.

Her orgasm was a breath away. "Fuck me faster," she whispered.

"I'll come if I do," he said.

"I know." She shivered, her own need for release reaching a fever pitch. "Fuck. Me. *Faster*."

He got the message. With a throaty growl, he fucked her faster as she raked her nails across his back.

Even though it had been steadily building, her orgasm still caught her by surprise. She thought she screamed his name, thought the room spun around her, but the only thing she knew for sure was that it was a tingle away from unbearably intense.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh...my...*God*..." Chris moaned, taking a few fast, uneven thrusts before shuddering against her. Then he collapsed on top of her, holding his weight up on his arms but letting his head rest on her shoulder.

In the silence afterward, she ran her fingers through his sweaty hair, the sharp releases of breath against her shoulder making her feel more alive than her own heartbeat. With the desperate need for his body satisfied, she let herself simply get lost in being close to him again.

*I'm not supposed to be this relieved that you're here.*

As the lingering aftershocks of her orgasm faded slowly, like footprints disappearing in the tide, she closed her eyes and held him. She was simultaneously unnerved and relieved.

*I wasn't supposed to miss you this much.*

She wasn't supposed to, but she did. Maybe this relationship, whatever it was, meant more to her than she thought. More than it should have. Right or wrong, being in his arms again was the sigh of relief she'd needed to breathe for two very long weeks.

In that moment, it scared her to think how close they'd come to throwing this away, along with all or some of their friendship. She cringed inwardly at the thought of how she would have felt if this had all fallen apart.

But it hadn't. She was here. He was here. One impulsive mistake in the heat of the moment could have cost them dearly, but they'd managed to sort it out and stay on track as both friends and lovers. Bullet dodged, disaster avoided.

Now all of that may as well have been a lifetime ago.

Her eyes opened and icy panic nearly made her heart stop.

*A lifetime ago?*

She quickly calculated it in her head, trying to remember how many weeks had passed since her brother's funeral.

"Kat?" Chris lifted his head and ran his fingers through her hair. "What's wrong?"

*Three...four...five...*

"Kat?" He sat up, gently nudging her to do the same.

"You okay?"

*Six...seven.*

*Seven weeks.*

A shiver ran up her spine. "Oh *shit*."

## ***Thirty***

"It could just be from stress." Kat ran a shaking hand through her hair, avoiding Chris' eyes. "It happens sometimes, if I'm stressed, and with work, with Dylan's death, with all of that."

"*Kat.*"

His gentle voice shook her into the present and she wondered how many times he'd said it. When she finally met his eyes, he said, "It could very well be any of those things, but it might not be." He nodded to the pregnancy test in her hand.

"Look, before I do this..." She looked at the blank test; as much as the very sight of it put her on edge, it was easier than facing Chris.

He touched her arm. "What?"

With a great deal of effort, she looked up. "What do we do if it's positive?"

Sucking in a breath through his nose, it was his turn to avoid eye contact. "I, I don't know. What do—"

"I can't get..." She stopped herself, gritting her teeth as tears threatened.

He squeezed her arm gently. "Then it's out of the question. If you can't, or won't, then..." Shaking his head, he made a dismissive gesture with his free hand. "You won't."

She searched his eyes for confirmation and he gave her a reassuring smile. Her voice unsteady, she said, "So what *do* we do?"

"We don't have to figure it all out overnight, Kat." His hand gently ran up and down her arm. "It took an impulsive moment to put us in this situation, but we have time to

figure things out." He nodded towards the test in her hand. "And that all assumes that it's even positive."

"Then I guess we should find out, shouldn't we?"

~ \* ~

He watched the door close behind her, then sat on the bed. He rested his elbows on his knees and, with an exhausted sigh, let his forehead fall into his hands.

This wasn't the first time he'd been through this nerve-wracking moment of truth. He and a girlfriend had had such a scare a few years back, and he'd spent a few hellish minutes outside her bathroom door waiting for a white plastic stick from the drugstore to decide his—their—fate. It was that same cornered, vulnerable feeling as being tied up and blindfolded, minus the escape route of a safe word.

She wasn't pregnant, but their relationship didn't last much longer after that. He simply couldn't shake that fear of being trapped with her. It wasn't that he was a man to run away from responsibility, quite the contrary, but he couldn't stomach the idea of being tied to *her*.

Strangely enough, the nerves that coiled in his stomach now were not that scared, one twitch away from fight-or-flight feeling he'd had before. Nervous, terrified, uncomfortable...but not trapped.

If Kat was pregnant, then he was, by all rights, trapped with her. But in his mind, to his great surprise, all he could think was that this would effectively clip the wings of a bird that had no desire to fly away in the first place.

It was that feeling, that unflinching acceptance of possibly being bound to her, that terrified him.

~ \* ~

As she washed her hands, Kat tried not to look at the test on the counter beside the sink. She needed to know, she had to know, but she didn't want to know.

Staring at her own reflection, she took a deep breath and prayed for the millionth time that Chris wouldn't resent her. She didn't want him to feel tied to her. She wanted their friendship and relationship—whatever it was or became—to be consensual. If they moved onto something beyond this modified friendship, it had to be because he wanted her as much as she did, not because of obligation.

*We've made our bed, and we'll lie in it if we must, but*



*I want him to lie with me of his own free will.*

On her way out of the bathroom, she kept a deathgrip on the test, terrified to look. At him. At the test. At anything.

His voice broke the silence. "Positive or negative?"

"I don't know. I haven't looked."

"How long does it take?"

"A few seconds. I just can't look."

The mattress creaked when he got up. She closed her eyes as he came towards her, his presence knocking the breath out of her just like it had that first night in her kitchen.

He gently wrapped his fingers around her wrist and whispered. "Then let me look."

She kept her eyes closed as he lifted her hand. Turning her hand over, he gently uncurled her fingers from around the test. When he sucked in a breath, her eyes flew open and she looked, not at the test, but at him. His eyebrows were knitted together, his lips tight but neutral. She realized then that the breath he drew was one of neither panic nor relief, but apprehension.

Almost imperceptibly, his shoulders dropped in the same moment that his Adam's apple bobbed with a hard swallow. Panic surged through her as the twin creases between his eyebrows deepened. *Is that an 'oh shit' or a 'thank God'?*

He closed his hand around hers and looked up. The corner of his mouth twitched, *upward, thank God, upward*, and she released a breath before he even said it. "It's negative."

Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her forehead. She put her arms around him and they just held each other in silence for a moment.

*Now what?* The question echoed through her mind with the same edgy uncertainty she'd expected had the test been positive. As relieved as she was that it was negative, there were still questions left unanswered. *Where do we go from here? What do we do now?*

Gently freeing herself from his arms, she met his eyes. *Chris, are you still here?*

She cleared her throat. "So what now?"

He cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

"Do we..." She paused, unsure how to even put it into words. She swallowed hard and plunged forward. "Does this change anything?"

"I think," he said, looking away and pursing his lips, his brow furrowing just as it had when he'd looked at the test. He met her eyes again. "I don't think either of us will forget a condom again." The corner of his mouth tried to pull up, and he was obviously struggling to keep his expression neutral, but his eyes begged for permission to laugh.

She smiled, and when he laughed, she did too. After a moment, her smile fell. "So do you..." She swallowed. "You don't want to stop what we're doing?"

"I don't," he said. "But if you're not comfortable with it..."

"No, no, I am." She dropped her gaze.

He ran his fingers through her hair. "Kat, we fucked up that day. Once. One time." He kissed her lightly. "It happened in the heat of the moment, and I know that neither of us will let it happen again. So yeah, I'm fine with not changing a thing."

She thought about it for a moment, then grinned. "So I don't have to twist your arm to sleep with me again?"

Pursing his lips, he shrugged. "Well, you could if you *wanted* to."

"Don't tempt me."

"I thought that was my sworn duty as your booty call."

She laughed. "That's true. It is."

He chuckled, then his expression turned serious. "You're sure you're okay with this? With everything?"

"Yeah, I am."

"Good." He hugged her, and an overwhelming but puzzling sense of relief swept over her.

*This is just supposed to be a casual thing.* She held him tighter, blinking back tears. *Why am I so afraid of losing it?*

## ***Thirty One***

Kat watched Chris in silence as he pulled his knee onto the cushion, twisting his hips so he was facing her but making no move to come closer. He rested his arm along the back of the couch, but drew his elbow back a little, as if trying to keep some distance from her. Eyes down, he stared at the vacant cushion between them.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

At that, his eyes flicked up. He pursed his lips. "I guess I was just thinking."

She mirrored his position on the couch, letting her knee encroach on the cushion that served as a barrier between them. He didn't draw back, but didn't come closer. She took a breath. "Thinking about what?"

He swallowed hard and looked her in the eye, almost looked *through* her as if he could read something she tried to hide. "This arrangement we have, this friends with benefits thing..."

Her heart pounded and her eyebrows lifted. "Yes?"  
*Please don't call it off. Please don't call it off.*

He spoke as if the words threatened to choke him. "What happens if one of us starts having feelings for the other?"

*Oh God, he knows. He knows. Oh fuck.* She cleared her throat. "Well, I..." She couldn't find the words.

~ \* ~

*Shit, she knows. I shouldn't have said anything. She probably sees right through me.* He shifted uncomfortably. "I mean, hypothetically. If it happened. Down the line."

Her shoulders dropped a little and she let out a breath. A *relieved* breath. He didn't know if that hurt or if he, too, was relieved.

She chewed her lip for a moment, looking at the cushion between them. "Hypothetically? I guess, I mean," she paused. "We'd deal with it when—if it happened, but we agreed to keep this as friends with benefits so we wouldn't fuck up our friendship."

"Right, I know."

~ \* ~

"I suppose if one of us developed feelings for the other..." She chanced a look at him, searching his eyes. "We'd have to call this arrangement off."

He nodded, watching his fingers drum the back of the couch. "You're probably right."

"I can't imagine sleeping together if our feelings were so different." *But what if we felt the same way?*

"Exactly."

"We'd be asking to get hurt." *Do you know how much this is killing me?*

He looked at her for a moment, his eyes seeming to probe her for information, looking for everything she was afraid he'd see. His voice low, he said, "So as long as we're on the same page, then we're okay."

*Are we on the same page, Chris?*

~ \* ~

Her apprehension put him on edge. Did she suspect that he had feelings? Could she hear the words that were always a breath away from coming out at an inopportune moment? *Shit, I never should have gone there. Just couldn't let it rest, could I?*

She dropped her gaze and he swore her cheeks colored a little.

His heart jumped into his throat. She couldn't possibly feel the same, could she? Every fiber of his being screamed at him to ask, to just put it out there on the table, but he bit his tongue. There was too much at stake. She'd even said that if one of them had feelings and the other didn't, they'd have to call this off. Go back to being friends.

*Go back to being friends until we get tired of the charade and one of us stops calling.*

He took a breath. "What are you thinking about?"

Her eyes met his again, her expression completely unreadable. Part of him was afraid he could see right through him. Part of him wished she could.

*I can't say it, Kat.*

She shifted her weight, her eyes never leaving his.

*Can you see what I feel for you?*

Licking her lips, she said, "I was just thinking, you know, as long as we stay open and honest with each other, we can head anything like that off before it starts." She swallowed. "You know, before feelings get to be too much."

*Too late.*

~ \* ~

He took a breath, nodding. "Right, I see what you mean."

She forced herself to smile. *Be open and honest, yes, but I can't because I'm too damned scared of losing you.*

His gaze shifted. What if he didn't see through her at all? What if he felt the same way? Her heart skipped.

*If you do, Chris, say it. I promise, I won't turn you away.*

He met her eyes again, and something unreadable in his expression held her breath in her throat. Something unspoken.

~ \* ~

His heart pounded. *Say something.*

~ \* ~

She struggled to hold his gaze. *Give me a sign.*

~ \* ~

*Can't you see it?*

~ \* ~

*Stop deluding yourself, Katrina.*

She smiled at him to break the tension. "Well, it's good that we had this talk. Make sure we're both on the same page." *God, I wish you knew.*

He returned her smile, the warmth in his expression loosening the knots in her shoulders. "Yeah, definitely."

The distance between them became unbearable. Even if he didn't know, if he never knew, how she felt, she could love him in silence. At least, whether he felt the same way or not, he was here.

Her hand slid across the cushion and covered his knee.

~ \* ~

Her nervous smile turned into a devilish grin. "And as long as we're on the same page..."

*If you only knew.* He put his hand over hers, the warmth of her skin making his heart flutter. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"If it involves being naked and sweaty, you'd better believe it."

"Then that would be a yes." He pulled her into his arms, kissing her deeply. Together, they sank onto the couch.

As clothes came off and kisses deepened, as the sounds of orgasms echoed through the apartment, as she begged him to fuck her, he wished that *just once* he could tell her he *wasn't* fucking her.

He was making love to her.

## ***Thirty Two***

With her lips still tingling from Blake's good night kiss, Kat watched in her rearview as the silver Jaguar pulled out of the parking lot. The distinctive taillights faded from view as he turned onto a side street and disappeared.

As soon as he was out of sight, Kat let out a breath and closed her eyes. Her stomach was knotted with an uncomfortable mix of giddy butterflies, puzzling guilt, and the weight of an inevitable decision that she would have to make sooner than later.

Blake was everything she wanted in a man; intelligent, funny, attractive. An accent that melted her as easily as his kiss. Divorced, but not bitter. Interested, but not pushy. A total gentleman who clearly hid a dirty side that she desperately wanted to see.

So *why* did she balk at going home with him?

She'd gone home with plenty of guys that didn't interest her nearly as much as he did, and some that had interested her. One night stands and weekend flings didn't bother her, nor did sleeping with someone on a first date. The chemistry was there with Blake, had been since the moment she met him, but still she held back.

And she simply didn't understand *why*.

She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel and stared out the windshield, focusing on nothing in particular. She wasn't cheating on Blake or Chris. Neither of them expected to be exclusive with her, and she could sleep with either of them with a clear conscience.

Still, she couldn't bring herself to sleep with Blake. After he was gone, she couldn't bring herself to call Chris.

Something about being with him after an evening with Blake didn't sit well. Their casual relationship was a backup plan for dates gone sour and evenings with no plans, not dates that were perfect except for a case of cold feet.

Two hot, willing men, and she just couldn't do it.

There was no denying what she felt for Chris, but rationally, she knew there was no point in waiting for him to feel the same way. They'd agreed to the rules, they were friends with benefits, and that was it. He simply wasn't going to be anything more, and she knew that.

Blake, on the other hand, was available. Interested. Exactly what she wanted, and probably just what she needed. So why was she so damned guarded with him?

It wasn't as if she couldn't have the best of both worlds. As long as she and Blake were just casually dating, there was no reason she couldn't keep things going with Chris. If things turned serious with Blake, though—

Her eyes flew open. Something sank in her stomach as the penny dropped.

Deep down, she was almost certain that if she and Blake continued, things *would* get serious. She'd had that gut feeling a few times in the past, and had only been wrong once. There was that level of chemistry, that 'click', that said "he's going to be around for a while". Getting serious with Blake wasn't a matter of if, it was a matter of when.

*If*, that is, she let herself get involved with him.

And she realized that she wasn't letting herself get involved with him because that would ultimately mean getting *uninvolved* with Chris. Blake was just the kind of guy she'd been looking for all along. The only thing that kept her guarded and out of his reach was the man that was out of *her* reach.

"Fuck," she whispered into the silence. She rubbed her eyes and started the car.

All along, she knew this intimate relationship with Chris would eventually come to a crossroads, a point in time when a decision would have to be made to continue as lovers or friends.

That crossroads was Blake.

And she didn't know which way to go.



## ***Thirty Three***

It was Chris's turn to go to the bar, so he shouldered his way through the thick crowd and flagged the bartender down.

As he waited for his order, a girl stepped up to the bar next to him. She was gorgeous. Probably Philipino, judging by her dark skin, jet black hair, and exotic eyes. The low cut dress she wore clung to her narrow but shapely hips, the skirt stopping well shy of her knees.

When she looked at him, she didn't accuse him of staring. If anything, her smile told him he was welcome to keep looking.

"What's your name?" he asked over the blaring music.

"Tina," she said. "Yours?"

"Chris."

They exchanged smiles, but the conversation didn't go any further. She raised one thin eyebrow, as if waiting for him to ask the inevitable question. His eyes flicked towards the dance floor, then to the table where his friends waited.

Kat wasn't looking at him, but he was sure looking at her, and guilt gnawed at him. He wanted to ask Tina to dance, but it just didn't seem right with Kat so close by.

When the bartender brought his drinks, he paid, gave Tina one last smile, and headed back into the crowd. *God, she's hot. What I wouldn't do for just one dance. One. Dance.*

On his way back to the table, an epiphany hit him so hard he almost stopped dead in his tracks.

She was obviously waiting for him to ask, so why didn't he? *I'm single, for God's sake.*

Why was he so worried about Kat seeing him dance with another woman? It wasn't as if she was any more likely to return his feelings if she knew she was the only woman in his life.

*What am I doing?*

He glanced over his shoulder. Tina was still at the bar. Maybe he hadn't missed his chance after all.

Setting the drinks and change on the table, he said, "You guys sort out the change, I'll be back." Before he could meet Kat's eyes and let his conscience talk him out of it, he went back into the crowd and headed back to the bar.

She was gone.

*Damn it.* He looked around, realizing just how futile it was to find someone of Tina's height in a crowd that thick. His heart sank. *Had your chance, dipshit, and you—*

There she was.

Across the room, sipping a martini and chatting with three other women, there she was. Blood pounded in his ears, drowning out the deafening music as he worked his way towards her. He didn't dare take his eyes off of her; in a place like that, it only took a second for someone to slip away and disappear into the crowd.

Just before he reached her, she glanced at him and did a double take, then smiled.

"Hey," he said. "Sorry, earlier, I—" He gestured at the bar. "I had to get some drinks to my friends."

"No problem." She grinned. *I knew you'd come find me*, the twinkle in her eyes said.

He nodded towards the dance floor. "Care for a dance?"

"Of course," she said, setting her drink on the table. To her friends, she said something he couldn't understand, and then followed him, wobbling a little on her stiletto heels. He offered her his elbow and she took it. She stumbled a bit on the way, but he kept her upright. It never ceased to amaze him that women didn't snap their ankles on a daily basis in such precarious footwear. His perfectly comfortable dress shoes almost made him feel guilty with the things women inflicted on their own feet.

Safely on the dance floor, he put her arms around her. As they danced, she wobbled again, this time nearly toppling

against him. At first he'd thought it was her stiletto heels, which still only brought her up to about his chest, but when he pulled her closer to keep her steady, he caught a scent that *definitely* wasn't perfume. A combination of disappointment and annoyance sank in his gut.

He didn't mind a woman who drank, but when she drank so much he could smell it on her and she couldn't stand on her own two feet, that was where he drew the line. He'd dance with her, but he definitely wouldn't leave with her, and it would be a cold day in hell before he slept with her.

Over her shoulder, he cast a glance at the table where his friends still hung out. They were all lost in conversation and drinks.

All except for Kat.

When their eyes met, her cheeks colored. She inhaled sharply and went for her drink. For a moment, she tried to immerse herself in everything going on around her, but he was still watching when her eyes flicked towards him again.

As he and Tina turned on the floor and he no longer faced the table, he couldn't get Kat's puzzling expression out of his mind.

She couldn't possibly be jealous. They had both danced with other people since they'd made this arrangement. They'd agreed they could even sleep with other people. Though he hadn't been with another woman since he started sleeping with Kat, there was nothing to stop her from sleeping with other men.

A sudden pang of jealousy tightened his chest and he gritted his teeth. Then he swallowed hard, reminding himself of the rules.

But what about that look? Was she jealous?

Of course she wasn't.

If she was, that would mean she...

*No, she doesn't Wishful thinking, nothing more.*

Whatever it was, one thing was for certain. He wasn't sleeping with Tina tonight. Jealousy, wishful thinking, or just shameless pining for Kat notwithstanding, Tina was way too drunk for his taste.

Leaning in to speak to her, moving closer just so she could hear him over the music, he was caught off guard

when the hands on the back of his neck pulled him down into a kiss. Just as she did, she lost her balance, and he held her close to him to keep her upright even as she assaulted his mouth with a vodka-marinated tongue. He quickly righted her, made sure she was more or less on her own two feet and broke the kiss, smiling at her but silently sending up a prayer of thanks for the height difference between them. Another kiss like that and he'd be too drunk to drive home.

He looked towards the table again, and his eyes were immediately drawn to Kat's chair.

*Kat's empty chair.*

*That's not a good sign.*

As the song wound down, he gently separated himself from Tina, then guided her back to her table. Once he was sure she was safely back with her friends – and her martini – he made a polite escape back into the crowd.

He didn't go back to the table. He didn't need to ask anyone where Kat had gone. Assuming she hadn't left the club there was only one place she'd go if she needed to avoid the sight of him with another woman.

His heart in his throat, he headed for the stairwell and took the steps two at a time, praying she was still there.

## ***Thirty Four***

The terrace was mostly empty, given that it was a somewhat drizzly night, but the air thrummed with the conversations of a few scattered groups and couples. Footsteps and clinking glasses punctuated the dull hum, but for the most part, it all blended together like background music, something Kat was aware of only in the sense that she would have noticed if it suddenly stopped.

A particular set of footsteps worked its way into her consciousness, the sharp, staccato click separating itself from the rest like a percussionist playing out of time.

"You disappeared." Chris's voice should have startled her, but she knew before he spoke that he was there.

"Just needed to get away from the noise for a bit." She smiled.

"I've heard that before."

"You've said it before."

"But I get the feeling that's not why you're out here."

"No more than it was why you were out here that night."

"Touché." He put his hands in his pockets. "You okay?"

*Now that you're here.* She nodded. "Yeah, I'm okay."

He touched her arm. "Seriously?" His eyebrow lifted. "So your disappearance, out into the rain, no less, had nothing to do with that gorgeous Philipino girl I was dancing with?"

"Nothing at all."

"Not even a hint of jealousy?"

*A hint doesn't even begin to describe it.* "Okay, maybe a little."

He smirked. "Now, Kat, you know I'm—"

"You're assuming I was jealous of *her*."

He laughed. "You know I'd share."

"Something that hot, you'd damn well better share."

She laughed. "Chris, really, I'm fine. It's just..." She shrugged, trailing off.

He squeezed her arm. "Kat, tell me. If there's something wrong..."

"It's not..." She cut herself off, looking away from him as she made a frustrated gesture. "I mean, I know we're not exclusive, we're not in a relationship per se, but..."

"But what?"

"I guess it's a bit weird when we're..." She paused, swallowing hard. "You know, when it's..." She ran a hand through her hair, the cool mist that had settled onto it collecting in tiny pools between her fingers. "I don't know how to describe it without sounding possessive or territorial, because I'm not. You're not mine, I don't own you, I'm fine with how we're doing things—"

"But it's hard to watch me with someone else." It was neither a question nor an accusation. If anything, she swore the words relieved some tension in him that she hadn't noticed before.

"Yeah." She paused. "Yeah, that's exactly it."

He pursed his lips and nodded, looking at the ground between them. "I know what you mean. I know exactly what you mean." They were both quiet for a moment. As they stood in silence, dark spots appeared on his shirt and icy drops landed on her shoulders while others worked their way into her hair. The dull cacophony of human interaction fell silent as everyone sought refuge indoors, but the air around them came alive with the steady, electric drumbeat of raindrops on the terrace.

Chris looked up, a raindrop landing on his face and sliding down his cheek. "We should go inside before the rain gets much worse."

Kat didn't want to go in yet, not until they were on the same page. If they were alone on the terrace, all the better. She shrugged. "It's just a little rain."

"You'll get wet," he said.

*I need to know that you won't push me away.* "Chris,

you're here." *I need to know that I haven't pushed you away.* She grinned, putting a hand on his hip to test the water. "It's much too late for that."

His eyes widened in momentary disbelief as he glanced at her hand, at the dark spots that expanded and multiplied on his shirt. She kept what she hoped was a seductive smile on her face, hoping he couldn't see the uncertainty that coiled just below the surface.

He slipped an arm around her waist. "Well," he said. "When you put it like that..." He pulled her into a deep kiss, his hands hot against her rain-cooled skin.

After a long moment, he broke the kiss and they looked at each other. Finally, he broke the silence. "Look, if it's going to cause jealousy—"

Something sank in her gut. *Here it comes. But then, why would he still kiss me? Why isn't he pulling away?*

"Maybe we should just keep our other pursuits out of each other's sight."

She tried not to let him see or feel just how relieved she was, but she was certain he noticed the sudden release of tension in her body and her mouth. "I think that's a good idea."

His fingertip raced a single drop down the front of her neck, catching it just before it dipped beneath her shirt. "Doesn't mean we can't, or shouldn't, see other people, but doing it right in front of each other..."

She nodded. "I agree."

"But the one thing I don't want," he whispered, his voice barely audible above her pounding heart and the driving rain as he leaned in to kiss her neck. "Is to stop this."

The gasp and shudder were as much from the touch of his lips to her skin as from relief, knowing that he was still there. *I'm here,* his hands reminded every inch of her skin. *I'm not going anywhere,* his lips told the hollow of her throat.

His hand drifted down her hip and she moaned as it disappeared beneath her skirt. His skin was damp from the rain, his touch a startling contradiction of hot and cold as he trailed his fingertips up her inner thigh.

"Chris..." She gasped, her legs parting at the insistence of his fingers in spite of her mind's hesitance. His soaked shirt bunched in her hands as his finger drifted lightly across

thin fabric, touching but not touching her pussy. "We can't...not here..."

"Why not?"

"Because..." She stopped, closing her eyes and exhaling as a single finger hooked under her panties.

"Because why, Kat?" he whispered, kissing beneath her jaw. "Tell me why you don't want me to do this." His fingertips slipped between her pussy lips, not entering, just teasing. "Tell me you don't want me to do this."

"I..." The reasons she thought they shouldn't faded into irrelevance as one, then two fingers slipped inside her. When his palm covered her clit, she only vaguely remembered protesting, couldn't remember why she would ever think of telling him to stop.

Her knees shook, threatening to buckle, and he shifted his weight, leaning her against the railing. The rough, cold masonry barely registered, her senses offering the coarse surface little more than a passing acknowledgement, her every nerve ending completely enslaved by the two fingers that moved almost imperceptibly inside her.

Even his lips against her neck nearly escaped her notice, probably would have had he not murmured, "I can't go anywhere until I feel you come." His voice thrummed across her wet skin, the vibration rippling down her spine to her pussy, to his fingertips, right into her G-spot.

Her hips, moving of their own accord, pushed against his hand, the pressure of his palm against her clit driving a whimper out of her. His fingertips crooked against her G-spot, beckoning her closer to the edge. Swallowing hard, she looked at him.

Water rolled from his slicked hair down the sides of his face like sweat, like tears, like the liquid desperation gleaming in his eyes.

"Chris, I..."

"Come for me, Kat." His voice was strained. Choked. "Come for..."

"I *can't*."

His fingers slowed, but didn't stop, keeping just the slightest movement alive against her G-spot. "You—what?"

"Not here." Trying to stay coherent—*sane*—in spite of what he did to her pussy, she tightened her grasp on his



shirt and looked him in the eye.

His lips tightened, an expression that told her he wasn't sure whether to be amused or alarmed. "Why not?" His fingers slowly withdrew, their sudden absence from her G-spot making her shudder. "If you want me to stop, I..."

"I don't want you to stop."

Amusement and alarm turned into confusion. His fingers stopped, neither withdrawing nor pushing deeper. "Kat, tell me what you want me to do."

Through chattering teeth, she said, "I want you to, but not here. Not...we can't...I can't..."

"Why not? There's no one here. No one will see."

"It isn't that." She licked her lips, not caring that they were already plenty wet.

"Then, what?"

A violent shudder went up her spine, nearly knocking her knees out from under her. Releasing his shirt, she put her arms around his neck. "If I come, I'm not going to be *able* to stop."

The words seemed to take a moment to register. Then, he moved closer to her, his fingers returning to their deliciously torturous place over her G-spot. "Are you suggesting," he whispered against the water trickling down her neck. "That if I make you come..." His palm circled her clit. "You'll want me to fuck you?"

"I will *need* you to fuck me," she moaned.

He raised his head, kissing her. "Then tell me, Kat," he said. "Tell me if you want me to stop."

"I don't want you to stop," she breathed. "But I don't know if *I* can."

His fingers trembled inside her, against her G-spot, and his voice was unsteady with desperation. "Give me the word, Kat." He sounded almost on the verge of tears. "Give me the word, and I will fuck you right here, right now."

There was no word to give, because the instant he said that, she was gone. She moaned something, maybe screamed it, but her voice was lost in the rhythmic percussion of the rain and the unsteady whisper of, "Oh my God, Kat, I want to be inside you..."

Through the delirium of her orgasm, she was vaguely aware of a sudden chill, a cool void over her shoulders where

his arm had been. Something rustled. A second later, he turned his head away from her neck, and the sound of ripping foil made her pussy tighten around his still beckoning fingers.

Slowly, his fingers withdrew, allowing her to breathe at last. His belt jingled and the rain, which was falling faster and harder by the second, muffled the sound of his zipper.

Still leaning on the railing for balance, she slid her panties off as he put the condom on. Neither spoke, their eyes locked as his hand moved under her skirt and pushed it up her hip. She hooked her leg around his waist, pulling him closer, not sure who was shaking more as his cock touched the outer lips of her pussy.

He was inside her. She was instantly aware of him, of the sensation of being completely filled up, but it took her mind a few seconds to comprehend it.

"Oh *fuck*," she moaned, closing her eyes and throwing her head back.

"My God, you feel good." He pushed himself deeper. "Jesus, I could..."

"Chris? Kat? Are you guys out here?" Natalie's voice pierced the thrumming of the rain, and they both froze.

"Shit," Kat said.

A male voice said, "Why the fuck would they be out here? It's pouring down rain."

Kat looked at Chris in horror as she realized David had come out onto the terrace with Natalie. They were still somewhat hidden from view as long as David and Natalie didn't stray more than a few feet from the door.

"Go out and see if they're around the side," Natalie said.

"Why me?"

"Because I don't want to get this outfit wet."

"I don't want to get wet either."

Their voices lowered as they argued. Chris laughed softly, shaking his head.

"Come on, we should go." She gently nudged his shoulders but gasped when, instead of pulling out, he pushed deeper. "Chris..."

"Let them find us," he growled against the side of her neck as he withdrew slowly, then slid back in. "Because...oh

God..."

Clinging to his arms, she glanced over his shoulder, watching the empty terrace, expecting at any moment for their arguing friends to finally step out far enough to see them. "Chris..."

"Kat," he whispered. "Look at me."

She did, then her eyes flicked towards the rest of the terrace again.

"*Look at me.*"

The words were somewhere between a growled command and a desperate plea, and the need to see him overrode her paranoia about being caught.

"Haven't you ever fucked where you could get caught?" His voice was barely audible over the rain as he took long, slow strokes inside her. "Don't you know the thrill of—"

She closed her eyes, moaning as his cock slid against her G-spot. She held on tighter, rocking her hips to draw him deeper.

"David, just go look!" Natalie said, her voice shrill with anger now. It was only a matter of time before he gave in.

Chris glanced over his shoulder, his body tensing slightly. "We only have so much time," he whispered, moving just a little faster inside her. "Now or never, Kat, it's your choice. Stop or risk it?" He thrust harder, letting her know exactly which choice he preferred.

"Natalie, it's pouring down rain, do you really think Kat would be out here getting soaked to the bone?"

"Well where else would they be?"

Kat chewed her lip, her eyes flicking in the direction of their voices. Then she looked at him, tightened her grasp on his arms, and mouthed, "*Fuck me.*"

His grin pulled into a grimace and he did just that, pounding her hard and deep. "Oh God," he groaned.

"Damn it, fine, I'll go look." David's voice was barely audible, but his intent echoed through Kat's consciousness.

"Shit," she whispered.

"I can't..." Chris's voice caught. "I can't stop."

Glancing over his shoulder, she caught sight of David stepping out into the rain, but he went left instead of right.

"He went the other way," she said.

But Chris didn't respond. His eyebrows bunched together and his eyes screwed shut as he thrust faster, harder, and when his cock twitched inside her, when he sucked in a breath as his eyes flew open, she knew the roar that was coming would give them away. She seized his wet hair and pulled him into a passionate kiss, muting his cry to little more than a muffled whimper.

"They're not over there," David shouted at Natalie.

"Then go look over there."

"I am. Jesus Christ..."

Chris shuddered one last time and broke the kiss, looking over his shoulder. "Shit." He pulled out and fumbled with his clothes. "Fuck, *fuck!*"

"Turn around and lean over the railing," Kat said, quickly straightening her skirt.

"What?"

"Just do it."

"There you guys are, Jesus Christ." David cocked his head, eyeing Chris. "What the fuck are..."

Kat put a finger to her lips and held her other hand up. She gestured at Chris, then pointed at her temple.

David grimaced. "Ouch."

Keeping her voice as low as possible, she nodded. "Yeah, I didn't want to leave him out here like that."

"Yeah, good, okay," David said. "He gonna be okay?"

Chris glanced over his shoulder at her, giving her a puzzled look and Kat quickly said, "I'm going to take him home in a few minutes."

"Okay, sounds good." He gave Chris one last concerned look, then headed back inside. Kat waited until she could no longer hear Natalie demanding to know if he'd found them.

Once she was sure they were gone, she turned toward him. "All clear."

"Quick thinking," he said, laughing as he got rid of the condom, tossing it into a nearby trash can, and fixed his clothes. Then he kissed her. "Told you almost getting caught was hot."

"Okay, I'll give you that. But *getting* caught? Not so much."

"Yes it was. And we didn't *quite* get caught."

"Okay, you're right." She kissed him again. "In fact, all it did was make me hornier."

He put his hands on her waist. "Is that so?"

"Yes. And since it's your fault, you get to do something about it."

He grinned. "Such as?"

"Take me home." She kissed him. "And fuck me until you *can't move*."

## ***Thirty Five***

By the time they made it back to Chris's house, Kat was still aroused as hell, but the heat of the moment had cooled enough to let her body realize just how cold her wet clothes were. Her teeth chattered and she hugged herself as he unlocked the front door.

"Cold?" he said.

"Very."

"Me too. Shower?"

"Oh God, that sounds like heaven."

As soon as they were in his bathroom, they peeled clothes off as quickly as their cold, trembling hands could manage. One shirt made it onto a towel rack to dry, but everything else fell forgotten to the floor. Laundry and a wet floor didn't matter nearly as much as getting warm and close.

In the shower, the hot water stung her cold skin, but she barely noticed it beside the gentle warmth of Chris's hands. Water spilled from his hair down the sides of his face like the rain had earlier, and just like they had on the terrace, his eyes smoldered with desire.

His kiss alternated between sensual and frantic. One second he seemed content to just taste her lips and the tip of her tongue while his hands drifted all over her body. The next second, he devoured her, inhaled her, touching her so desperately she swore she could feel the way he ached for her.

Her need for him was no different. His hard cock against her hip made her tremble with desire to have him deep inside her. His kiss made her weak, and she wanted his

mouth on her pussy, but that meant breaking the kiss for more than a second, and she simply couldn't do that.

He leaned her up against the wall, the cold tiles making her gasp and arch her body towards him. He put his hands behind her back and pushed her back against the tile, the contrasting cold wall and warm hands making her shiver.

"Jesus, Kat," he whispered, touching her face as he kissed her again. "There's so much I want to do to you right now." He kissed her lightly, tried to pull away and speak, then kissed her again. Eventually, he managed, "I want to taste you..." Sliding a hand down her back, he pulled her hips close to him so she could feel how hard he was. When she gasped, he said against her lips, "I want to put you up against the wall..." Another kiss. "Bend you over something, anything..." A longer kiss. "Throw you down on the bed..." Even longer kiss. "And fuck the living hell out of you..."

She moaned, digging her fingers into his shoulders and pressing her hips against his cock.

"But I can't." He groaned softly, then kissed her again. When he managed to speak again, brief, light kisses punctuated his speech. "Because I just. Can't. Stop. Kissing you."

"Chris." She struggled to speak. "Chris, I *can't wait*."

"Then we'd better move this to the bedroom," he breathed, reaching behind them to turn off the water. They didn't bother drying off. Kissing and touching the entire way, they stepped over their wet clothes, stumbled across the bedroom, and finally fell into bed together. Her clit tingled with anticipation as her back hit the bed, knowing she would have him inside her soon. When the nightstand drawer opened, she had to bite her lip to keep from whimpering.

"I have never, not once," he whispered. "Wanted to be inside someone as badly as I need to be inside you right now." He tried to tear the condom wrapper, but his shaking hands hindered him. "Damn it." The second time, he got it open and went to roll the condom on, his movements so frantic they bordered on clumsy. "Sorry," he muttered, his cheeks darkening a little.

She smiled and sat up. "Nothing to be sorry about." She grasped his hands, stilling them. "I love it when you're so turned on, you shake." Her hands weren't much steadier

than his, but she guided his fingers and they rolled the condom on.

"I'm always this turned on when I'm around you," he said, his voice as unsteady as his hands.

"I've never seen you like this," she said, putting her arms around his neck.

"You do this to me." He paused, kissing her as he lowered her to the bed. "Every time. Every fucking time."

The tip of his tongue met the underside of hers, drawing it into his mouth while his cock slid into her as slowly as humanly possible. His entire body quivered, but still he moved slowly, giving her his cock so gradually she swore he hit every nerve ending inside her one at a time, letting each and every one react to his touch.

"Oh God," he moaned, his voice trembling as if he was on the verge of tears. A shudder ran through him, making his cock twitch against her G-spot, and still he slid deeper.

When at last he was all the way inside her, he stopped. For a moment, he was simply *there*. Deep inside her, unmoving, barely breathing.

He touched her face with a shaking hand, breathing in short, shallow gasps as he looked into her eyes. When he lowered his head to kiss her, she closed her eyes, and as she did, squeezed a single hot tear from the corner of her eye.

Without breaking the kiss, he withdrew from her just as slowly as he'd pushed in, igniting sensations so intense they bordered on painful.

They were both completely silent except for their breathing, their bodies moving so slowly and fluidly that the bed didn't even creak beneath them. Even when their lips separated with a gasp, or because they were simply too overwhelmed to remember how to kiss, they were silent. There was nothing that could be said that would give justice to everything he did to her; anything she tried to put into words would be an understatement.

Or, she realized in some rational pocket of awareness that still glowed in the back of her mind, she might say entirely too much.

Something deep inside her gave a simultaneous sensation of exploding and collapsing in on herself. Her body shook violently, lifting her spine off the bed as her lungs



screamed for air that was just out of reach. The world around her disappeared into a shower of white light as the powerful orgasm he gave her went on and on and on.

Chris's voice trembled. "Oh God, Kat, oh God..."

She opened her eyes, blinking through the white sparks and the blur of tears to see his face. He gasped, shuddering against her, but still he took long, slow strokes, grimacing as he tried to stay in control even while he *lost* control. His eyes flew open and locked on hers.

He sucked in a breath and moaned. "Oh...*God*..." Only then did he break eye contact, throwing his head back and screwing his eyes shut as he released a throaty groan, drove himself all the way inside her in one stroke, and came.

Holding himself up on quivering arms, he looked down at her. His shoulders rose and fell with his deep, rapid breaths, but when their eyes met, his breathing slowed. So did hers. It wasn't for lack of need for air—her lungs still screamed for oxygen—but the look in his eyes simply made it hard to breathe.

Through the blur of her own tears, she was certain his eyes were wet too, and his stunned, disbelieving expression echoed exactly what she felt. What the hell was *that*?

## ***Thirty Six***

Chris absently trailed his fingers up and down Kat's arm. Her head rested on his shoulder and her arm was draped across his chest. Her slow, even breathing told him she had long since gone to sleep, leaving him alone with his thundering heartbeat.

Over and over, he replayed their entire evening together. The more he relived it in his mind, the less he could believe it had really happened. And if it had, that he'd survived it.

He knew what it was like to be so overcome by lust for someone that he didn't care who saw or what broke, he needed to fuck her. Right here, right now, can't wait, *now*.

He knew what it was like to feel so strongly about a woman that her touch moved him almost to tears.

But never in his life had he experienced both with the same woman, let alone in the same night. She'd driven him out of his mind with lust on the terrace, then brought him to tears as they made love in his bed.

*What are you doing to me, Kat?*

Even in his most primal, aroused moments, when he'd been driven to the edge of madness with desire, he'd never been the type to do something like what they did up on the terrace. There were simply too many opportunities to get caught. His rational side berated him for giving in to temptation like that, for doing something that reckless.

He'd never been the type to do something like that, but he'd also never been *that* turned on. Even now, the thought of her out on that terrace with her saturated blouse clinging to her skin, her hair stringy and disheveled and rain

drawing makeup down the sides of her face like ink tears gave him goose bumps. She probably thought she looked like hell. He thought she looked like living, breathing sex.

Reckless though it may have been, he could think of nothing he'd ever done with *any* woman that held a candle to the sex they'd had on that terrace in the pouring rain.

The sex on the terrace was hot, but what about what had happened *after* that?

Even now, hours later, an uncomfortable, unsettled feeling gnawed at him. He closed his eyes and let his mind relive every second of it, from the first kiss in the shower to the last shuddering orgasm in bed. Just thinking about it made his eyes sting with renewed tears.

When she came, he swore she'd had tears in her eyes too, but by the time he'd blinked his own away, she had too. They hadn't spoken of it, hadn't approached the question that seemed to hang in the air between them.

*What the hell was that?*

He sighed, staring up at the ceiling. Whatever it was, whatever had happened, something had changed.

No, it hadn't changed. It had been there for some time. All along, maybe. If anything, a wall had come down tonight, a wall he'd put up to keep himself from admitting what he felt for her. He'd agreed to keep this casual, that their relationship was friends with benefits. Nothing more.

Listening to her breathe beside him, he wondered how long this would last before she saw right through him. Or before he finally confessed, since they'd agreed a long time ago that if anything started developing beyond friendship, they'd discuss it. Nip it in the bud. Keep things the way they were, or rein it back to platonic friendship. He'd agreed to that because the choices were 'friends with benefits', 'friends', or 'go our separate ways'. There was no option for 'lovers in every sense of the word'. He'd taken the first option because it was as close as he could get to what he really wanted but didn't dare ask for.

He let out a long breath. This wasn't what he'd bargained for when he agreed to the rules in the beginning. He knew then that there was a possibility he could develop feelings for her. He knew that was a risk.

He'd never imagined he'd feel like this, because up

until tonight, he'd never known it was possible to feel like this.

Resting his hand on her arm, he looked down, his eyes just barely registering the suggestion of her shape in the darkness. He kissed the top of her head and she murmured in her sleep. She stirred, and then was still.

He ran his fingers through her hair.

*What would do if I told you I loved you?*

## ***Thirty Seven***

Playing with the edge of her menu, Kat stared at the vacant chair on the opposite side of the table. She chewed her lower lip, running the toe of her shoe up and down the table leg just to settle her nerves.

Something had changed last night.

Chris wasn't wrong to suspect that she was jealous of the girl he was dancing with, but their agreement to keep their future flirtations out of each other's sight had done little to comfort her. They both knew they'd be seeing—and likely sleeping with—other people, and it was only a matter of time before something got serious. When it did, they'd go back to being friends. No hard feelings, no strings, just friendship, just like before all of this started.

Folding her hands on top of her menu and taking a deep breath, she wondered if continuing this arrangement was such a good idea after all. Maybe it was time to talk to him about it. Then they could either let the emotions happen, or go back to being platonic friends before one of them got hurt.

But she didn't know if she *could* go back to the way things were before. She couldn't erase the things she knew about him now, or the way she felt about him.

She couldn't pretend that last night in the rain wasn't the hottest thing she'd ever experienced. Nor could she pretend that the way they'd made love afterwards wasn't the most intimate, sensual, powerful, intense, *emotional* sex she'd ever imagined.

*Fuck. This is not going to end well. Why am I doing this to myself?*

Regardless of how she felt, the rules were rules, and all this arrangement was doing was keeping her an arm's length away from happiness. She was sexually satisfied beyond her wildest dreams, but emotionally frustrated.

Something had to give.

"Sorry I'm late, traffic was a nightmare." Blake's gentle southern accent and warm smile brought Kat back into the present as he took the chair across from her.

She returned his smile as he reached across the table and clasped her hand. With a sweet, attractive, *interested* guy like Blake, what on Earth was she doing getting hung up with the one that was out of her reach?

"You look great tonight," he said with a grin, glancing down at her blouse before looking up and winking. Most men came across as sleazy when they so blatantly looked that way, but the shudder that his gaze sent through her was anything but unpleasant.

"Are you saying I looked like hell the last few times?" she asked, smirking.

"Absolutely not." He lightly drew his fingertip across the back of her hand. "I'm just saying you look especially good tonight."

"Likewise" Meeting his eyes, letting his gaze and gentle touch melt every nerve ending in her body, she knew it was time to stop kidding herself. A man like this wasn't going to wait around forever and Chris wasn't going to be hers in this lifetime. Better to lose one than both, and Chris would still be there as her friend.

*Tonight, the wall comes down.*

She leaned forward, hoping he couldn't see how nervous she was. "So, tell me about your latest trip."

The conversation meandered to various safe, mundane topics, but there was nothing mundane about the smoldering gazes he sent her way or the way he touched her hands.

His eyes lit up when he found out she was a gun enthusiast, but when he licked his lips and ran his fingertips across the palm of her hand, she couldn't even remember what kind of gun she owned.

"I'm not distracting you, am I?" he drawled.

"Yes, you are," she said. "But please, carry on."

"I don't know if I should," he said, slowing the gentle

motions of his fingers. "Or you'll never finish a sentence."

"I'll manage."

He laughed. "So you were saying...?"

She blinked. "What was I saying?"

"You said you have a Sig Sauer forty-five." He was obviously amused by his ability to throw her off. "And what else?"

She closed her eyes as his finger drifted to the heel of her hand. "And a Winchester Model Seventy."

His eyebrows lifted. "Impressive. Competition or recreation?"

She shrugged. "A little of both, but I don't compete as much as I used to. So what about you?"

"I sold a few last year, but I still have—" His speech halted and he jumped as she ran the toe of her shoe up the inside of his leg. Then he grinned at her. When her toe found his knee, his fingers wrapped around her ankle and he gently pulled her foot onto the bench beside him. She shivered as his fingertips ran up and down her shin, then back to her ankle.

He glanced down and did a double take. "A tattoo?" His thumb traced over it and he grinned when he looked up. "Very sexy."

"I have more."

"Oh really?" He glanced down at the anklet, then back at her. "How many more? And where?"

"One on my other ankle, and the other two..." She winked. "Are a bit less obvious."

He swallowed as he let go of her ankle. She pulled her foot back, letting it run alongside his leg on the way down.

Pausing to take a drink, he said, "So then I guess that answers my question about whether or not you like tattoos."

"I love them."

"So do I." He leaned forward, reaching for her hand. His thumb ran up the inside of her wrist. "Maybe if you show me yours, I'll show you mine."

Nervousness and excitement mingled in her gut. "I've shown you one of mine."

"And I'd show you one, but I can't show them off in polite company."

"Then tell me about one of them."

He laughed. "Actually, I can show you part of one." He gently freed his hand from hers and unbuttoned his shirt sleeve. "I just can't show you the whole thing here."

Kat craned her neck as he rolled the sleeve partway up his forearm, revealing a kaleidoscope of colors and abstract designs forming a sleeve. "How far up does that go?"

"It's a full sleeve," he said. "All the way up to my shoulder."

She had to bite her lip to keep from telling him she couldn't wait to see the rest of it. "How many more do you have?"

"Nine, if you count each sleeve as one."

"You have them on both arms?"

"Well, the left one isn't quite finished, but yes." He winked. "However, you can't see that one until I see another of yours."

"Fair enough."

He opened his mouth to speak, but stopped when her other foot ran up the side of his leg. He looked down and wrapped his fingers around her ankle. "Barbed wire," he said, nodding with approval and shooting her a devilish grin as he let her foot go. "I thought you had a bit of a wild side."

"You don't know the half of it," she said.

Folding his hands on the table, just inches away from hers, he leaned towards her and whispered in his mouthwatering southern drawl. "You're right, I don't. But I want to."

She sucked in a breath, blood pounding in her ears as the words made her clit tingle. She put a hand over his, willing herself to breathe as his hands parted, then closed around hers. Chris's face flickered through her mind, but she pushed those thoughts aside.

*The wall comes down. Now.*

She let her fingers lace between his. "Maybe if you show me yours," she said. "I'll show you mine."

~ \* ~

Blake slid his arm around her waist as they walked out of the restaurant. "I had a great time, as always."



She smiled. "So did I." She laced her fingers between his on her hip. He glanced at her, his warm smile making her knees weak.

"Where are you parked? I'll walk you to your car."

"Actually, I took the bus here from work. I was..."

"I can take you home, if you'd like."

She wetted her lips, wondering whose home he meant. "Are you sure?"

His fingers pressed into her hip and drew her a little closer. "Any excuse to spend some more time with you."

"Thank you," she said.

They didn't speak for the entire walk to his car, which was a block or so away, but the unasked question was there, crackling in the air between them. Flirting and touching with nerves of steel was easy in the safety of a restaurant. Now the moment of truth was approaching in the form of a silver Jaguar parked up ahead, and her heart pounded.

*It's not cold feet. It's just the first time with someone new.*

But, as they both went around to the passenger side of the car, she knew it was more than that. She'd had plenty of one night stands and flings without these nerves. This was that gnawing, uncomfortable feeling that she was standing at a crossroads and had to choose a direction.

Blake opened her door, kissing her lightly before she got in. Then he went around to his side, started the car, and paused. She held her breath, wondering if he was going to ask now or if he'd wait for her to invite him in when they arrived at her apartment.

He put his hand on the brake and was about to release it, but stopped. "I was going to wait until I dropped you off..."

*Here it comes. Will I? Won't I?*

He swallowed nervously, then smiled. "But I've been waiting all night for this." He put his arm around her shoulders, leaned across the console, and kissed her. After only a second of hesitation, she slid her hand around the back of his neck and let herself get lost in the gentle intensity of his kiss.

Blake broke the kiss, but still held her close. Running his fingers through her hair, he whispered, "I don't want to rush you, but if you want to, I don't live far from here..." His

eyes finished the question.

Her heart pounded. *This is it. This is the crossroads. Chris or Blake?*

*Blake wants me the way I wish Chris wanted me.*

*Getting hung up on Chris is a dead-end street.*

He swallowed. "If you don't—"

"I do." She kissed him and whispered, "I want to."

## ***Thirty Eight***

Blake unlocked the door and held it open for her. The house was dark except for the otherworldly turquoise glow from an aquarium on one side of the living room, but she wasn't interested in getting a better look at the shadowy suggestions of furniture and décor. Everything that held her interest in his house was behind her, closing the door and turning the deadbolt.

His hands closed gently over her shoulders. He didn't pull her back to him, but instead seemed to use the contact to draw himself closer to her, the warmth of his body sending a shiver up her spine. His fingertips coaxed the sides of her jacket into his hands and he slid it over her shoulders and down her arms. One hand left to, she guessed, put the jacket aside while the other snaked around her waist. There was a quiet intensity in the way he touched her, the way he breathed against her skin, and it raised goose bumps all over her.

*This*, some distant voice in the back of her mind declared as Blake led her across the short expanse between the door and couch, *is going to be hot*.

~ \* ~

Chris sank onto the couch, drumming his fingers on the armrest. He tapped his foot against the coffee table and looked around the deserted living room. It had been so long since he'd spent a Saturday night at home alone, he didn't know what to do with himself.

He was almost certain Kat wasn't going to call that night. She seemed pretty taken with this guy. It was only a matter of time, assuming she hadn't slept with him already.

Not that it was any of his business.

His gaze swept around the room and paused at his desk. The video camera was next to the computer, still plugged in from the other night when he'd burned their video onto a DVD so she could have a copy. He couldn't help but grin as he pushed himself off of the couch and went to the desk.

~ \* ~

Kat exhaled through parted lips as his stubbled chin grazed her skin. His fingers wandered into her hair and she let her head fall back, giving him more access to her neck. His hand cupped her breast through her shirt, but it wasn't enough. She wanted his skin on hers. She grasped his wrist and moved his hand down.

He tensed, his lips stopping their exploration of her neck. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she whispered. "I just want..." She put his hand on her hip and guided it under her shirt.

A warm breath of laughter just below her ear made her shiver. Gently pulling his hand away, cupping her breast through her shirt again, he lifted his head. He kissed her gently, then looked at her, his lips pulling into that smile that caught her eye the night she met him. The faint blue glow of the aquarium gave his face an oddly surreal look, deepening the shadows beneath his jaw and cheekbones, heightening the sparkle in his eyes.

Trailing his fingertips down the side of her face, he whispered, "You wanted to wait."

"I did," she said, sliding her hands under his shirt. "But now I don't."

The backs of his fingers trailed along her jaw and he tilted his head, leaning in to kiss her, but pausing just long enough to whisper. "But maybe now, I want to make *you* wait."

~ \* ~

Looking at the DVD in his hand, Chris pursed his lips. It seemed wrong somehow to watch it alone, without Kat, but wasn't that the whole point? Wasn't that why he'd burned a copy for her? They'd both agreed never to show it to anyone else, but she hadn't forbade him from watching it alone.

And, if nothing else, it was as close to Kat as he was going to get tonight.

He put the DVD in the player, picked up the remote, and dropped onto the couch again.

~ \* ~

Kat's bra went slack around her shoulders. Blake trailed a finger along her collarbone, hooking it under her bra strap and gently drawing it over her arm. His fingers went into her hair as he lowered her onto the couch, his mouth never leaving hers as they sank together onto the cushions.

"My God, I've been wanting you since the day I met you," he murmured, barely breaking the kiss. His hand drifted over her hip and coaxed her skirt up her thigh. She took a breath as his fingertips nudged her knees apart before traveling slowly up the inside of her thigh.

"You didn't mind waiting?"

His tongue parted her lips again, the tip meeting hers briefly, as if he only wanted a quick taste. "Absolutely not." As his fingers slipped inside her, he kissed her neck.

She closed her eyes, moaning softly.

~ \* ~

Chris leaned forward as Kat closed her eyes, her soft moan sending shivers up his spine and making his cock twitch. But it wasn't just the fact that she was aroused. Like never before, her face fascinated him. Or maybe it was just that he could look without worrying about her noticing him staring.

Only her face was visible, the camera paling her complexion, but not completely obscuring the flush of arousal that darkened her cheeks and neck.

Every nuance of her facial expressions mesmerized him. The way her eyebrows pulled together in the same moment that her lips parted. When her eyes flew open as she gasped, and she looked past the camera, as if focusing on nothing, he was certain there were tears in her eyes. She pressed her lips together, wetting them, sucking her lower lip into her mouth as if she could taste what she was feeling on her own lips.

Unconsciously, he licked his own lips, remembering the sweetness of her pussy on his own tongue in that moment as she inched closer to orgasm. His thumb absently

ran up and down his index and middle fingers, shuddering at the memory of her pussy tightening around them.

~ \* ~

"Bend your fingers a little, just..." *The way you always do*, she almost said, remembering just in time that she wasn't with Chris. She was with—

Her eyes flew open. She was with...

*Holy hell, what is your name?*

Not Chris.

Chris knew just how to touch her inside, how to find her G-spot like he'd put it there himself. Guilt tugged at her gut, withering her arousal. *How can I forget his damned name?* She'd occasionally been so turned on that she'd forgotten her own name, but she wasn't that turned on now, she certainly remembered her own name, and she couldn't *forget* the name of the man she wanted.

*Blake.*

It finally came to her, but the relief that followed didn't extend to her conscience.

~ \* ~

Something sank in Chris's gut. He picked up the remote and turned off the video, looking away before her image disappeared from the screen. He needed her, but not like this. He needed to be closer to her.

Closer than the television would let him get.

Closer than the rules would let him get.

Closer than *she* would let him get.

~ \* ~

"Wait." She gently pushed his head away. Pushed *him* away. "Stop. Please."

"What's wrong?" He put his hand on her arm as they both sat up. He didn't try to push her backward, it was simply an affectionate gesture, a need for contact.

"I can't, I'm sorry." She swung her legs over the couch and smoothed her skirt as she reached for her blouse.

He picked her bra up off the table and handed it to her. "Kat, if I'm doing something wrong—"

"No, no, you're not." She avoided his eyes, blinking back tears as she put her bra on. "It's not that. I just..."

His hand gently rested on her thigh and she was thankful he'd chosen to touch somewhere that was covered

by clothing. It probably wasn't accidental; Blake was a sweet guy, a gentleman. That was why it killed her to do this, but it was why she had to do this. He deserved better than a woman who couldn't remember his name.

"Blake, I'm sorry, I'm just..." She pulled her shirt on. "I just can't." Chewing the inside of her cheek to keep from breaking down, she looked at him. She owed him that much.

He swallowed hard. "Okay," he whispered. "I'm not going to make you do something."

"Thank you," she said.

He cleared his throat. "Come on, I'll drive you home." He started to stand, but she caught his arm.

"No."

"But, your apartment is halfway across town," he said.

"I know." She stood and took a deep breath. "But... I'll get home. Don't worry about me."

He said nothing, but stood and walked her to the door. By all rights, he could have cold-shouldered her. Handed over her purse and coat, pointed her towards the door, and advised her not to let it hit her on the way out.

But that wasn't Blake. He held her coat for her, then held the door, every act of undeserved kindness killing her a little bit more.

On her way down the porch steps, she realized the door hadn't closed behind her yet. She stopped and looked over her shoulder. He leaned against the doorframe, his expression unreadable.

"Do you want me to call you?" he asked.

She looked at the walkway for a moment, then back at him. "Do you still want to call me?"

He paused. "Yeah, I do."

She smiled softly. "Just give me a couple of days."

"I will. Good night, Kat."

"Good night." She turned to go as he disappeared into the house. Not sure how she felt about the fact that the metaphorical door was still open, she turned her attention to getting home.

~ \* ~

Chris watched his cell phone on the table, trying to will it to ring. He hoped Kat was having a good time, but damn if he didn't wish she would call. It was tempting to go into the

kitchen and grab a beer, but that off chance, that inkling of a chance that she might call, told him to lay off the alcohol.

Just in case.

~ \* ~

A block or so away from Blake's house she dug her cell phone out of her purse. She really didn't want to pay for a cab. The buses weren't running this late at night. She still had just enough pride that it would be a cold day in hell before she showed up at Blake's door and said that, on second thought, she'd like a ride.

But there was still Chris.

~ \* ~

Chris rested his elbows on his knees and steepled his fingers in front of his lips. Try as he might, he couldn't stop looking at that damned phone.

It was after eleven, well past the time she usually called. He sighed. It wasn't going to happen, not tonight.

*Whoever you are, you are one lucky, fucking bastard.*

~ \* ~

She stared at his number.

Booty call, friends with benefits, whatever he was, Chris was first and foremost her friend. She knew he would come get her if it was two in the morning with a foot of snow on the ground.

And God knew she wanted him that night. She wanted him *bad*.

She wanted him in ways she couldn't even begin to explain to him, because they'd agreed not to go there. But how long could she really pretend that she didn't feel this way? Sooner or later, something had to give.

Swallowing hard, blinking back tears, she hit 'send' and waited for the other end to pick up.

~ \* ~

Sighing, he picked up his silent phone and headed into the bedroom to call it an early night.

~ \* ~

"Emerald City Taxi Service?"



## ***Thirty Nine***

"Your move."

"Um, Chris?"

"Hmm?"

Kat cleared her throat and gestured at the board.

"What?" he asked.

"I *can't* move."

He looked at the pieces. Then he startled as enlightenment evidently struck him. "Oh, right." He paused. Still looking at the board, rather than giving her his usual smug, triumphant grin, he quietly said, "Checkmate."

"Are you okay? You never miss a chance to let me know I'm in checkmate."

His eyes darted up and she wondered if she was imagining the sudden flush to his cheeks. Sighing, he ran a hand through his hair and sat back on the couch. "I guess I just wasn't paying attention."

She snorted. "That doesn't do much for my ego as a chess player if you stomped me that easily without paying attention." *But then, I'm not here either.* Her laughter faded. If he was as distant as she was, she wondered if he was in the same *place* she was.

She took a breath. "More wine?"

He shook his head. "I'm okay. Thanks, though."

"I'm going for a refill. Don't go anywhere."

At this, he laughed, though half-heartedly. "I won't."

She smiled, hoping to prompt him to do the same, but was met with only a hint of a smile that didn't extend to his eyes. Picking up her wine glass, she headed into the kitchen.

She chewed her lip as she got the wine out. All day long she'd tried to psych herself up for this, to talk herself into this, to work up the courage to finally tell him the truth

about how she felt about him. She'd fully expected herself to balk when the moment presented itself, but she hadn't accounted for this.

His demeanor puzzled her. From the moment he'd walked through her door that evening, he wasn't himself. He was a million miles away. Not cold or standoffish, but not warm and welcoming like he usually was. It wasn't the irritable, sniping attitude that signaled an impending migraine. Playful, witty Chris was suddenly reserved and quiet. Distracted.

Or maybe she was just more attuned to it tonight. Maybe he was always like this, and her perception was amplified by her own need to be closer to him and her fear of telling him what she needed to tell him.

Drumming her fingers on the wine bottle, she wondered if Chris had caught onto her desire to be closer to him. Maybe he was pulling back, countering her advance with enough of a retreat to keep the distance between them unchanged.

She sighed as she poured her wine. Rules were rules and he was playing by them. Still, rules didn't change what she felt for him. Ever since she'd walked out of Blake's house the other night, she could think of nothing but Chris and everything she couldn't deny feeling for him.

Even if it meant ending their casual, sexual relationship, he needed to know. She couldn't lie anymore.

Filling her glass a little fuller than necessary, hoping that extra bit of liquid courage would be enough, she put the bottle down and headed back into the living room. His eyes met hers and she was suddenly certain she'd need the rest of that damned bottle. *No, I can do this. I can't fake it anymore. Rules be damned, this has turned into an entirely different game.*

But what little confidence she had, what little certainty she had that she could confess her feelings to him tonight, sagged as she eased onto the couch across from him. If ever she worried how receptive he would be, it was now.

He gave her a puzzled look, apparently noting that she hadn't taken her place across the board from him. "You don't want to play another game?"

She shook her head. "I don't think either of us is focused on the game tonight."

He swallowed. Wishful thinking or fear, she couldn't be sure, told her it was a nervous thing, an uncomfortable, uncertain reaction. More than ever before, she couldn't read him at all.

He didn't speak. Neither did she. They both silently waited for the other to say something. Do something. Take a step in *some* direction.

Kat could strategize chess moves with just about every possible result mapped out in her mind, anticipating everything that could and probably would happen. This strange, uncomfortable quiet that hung between them now defied strategy and calculation. A simple but wrong move could throw their friendship into checkmate, leaving them with no choice but to admit defeat and move on. The right move could advance them to something more, something *much* more, but still there lay the possibility for more wrong moves.

She had no idea what to say.

Maybe this transcended the need for words. Taking one last sip for courage, she set her wine glass on the coffee table and turned to him. He looked at her with an expression that seemed to mirror what she felt: nervous, uncertain, and scared to death.

She put her hand on his knee. He looked at her hand, then at her, then back at her hand.

*Your move, Chris I need to know if we're still playing the same game.*

His hand covered hers, that simple touch lighting up every nerve he'd ever aroused in her body.

When their eyes met and his fingers interlaced with hers, every doubt she had about how she felt disappeared. *I have never been more in love with someone than I am at this moment.*

His eyebrows lifted slightly.

She swallowed hard. *My move.*

Ignoring the way her heart pounded and her hands threatened to shake, she moved across the couch towards him. Relief swept over her as he met her halfway, his free hand touching her face just before their lips met.

The tenderness of his kiss pushed her apprehension aside. There would be time to talk later. Words could wait. For now, she'd let their bodies do the talking.

Drawing away for a second, he took his shirt off and dropped it to the floor. Then he pulled hers off and tossed it aside, the rattle of disturbed chess pieces barely registering in her consciousness over the soft whisper of his breath on her neck. He pulled her down on top of him, putting his arms around her as he kissed her neck, her jaw, her lips, then back down her neck.

She arched her back against his hands as they sought the clasp on her bra. Everything about his touch was perfect. Incredible. Somewhere amidst the intoxicated confusion of arousal, clarity worked its way into her mind. *This is where I belong.*

His fingers stopped trying to undo her bra. They retreated, drawing across her back to her shoulders, down her arms, and there they stopped.

There was something odd about the breath he released against her neck. It was a long, heavy exhalation, not a sigh of arousal or a hiss of frustration.

It felt and sounded...*resigned*.

Alarmed, she raised her head. "Chris, what's..." She stopped when their eyes met. He quickly closed his eyes and looked away, his lips thinning as his brow knitted together. She shifted her weight onto one arm and touched his face, her blood running cold when he flinched. "Chris, what's wrong?"

At that, he looked at her and exhaled. There it was again, that sigh of resignation. "I can't do this."

She blinked. "What? What do—"

"I'm sorry, Kat. I can't." He started to sit up, so she moved to give him room.

She was stunned into silence until he reached for his shirt and keys. "Chris, what's wrong?"

"I just can't." He pulled his shirt on as he rose.

She stood. "Wait, can't we talk about this? Have I done something wrong?"

He paused, his jaw tightening, but he didn't look at her. "No. No, you haven't done anything wrong." When he finally looked at her, the pain in his eyes was palpable. "Kat,

I'm sorry. I can't."

And he was gone.

The front door clicked shut, the sound echoing through her apartment. Outside, a car door slammed. A moment later, the engine turned over and she listened to its muffled hum until it faded into the distance, leaving her with only the sound of her own heartbeat.

In the silence, she shivered, the cold emptiness of the room settling in on her bare shoulders. She picked up her shirt, holding it to her chest like a life preserver.

*I wonder if this is how Blake felt.*

At that, the tears came. It wasn't just guilt at hurting Blake, but the realization of what Chris's departure meant.

*Whoever you are, you're the luckiest woman on the planet.*

## ***Forty***

At least a hundred times on the way to work, Kat considered calling in sick. She didn't feel up to breathing, let alone facing a job that already threatened to put her blood pressure into quadruple digits. It was the last place she wanted to be.

That wasn't entirely true. The last place she wanted to be was home. Alone. Surrounded by Chris' absence.

When she got to work, she vowed to make it to the end of the day. By the time she made it to the door, she'd bargained herself down to 'make it to lunch, play the rest of the day by ear'.

Numb and exhausted, she trudged into the office, staring at the floor and avoiding eye contact with anyone who might want to talk to her. Either they'd want to give her more crap to do, or they'd ask what was wrong. She was sure she looked like hell. After a few restless hours of sleep, she'd put herself together as best she could, but there was only so much she could hide from the scrutiny of fluorescent lights. A quick glance at her semi-transparent reflection in an office window confirmed that she looked awful.

*At least I don't look as bad as I feel.*

She slipped undetected through the gauntlet of potential conversations and dropped into her office chair with a relieved sigh. Shoving her purse into a drawer, she looked at the mess of crises littering her desk. The stack of reports. The blinking voicemail light. The sticky notes and file folders that had materialized since she'd gone home last night, each with scribbled messages in varying degrees of urgency. Her phone was still on 'do not disturb' mode, and judging by the

number of lines already lit up, it would start ringing off the hook the second she switched it back to 'available'.

She sighed.

*Only eight hours and I can go home. I can do this.*

As she eyed the mess, Bill walked into her office, a thick file folder under his arm.

*Okay. Ten hours.*

"Good morning, Katrina," he said, his joints cracking as he sat in one of the chairs facing her desk. He pulled his ankle onto his opposite knee, cradling the file folder in the crook of his bent knee as he leaned back in the chair.

*Twelve hours.*

"Morning, Bill," she said, sipping her coffee.

He drummed his fingers on the file folder, but eyed her. Whatever it was he'd come to talk about was in that folder, but his expression suggested that something else had crossed his mind that he wanted to address first. His pre-planned discussions were lengthy, but if he suddenly veered off on some impromptu tangent, his filibustering was second to none.

*Oh God, I'm in Purgatory.*

She put her hands together on the desk in front of her, assuming a prayer position that was much more deliberate than Bill probably realized. *Kill. Me. Now.* "So, what can I do for you?"

The drumming slowed, but his eyebrows tugged together above his nose. *Here it comes.* He cocked his head and pursed his lips, the last sign of an impending speech. Tapping his fingers on the file folder as if it were a podium, he drew a breath. "You know, even though this office is generally a call center, we do have customers come through on occasion."

Kat nodded, unsure where he was going with this. "Right, I know."

"And as such, we want to keep up our best appearances. You know, let them know we're a friendly, *professional* group."

"Of course." She wondered which of her call center employees had worn a too-low shirt this time. Or a pair of shoes that didn't quite fit the company's definition of 'business casual'. Perhaps came in with a hairstyle that,

while stylish on the club scene, was considered 'bed head' in the workplace. *Which one of you do I have to strangle for getting Bill into my office?*

His eyebrow lifted and he looked right at her, but said nothing.

She swallowed hard. He was waiting for her to say something. This was one of Bill's little games. He decided who spoke next in a conversation, regardless of whether or not he'd finished explaining what it was about in the first place, and they'd better have the right answer. *Damn it, Bill, don't do this to me right now, I do not...*

Her spine straightened as she recalled her reflection in the window earlier. The red eyes, dark circles, and alarming pallor she'd tried to cover with makeup. Clearing her throat, she dropped her gaze. "Bill, I'm—"

"I've got enough problems with customer service reps coming into my call center hung-over, disheveled, and looking like they were out partying all night." His scrutiny hardened into a pointed glare. "I expect more from you, Katrina. Unless you're ill, you're—"

"Bill, I am not sick, and I'm not hung-over."

His mouth twisted into a skeptical sneer. "Then—"

"Bill, honestly." She knew she was treading on thin ice by cutting him off, but there were a lot of heavy objects on her desk that might end up flying at his head if he kept going. "I just had a rough night. Didn't sleep. I'm not going to pretend I'm at my best, but it wasn't bad enough to call in sick."

She wasn't lying. The alcohol had nothing to do with the aching between her temples and the sick feeling in her gut. Come to think of it, her wine glass was still sitting on the coffee table, two thirds full of the liquid courage she'd never had the chance to use. That thought made her stomach turn.

Bill looked at her for a moment. "Well, I can't have any of my call center reps, managers included, coming in after partying all night. We can't have customers seeing it."

*Do you even listen? Why do I bother explaining myself to you?* She watched his mouth move while he lectured her, letting his endless monotone go in one ear and out the other. When he finally gave a single, sharp, self-satisfied nod to



indicate that he was done, she simply smiled and promised not to let it happen again.

Then she nodded towards the file on his leg. "What's up?"

He looked at it and his eyebrows lifted as if he'd just noticed it was there. "Oh yes. That's why I came in here in the first place..."

It was well over an hour before Bill left her office. Fortunately, most of what he said was endless repetition of simple, common sense concepts, so she could tune him out and dwell on Chris.

After Bill had gone, Kat took a deep breath and forced herself to face the onslaught of the day's insanity. She booted up her computer, groaned at the sight of a hundred or so e-mails, and set her phone to 'available'.

The maelstrom of bullshit was as relentless as it ever was, but like never before, Kat thought she was going to buckle under it. Every crisis wanted to be a catastrophe. Every caller demanded miracles. With the endless parade of people and papers running through her office, she wondered why she hadn't had a revolving door installed.

She could usually handle the chaos and confusion without breaking a sweat, but she didn't usually have to face it along with the added weight of last night on her shoulders.

*Why didn't he tell me he'd met someone?* she wondered as she checked over a report of order audits.

*Will he call me?* She paused in the middle of calming an angry customer and dug her cell phone out of her purse, berating herself for being surprised and disappointed when the screen showed no missed calls.

*Did I do something wrong?* The e-mail she was reading suddenly blurred and she blinked a few times, sniffing back tears.

Yes, she had done something wrong. Agreeing to that damned arrangement. Giving in to the temptation to kiss him that first night in her kitchen.

A tear rolled down her cheek and she quickly brushed it away. There was no sense dwelling on it. What was done was done, and it was definitely *done*. She had a job to do. She couldn't—

A muffled but shrill ring brought her back to the

present.

Her cell phone. She stared at the desk drawer where she'd put her purse, eyeing the drawer like she'd suddenly heard a rattlesnake inside it.

*Chris? Maybe?*

Heart pounding, she opened the drawer and fished around for her phone.

*Chris? Please?*

It wasn't Chris's number. Disappointment mingled with relief.

Then her blood ran cold.

*Blake.*

She stared at it, listening to it ring, but unable to bring herself to talk to him just yet. The call clicked over to voicemail, and a minute later, the phone beeped to let her know that Blake had left a message.

Her mouth dry, she dialed her voicemail.

His soft accent made her chest ache with guilt. "Hey Kat, it's Blake. I just, I wanted to talk to you. About the other night. Would you be up for drinks tomorrow night? I'll be traveling today, so leave me a message and I'll call you tonight to work something out." There was a short pause, just long enough to suggest he wasn't quite sure what to say next. "Anyway, call me. I really want to see you." He left his number, and the message ended.

Closing her eyes, she held the phone to her chest and took a deep breath. Could she really face him after what she did to him? Obviously he wanted to see her, or he wouldn't have called.

*He still wants me even after I walked out on him. Probably because he doesn't know that he wasn't the problem. Chris was the problem.*

*And Chris is gone.*

Anger suddenly flared in her chest. She clenched her teeth. *And just what the fuck am I doing dwelling on Chris?* She couldn't decide if she was angrier with Chris for leaving or with herself for letting herself get too hung up on him.

She took a deep breath. Chris wasn't gone forever. Maybe he left in the heat of the moment and would come back to sort things out sooner or later. They could salvage their friendship and move on. Whatever this mess of a

relationship was, she'd known from the beginning what it was and what it never could be.

It didn't matter how much it hurt. She had to move on, because she should never have gotten that attached in the first place.

And what better way to move on than a guy who was willing to give her a second chance that she didn't deserve?

Yes, she *could* face Blake.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she called him back, but his voice recording melted some of her courage. She left a brief, non-committal message, asking him to call her that evening.

She'd taken a step to letting go of Chris.

Moving on. Moving on to someone else.

But she didn't want to let go of Chris.

*No, I have to. I will. I'm going to.* She wiped her eyes again and forced herself to focus on the chaos that was her job until five o'clock finally, mercifully showed up.

Her desk was still piled with emergencies and insanity, but she couldn't endure another hour of this. Tomorrow, overtime. Tonight, she just couldn't take it.

On her way out to the car, her phone rang. Her heart skipped. *Chris?*

When she flipped it open though, Blake's name appeared on the LCD screen, and something sank in her gut. As the phone continued ringing in her hand, she pursed her lips. That call was her opportunity to pick herself up, make things right with Blake, and let go of what she never should have clung to with Chris.

She liked Blake. She liked him a lot.

*Ring.*

She needed to move on, but she just didn't have the heart to move forward with him. With anyone.

*Ring.*

Right or wrong, pointless or not, she was still in love with Chris.

*Ring.*

Just before the call switched to voice mail, she answered.

"Hey Blake."

"Hey." He paused. "I got your message. Did you..."

Another pause.

Leaning against her car, she ran a hand through her hair and took a breath. "Listen, I'm sorry about the other night."

"Kat, you don't have to apologize. If we're moving too fast, I don't have a problem slowing down."

"It's not that."

"Okay." He cleared his throat. "What..." A long breath, as if bracing himself for what she was going to say. "What *is* it?"

She swallowed hard. "I just don't think I'm ready for anything right now. With anyone."

*With anyone except the one who let go of me.*

## ***Forty One***

Three days after Chris left, Kat's phone rang as she walked out of the office for the evening.

*Is it Chris?* She rolled her eyes as she dug her cell out of her purse. Every time the damned thing rang, she got her hopes up, thinking it might be him, and every time, her hopes were dashed. *He's not going to call. Get over it.*

She flipped it open and stopped so fast she stumbled.

*Chris.*

With her heart in her throat, she answered. "Hello?"

"Kat, we need to talk." His tone was as unreadable as his face had been the night he left.

Relief and anger vied for dominance in her voice, but she managed to keep her tone neutral. "Okay. Let's talk."

"I'd rather..." He paused, clearing his throat. "I'd rather do it in person."

Tears stung her eyes. *Chris, I can't watch you walk out again. I just can't.* "Chris..."

"Please," he said, his voice suddenly unsteady. "Look, I need to explain what happened the other night, and..."

*And tell me all about her?* She exhaled through her nose, biting her tongue as her composure wavered.

"Kat, please," he said. "I shouldn't have done what I did the other night, and I want to explain myself face to face." He took a breath. "I owe you that much."

The lump in her throat swelled. Finally, she exhaled, her shoulders sagging. "I'm heading home now. Why don't you meet me there?"

"I can be there in an hour."

~ \* ~

She opened the door, hoping her face didn't reflect how much it hurt to see him.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey." It did hurt to see him, but it was the other ache he ignited deep inside her that made her want to break down crying. Was she really that pathetic, that she still physically craved him even now?

He nodded towards the threshold. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah." She looked down and stepped out of the way, letting him walk past. After she closed the door, they stood in silence, neither looking at the other. Part of her wanted to take this in the living room and sort it out on the couch, but more often than not, when they'd tried that, fucking preceded talking. No matter how hurt and angry she was, it didn't change the fact that Chris was living, breathing temptation, and as much as her body ached for his touch, she couldn't sleep with him again. They needed to talk about this someplace other than on a horizontal surface.

"Let's go in the kitchen," she said, heading that way before he had a chance to respond. Footsteps thudded on the floor behind her, but she didn't need to hear him to know he was following her. The air thrummed with his presence.

And as they stepped into the kitchen, she instantly regretted the choice to talk there. *Great, let's take this back to the place where we kissed for the first Goddamned time.*

She took a deep breath, shoving the memories into the back of her mind. They needed to talk, and here was as good a place as any. She spoke without facing him. "What happened the other night?"

"Look, I'm sorry."

She turned on her heel. "Don't apologize, just tell me what the fuck happened." Her own anger caught her off guard. His eyes widened and his lips parted. She chewed the inside of her cheek. "I'm sorry. I'm..." She rubbed her eyes, then looked at him. "I'm sorry. Go on."

"I didn't mean to hurt you the other night," he whispered.

"You have a funny way of trying not to hurt me."

He scowled. "Would you let me explain myself?"

Gritting her teeth, she said, "Please do."

"Listen, I didn't mean to hurt you, but Kat, I can't

keep using you for sex."

"Couldn't you have thought of that *before* you started?"

"Do you think I planned it that way?" His tone suddenly shifted from repentant to angry. "That I just deliberately got you all fired up, then walked out for shits and giggles?"

"Well, I never expected you to do anything like that at all. You never struck me as the type to get up and walk out without saying more than two words, then completely cold-shoulder me for days. So honestly, it wouldn't surprise me at this point."

His jaw tightened and he looked away. "You know me better than that."

"Do I?"

Shifting his weight, he drew a long breath in through his nose. "We agreed in the beginning that we could walk away from this with no hard feelings, right?"

A sinking feeling tugged at her gut. "Yeah, we did. But I didn't think..."

He put his hand up. "I know, I know. And I didn't think that would happen either." His expression and tone softened. "I swear to you, Kat, I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't mean for things to happen the way they did the other night, but...I can't do this anymore."

She swallowed hard. *So here it is. We agreed to this. I also agreed not to fall in love with you, but you're playing by the rules. So will I.* She nodded, forcing a neutral expression. "Okay, we'll stop."

They were both silent for a moment. Kat stared at the floor, trying to keep her composure. Even in the beginning, she knew it would be difficult to stop sleeping with him. Giving up something enjoyable was never easy. It just wasn't supposed to hurt like this.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" he asked.

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter if I am or not. We agreed that if one of us wanted to stop, we would." She met his eyes and swallowed hard, trying not to read between the lines of his expression. The way he chewed his lower lip was out of discomfort in an awkward situation, not because he was hurting as bad as she was. The furrow of his brow was

concern, not regret. And no matter how much she wished them to be, those *weren't* tears in his eyes.

She shifted her gaze back to the floor, where there was nothing for her wishful thinking to distort into a glimmer of hope. *Hope of what? That he wants to go back to being friends with benefits?*

"So what now?" he whispered.

*His voice is not shaking.* She took a breath. "I don't know. I guess we just go back to the way things were before."

He exhaled hard and when she looked up, he was staring out the kitchen window with unfocused eyes. "Maybe we should..." He trailed off.

She folded her arms across her chest to keep from shaking. "Maybe we should what?"

He dropped his gaze, chewed his lip again, then looked at her. *My God, are those tears in his eyes?* "Maybe we should spend some time apart. Give each other a few days to..." He paused, clearing his throat. "Give us both a chance to get used to being just friends again."

A lump rose in her throat. As much as she didn't want to let him go, she couldn't help but be relieved at his suggestion. A few days alone might give her some time to deal with it, be able to face him again without being this close to tears. After a moment, she nodded. "Maybe you're right."

They stood in silence, miles of distance between them in her tiny kitchen. What she wouldn't have given for the courage to tell him how she really felt about him, but she was too close to losing him altogether. The damage was done. He'd ended it. She couldn't risk what was left of their friendship.

Finally, Chris spoke, his voice wavering. "I should probably go."

She clenched her jaw as the lump in her throat rose even higher. The thought of watching him walk out that door again was too much, but having him here was even worse. The sooner he was gone, the sooner she could get used to him *being* gone. Silently, she nodded.

When he moved, it wasn't to leave. He came towards her. "Kat, I'm sorry about the other night, and I'm sorry I



couldn't keep doing this." He touched her shoulder gently, pausing as if waiting to see if she'd recoil. When she didn't, he put his arms around her.

A tear rolled down her cheek as she returned his embrace. The familiar warmth of Chris's platonic, friendly hug was lost in the cold emptiness of knowing this was as close to him as she'd ever be again. She never wanted to let him go, but she needed him to leave before she broke down.

She pulled away gently and he released her. They looked at each other in silence again, and this time she was sure that his eyes were wet. He took a breath, parting his lips as if to speak, but tightened his jaw and looked away, evidently deciding against saying whatever he was about to say. Then he pursed his lips and nodded, as if satisfied that they'd settled their differences, and turned to go.

Just before he made it out of the kitchen, she whispered under her breath. "She's a lucky woman."

Chris stopped in his tracks, his hand flying to the doorjamb as if he had to physically catch himself. He looked over his shoulder. "What?"

Kat folded her arms across her chest again and swallowed hard to keep from breaking down. "Whoever she is, she's a lucky woman." She forced a smile. Though it was sincere—after all, she wanted him to be happy—it still hurt.

He turned around, letting his shoulder rest against the doorframe. "How did..." He wetted his lips. "How do you know there *is* someone?"

"Lucky guess." She laughed softly, the only thing left to keep herself from crying.

He dropped his gaze, chewing his lip again. Then his posture straightened a little. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "Yes, there is someone."

The words hit her in the chest. It didn't matter that she knew it was coming. Hearing it was more than she could handle. *I should have let him walk out. I never should have said anything.* She cursed under her breath as a tear rolled down her cheek, and she quickly brushed it away.

He shouldered himself off of the doorframe and inched towards the hallway, but paused again. "Fuck," he muttered, running a hand through his hair and looking at the floor.

"What?" She furrowed her brow.

He raised his eyes, looking straight up as if trying to gather courage or find the words as he swallowed nervously. "I need to be totally honest with you."

She hugged herself tighter. "About?"

"About the other night." His gaze fell to the floor again. "About everything. About..." He paused. "Her."

*Oh God, there's more.* Chewing the inside of her cheek, she took a deep breath. "Go on."

"There is..." He hesitated. Leaned against the doorframe again. Kept staring at the floor. "Do you remember what you told me the first night we..." He hesitated. "When we started this whole thing, what you told me about a first kiss?"

That entire night was etched into her memory. "Yes, I do."

"How it's like you reach a point where it's not a matter of if, it's when?"

"Right."

He was quiet for a moment, opening his mouth to speak, then hesitating, as if the words refused to come. Finally, he said, "I think falling for someone works the same way. You keep moving towards each other, inching closer, backing away, and waiting for someone to finally say 'checkmate'." At that, he looked at her, pausing for a moment as if searching her eyes. "There comes that point when you know it's coming, it's just a matter of the pieces falling into place and someone saying it."

She furrowed her brow, trying to follow him. "Okay..."

His lips thinned for a moment and his cheek rippled as if he'd clenched his jaw. He dropped his gaze again. "What if saying 'checkmate' meant losing the game?"

She blinked. "What do you mean?"

He drew a ragged breath. How long would you keep playing if you knew the other player wouldn't say it, but *you* would lose if you did?"

"Chris, I don't understand."

Rubbing the back of his neck, he cleared his throat and avoided her eyes again. "Look, there is someone. And I'm in love with her. But..."

Kat turned away, covering her mouth with her hand. His footsteps reverberated through her consciousness as he

came closer, but his hands on her shoulders still startled her.

"Please, listen to me," he said. "I left the other night because I couldn't get the way I felt about her off my mind."

"Then I'm glad to know meaningless sex with me helped you figure out that you're in love with her."

"No, that's not true. Kat, look at me."

"Chris, just say what you need to say and go," she said. "This was supposed to be easy, but it's not." She sniffed, closing her eyes as another tear rolled down her cheek. "And you're not making it any easier by—"

"I love you, Kat."

Her heart jumped into her throat. She turned around, staring at him in disbelief and yes, this time there was no mistaking it, there *were* tears in his eyes. "What?"

He blinked, dropped his gaze for a moment, then met her eyes. "I left the other night because I couldn't pretend that I was having meaningless sex with you." His voice faded to almost a whisper as he looked down. "I couldn't pretend that it was ever meaningless."

"Chris..."

His voice was unsteady, but the words came quickly now. "I didn't want to hurt you, but I couldn't keep doing this. I couldn't keep pretending that this was casual and meaningless. I know we didn't want to risk our friendship by letting this turn into something more, and I thought I could do this without feeling something more for you, but..." He shook his head. "I think the friendship we were trying to protect was the very reason I fell in love with you."

Her knees shook and it was all she could do not to reach for him for support. "Chris, I..." She trailed off, completely at a loss for words.

"I didn't have to put on an act with you, Kat." He shifted his weight. His hands closed into loose fists at his sides, then opened, then closed again, as if he just needed something to occupy his hands. As if he needed to do something to keep himself from touching her. "I didn't need to try to impress you. There were no pretenses about trying to get into bed, because you'd already gotten me into bed. There was no pretending I was someone else, because you already knew who I was. You know me like no other woman has, you put up with me even when I'm at my worst, and..."

He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. "And I was afraid all this time that if I told you that, if I said 'checkmate', that I'd..." His voice cracked. "That I'd lose my best friend *and* the woman I love."

He was silent for a moment, but she had a feeling he wasn't finished, so she waited. Sure enough, after a long, quiet moment, he took a breath and went on. "So there it is. I can't keep using you, Kat, but I can't change what I feel. And if the only way I can have you in my life is as my friend, then I'm happy with that. The one thing I don't want is to lose you."

Staring at him, Kat couldn't breathe.

His eyebrows lifted, his eyes pleading with her to say something. *Anything*. There was so much she wanted to say just then, but disbelief rendered her mute.

Finally, she did the only thing she could think to do. Watching her own hand, she reached across the narrow canyon between them. The first warm contact of her fingertips on his skin made her vision blur with tears, but she blinked them back as she laced her fingers between his.

His other hand rose and the pad of his thumb gently swept across her cheek, brushing a tear away before his hand came to rest against the side of her face. "Kat, all along, I didn't want to risk our friendship with a relationship. I was afraid I'd lose you as a friend. But being in love with you is the one thing that makes me willing to take that risk."

Her shoulders dropped and she let out a breath. His confession destroyed all of her fears that he'd turn her away if she told him how she felt, and everything she'd been dying to say came rushing to the surface. Swallowing her tears, she looked up at him, opening her mouth to speak.

But when their eyes met, when she realized just how close her face was to his, she couldn't remember how.

*Are you going to kiss me?*

As she raised her chin and he tilted his head, the air between them was ablaze with the same electricity of a first kiss. It was the kind of intensity that never comes twice between two people, yet there it was.

*When will you kiss me?*

He drew her closer, his breath warming her skin.

"Chris," she whispered, her lips almost touching his.

"Yeah?"

"Checkmate."

## About Lori

Lauren is an erotica author currently living in Okinawa, Japan, with her husband and two cats.

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