

C.G.BERRY

WELCOME
TO ALEGRIA
CATHERINE'S STORY



BOOK ONE IN THE SONGS OF ALEGRIA SERIES.

Welcome to Alegria: Catherine's Story

Book One - Songs of Alegria

by C.G.Berry

*Welcome to Alegria:
Catherine's Story*

UK English and metric edition



"I can see every part of it. Wherever Alegria is, I want to go!"



"The most intensely erotic and surprising feel-good read of the year. When is the next book due for release?"



"A great story, told with integrity, compassion, humour and honesty."

C.G.Berry

Publication imprint



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Welcome to Alegria: Catherine's Story

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C.G.Berry

*Dedicated to my family; a family not defined by blood alone, but by actions, integrity, loyalty and honour.*

*My mother, Trudy, for her undying optimism; my fathers, Brian and Andy for their undying support and efforts; my sisters and brothers from other mothers for their unwavering faithfulness and humour; and my extended family, all beautiful and generous spirits from city and country Australia, Valdelacalzada and Badajoz in Spain, and many others scattered all over our beautiful world.*

*I love and treasure you all, Craig*

Welcome to Alegria: Catherine's Story

# Welcome to Alegria: Catherine's Story

IS

Book One in the **Songs of Alegria** series,

by C.G.Berry



Ruined by her now ex-husband, a sociopathic con man and predator, Catherine (Kate) has been left penniless and homeless. Her natural strength and capability shines through as she rescues herself and forges a new life with the support of two lifelong friends.

Not searching for love, she meets Dominique, an enigmatic and powerful man who recognises her intelligence and ability when she saves a project of his through fast and decisive action. Invited into his world, and welcomed into his private island paradise of Alegria, she finds herself in the company of a most unusual group of people.

A chance encounter sets off an unexpected chain of events, taking Catherine on a challenging and life-changing journey of personal and erotic self-discovery.

This is Catherine's story of courage, exploration and transformation, her song.



## Acknowledgements

Catherine's Story would not be the adventure it is without the exceptional thoughts and sharp eyes of Brian, Andrew and Bekky. Thank you for your brilliant edits, ideas and questions.

~

Others deserving of recognition remain unmentioned to protect their anonymity. They know who they are and how they've helped.

~

Gratitude also to Michelle for encouraging me to start.

~

To my wonderful band of test readers, thank you for your great feedback and critiques.



## A SPECIAL NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

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Our adventure, "Welcome to Alegria: Catherine's Story", is a social experiment in trust on my part, and quite literally represents twelve full-time months of my life. (I quit my practice and walked away from my business to write this book.) My social experiment is based purely on my trust in you, and my belief in your personal decency and honesty. Before I ask you to value my work, our adventure, I offer you the opportunity to meet the wonderful characters and experience the magical world of Alegria.

You see, I think too many author's want you, the reader, to take the risk of paying up front for a story you might not appreciate. I believe in my work, so I have chosen to trust in you, and in your integrity, and assume the risk of offering this eBook to you without asking you for a payment up front.

Instead, I offer it to you to read, and then ask you to honestly value what this adventure has meant to you. To do this, please take a moment to visit <http://SongsOfAlegria.com/value>. I ask you to decide on the value of this book to you, based on your enjoyment, learning, escape or inspiration. Most of all, I trust your integrity to do what is right. You can offer as much or as little as you feel is honest and right for you.

I also invite you to write a review and share your thoughts (links are on the <http://SongsOfAlegria.com> website) and all honest reviews are greatly appreciated. If you really can't afford what this book is worth to you, please send what you can afford, and invest some time to

write an honest review. My intent is to offer all soft-cover first releases of the six planned books in this series in the same way. To share this book with others, please share the link, <http://SongsOfAlegria.com/downloads>. I offer the following scale as a guide. Naturally, you are also able to nominate your own amount:

**\$5.00:** I enjoyed it. Thank you.

**\$10.00:** I found it a great read and enjoyed it a lot. Thanks for trusting me to share it like you have.

**\$18.50:** I loved the story and characters, and I want to go back to Alegria. Thanks for the twelve months of your life it took to write this novel and trusting me to share it like you have. Reading this was so much better than the two hours of entertainment I'd get at the cinema for the same price.

**\$25.00:** Everything above! I loved it and I appreciate the twelve months of your life and the thousands of dollars you invested in making it, and I want to encourage you to write more. Thanks for trusting me and having faith that I will honour your trust and pay you what your work represents to me.

... or purchase a physical copy from Amazon.com for \$29.95, which includes this eBook as well, with my thanks.

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Comments and feedback are also invited via the website:  
<http://SongsOfAlegria.com>.



## FOREWORD

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I invite you to experience the beautiful world and people of Alegria with me, and to hear Catherine's story, her song. If this story becomes 'our' adventure, if you feel a little 'warm' at times, or you're inspired to seek new experiences, my highest goal in writing this book has been achieved.

Reading a book should offer you the chance to escape from the everyday and mundane world. Personally, I dislike pages filled with approval-seeking technical drivel, and will not infect our story with needless detail and trivia. So that we can get on with our adventure, let us now distinguish fact from fantasy.

All locations, the plot, the characters and their histories are entirely fictitious; however, the social issues that are [lightly] touched upon are quite real. The volcanic geology of Alegria is quite plausible, with several precedents in existence around the world.

The specific scientific and engineering references, training, personal abilities, psychological profiles, methodology and the described experiences of the characters generally conform to real-world parameters and/or accepted consensus within their relevant fields or experiences.

The only un-real technical aspect of the story is the new invention, although its principles are already in use in real-world, low-technology applications.

Given the characters and references in our adventure, and out of respect for those in uniform, I

[author] feel the need to state for the record that I have not served in any military service.

Alegria is a place of beauty. At no time in our adventure will you find scenes of gratuitous violence, suffering, gore, or animal cruelty. I include swearing and violence only where it is appropriate. I contextualise ‘appropriate’ as something that would seem out of place or character if not included.

A special note for those unfamiliar with the Spanish language, the word, ‘Amiga’ may cause some confusion when it appears in our story. Amiga is the feminine word for friend, and amigo is the masculine expression. (Plurals - amigas is an all-female group of friends, but amigos may describe either an all-male, or a mixed gender group of friends.)

To my American readers, for simplicity, a metre is roughly a yard (10:11), and there are roughly 4 litres to a gallon. A US English and US Imperial measure edition will be forthcoming soon.

Some passages in *Catherine’s Story* are necessarily ‘earthy’, but I choose to minimise metaphorical or literal narrative as much as is reasonable, not because of sensitivities, but because there are only so many ways to describe a few physical specifics. For example, when it comes to sex, none of us want to read thirty different metaphors and similes for a ‘breast’ or a ‘cock’. If I am doing my job as a writer, you will know, “*her sweat formed beads upon her heaving chest as she gasped his name...*” without needing me to say it. [Yes, that was painful to write.]

The sexual experiences of the characters in our adventure represent genuine experiences and real-world intent, technique and responses. Any caring couple possessing imagination, patience, common sense and

## Welcome to Alegria: Catherine's Story

good communication should be able to replicate the described experiences. I hope that you may even be inspired to explore your own desires and pleasures after sharing our adventure.

I invite you to share in the magic of Alegria and enjoy *Catherine's Story*, her song.

C.G.Berry – 2014



Please visit <http://SongsOfAlegria.com> for more fun, learning and news.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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The city's endless traffic reluctantly yielded to the authority of the red light before a green silhouette illuminated, declaring the crossing safe for the waiting pedestrians just as a taxi roared past, a dark cloud of acrid exhaust left in its wake. City life had taught its survivors to temper such automated assurances of safety with a healthy measure of scepticism.

Kate stepped from the curb with her eyes fixed on the other side of the road, each footfall heavier than her last. Some unusual movement caught her attention; a young executive-type was rushing to make the crossing and dodging erratically around others whilst yelling self-importantly into his mobile phone.

*Too close!* she thought as he cut across an older woman's path, bumping her groceries with his shoulder and rushing on; disregarding the sounds of her fall and ignoring his culpability in it. Seeing tears already in the woman's eyes as she looked up, surrounded by her scattered purchases, a dark thought arose grimly in Kate's mind. *Someone else's day is going like mine.*

Waiting for a couple with a baby stroller to navigate the pedestrian island ahead of her, Kate watched a man in a white shirt spring from a town car that was already pulling over. He crouched by the woman's side and talked to her for a moment before helping her to her feet. Another man in a suit had leapt from the driver's seat of the car, and was already retrieving her scattered groceries.

Drawing closer, Kate overheard the man in the white shirt saying, 'You needn't worry about that any

longer, I'm sure Edison was headed right that way from here.'

In tones that were almost too earnest, his driver affirmed, 'I am going straight past your door, ma'am, and your company is most welcome.'

Watching the woman being courteously ushered towards the town car, she recalled one of her mother's favourite quotes. "*Actions speak louder than words.*" She had quietly repeated the words to Kate every time her father had demonstrated his love for them. Even though he was never quite able to say the words, his actions spoke clearly. She recalled how whenever he was home, there was always a little flower on both her and her mother's pillow every evening, even if just wildflowers from their garden. It had been their bedtime ritual; she and her mother would recite the words when they found their flowers each evening. The memories came to her mind in a happy rush.

'You have a beautiful smile, my lady.'

Kate snapped back to reality and stared straight into the eyes of the man in the white shirt, his generous smile quickly causing her face to warm. *I am smiling*, Kate realised. He inclined his head with a mischievous grin and mimed tipping his non-existent hat in farewell before turning and walking briskly into his day.

A bell rang out from the direction of the courthouse, a stark reminder to her of the reason she was in the city today. Her smile withered and died as the musical peal became a banshee's scream, foretelling her imminent demise.

Just under three and a half years ago, Silvio Schivello had promised to honour and love her until he died. He had been the man of her dreams and the love of her life. He'd told her that he wanted to grow old with

her, to father her children, and take her all over the world. Today, the sum of his treachery and betrayals were to be completed with the willing complicity of the legal system. Trudging towards the courthouse, her lawyer's words replayed constantly in her mind.

It's all gone Kate. The company's assets are all mortgaged beyond value and it can't service the debts. We could plead that what he did was unethical and immoral, but the documents are valid. You have no position left. I am so sorry Kate. There is no valid legal argument we can make. For your creditors to clear the debts, even after a forty percent write-down, there will be nothing left. Nothing at all. Why did you sign those papers?

The only answer that she could come up with, either then or now, was, 'I trusted him because I loved him. He was my husband.'

Inside the courthouse, a man in a dark suit met her with a well-rehearsed but vaguely reptilian smile. He reeked of far too much aftershave, and as Kate's day dissolved into a haze of white noise, her last clear memory of the day was of recoiling from his olfactory assault. People spoke at her, using too many words with too many syllables to explain 'officially' what she already knew. The divorce and settlement of the company debts were costing her everything; the company, her house and savings, her car, her clothes, even her mother's jewellery. Everything.

A faceless 'suit' handed Kate her old battered backpack and a round cardboard cylinder. He said to her in his cheeriest voice, 'At least you are debt free after this. You're lucky, most people end up bankrupt.' Kate only barely managed to contain her urge to slap him. The liquidator's representative had called it a gesture of good



will. Her threadbare backpack was loosely filled with underwear and a few scant items of clothing deemed “not of sufficient value for seizure” by her liquidators. The cardboard document tube held her degrees, along with certificates and photos documenting Kate's life. Of course, they had all been removed from their ‘sufficient-value’ frames.

Kate found out that for his part of the final settlement and divorce, Silvio had already signed the papers in front of a judge. She recognised the crushing and soul-destroying truth that she had been denying until that moment. *He doesn't even care enough to show up and gloat.*

Helpless, she felt herself being dragged into the ravenous crushing gears of an insatiable legal machine, an uncaring system that had little time or regard for justice. She signed next to sticky arrows marked ‘Sign Here’ and watched the lawyers, receivers and clerks greedily checking, sorting and dividing the stacks of paper. Their chatter far away and unintelligible, all she could see were vultures and jackals arguing over the remnants of her carcass. Each pounding of the clerk's official stamp sounded to her like another shot from her firing squad. Once they had picked her bones clean, they lost interest in her. They never even bothered to look her in the eye or say her name as they dismissed her with flat, emotionless smiles and generic, often-recited farewells.

Detached and numb, Kate stood shaking on the courthouse steps in the mid-afternoon sun. Alone, broke and homeless, she was unable to comprehend the horrific reality of her life's reduction to just her old high-school backpack and a tubular post pack. She could barely find the energy reserves to take her next breath in, or the will

to let it out again. Her muscles transformed into cold unfeeling lead, crushing her bones.



A coat fell over her shoulders and she shuddered deeply, registering just how cold she was. Kate blinked in confusion when she realised that the city was in deep twilight, unable to recall when that had happened. Wrapping her in a huge pirouetting hug, Dee kissed Kate playfully on the cheek.

‘Come on love. Let’s get you warm, fed and pissed,’ she said as she half dragged and half-carried Kate towards her waiting taxi.

Called Danielle by her mother, Dee was a force of nature and Kate’s lifelong friend. Only slightly taller than average, Dee had a broad, muscular physique, earned through many years of strenuous early-morning training sessions that had, until three years ago, consistently earned her places on the state and national rowing teams. Hers was also the type of hard, athletic figure that appeared a little overweight in all but the best-cut clothes.



‘To a clean start and bugger the past,’ was Dee’s first toast of the evening. She diligently kept their glasses filled with brandy and offered many other toasts that evening, all proposing increasingly dark and imaginative scenarios leading to The Prick’s slow castration and eventual demise. All of Kate’s friends simply identified Silvio as The Prick.

Later, in bed, Kate stared towards the ceiling with unseeing eyes. Despite the alcohol and her weariness, sleep evaded her. With her deepening fatigue and frustration, her tears finally came. Less than an hour before dawn, exhaustion eventually prevailed and she fell into a fitful and restless doze.



Her fatigued brain struggled to understand why the sun was in her eyes, and why a door was on the wrong side of her bed. Confused and trying to focus, she looked around the room. At that moment, the reality of the past eighteen months hit her with the cold, dumbfounding force of an avalanche. Kate trembled as she felt a weight form in her stomach, growing hotter and heavier. Her head started to swim as the memories of her nightmare pushed against her, one after the other.

She had been happily married to someone she believed to be a wonderful man. Their future assured by her inheritance; the jewel of which was an engineering firm started by her father. Under her careful and expert guidance, the company had grown steadily, making a consistent and respectable profit. All in all, life had been as close to ideal as it could be. It would have been perfect if only her friends could accept how wonderful her husband really was.

Then eighteen months ago, a letter arrived from a bank she had never heard of. *'Pay up or get out!'* was its essence. When she showed it to Silvio, he took it, assuring her that it was a scam and that he'd take care of it. Nothing more happened and life went on.

Three months later, Kate arrived home from a ten-day symposium and trade-show, excited to be home in

time for their second wedding anniversary. On the phone, Silvio had promised her a huge surprise and sounded very excited about it. When the cab pulled up to her house, she found a large van in her driveway. The men carrying her furniture out pointed her towards a man leaning on the rear of his car. As soon as she approached him, he pushed a large envelope into her hands without explanation. She opened it and her world stopped. Written by her husband's and creditor's lawyers, the executive summary of the covering letter was brutally worded and explicitly blunt! Waves of nausea and confused disbelief washed through her as the words *divorce* and *liquidation* ricocheted around in her mind.

A man's voice said her name loudly. She looked up as a voice from behind a video camera said to her, 'Catherine Jones-Schivello, you are served. You have in your hands legal documents requiring proof of possession. This video is a legal record of your receipt and handling of those papers.' Jumping into the open door of his already running car, he shouted to her through his window, 'Nothing personal, just business,' before accelerating away.

Lawyers, arbitrators, liquidators, creditor's representatives and accountants had all given her their expensive opinions in the fifteen months since. How piously the words, 'ruined', 'nothing left' and 'why did you sign those authorities?' rolled off the tongues of those billing her at \$500 an hour. How condescending their 'caring' smiles were, their fees guaranteed in advance.

Kate's lowest point was the day she confessed to her employees that the company was lost. The majority of those men had been hired by her father and most had

endured Kate's endless childhood curiosity, later mentoring her through her degrees. She regarded every one of those shocked faces as loyal friends. She had called nine of them 'Uncle' for as long as she could remember.

A molten urgency gripped her belly, pushing against her throat as it rose. Remembering the way to the bathroom in her friend's apartment, Kate bounced from wall to wall in her desperate rush. She held the porcelain tightly as her stomach made a determined attempt to turn itself inside out.

Kneeling, still hanging on for balance and panting from her efforts, she ineffectively begged the bathroom to stop spinning between each wave of nausea. When her world eventually became somewhat solid again, Kate reminded herself that combining alcohol and recriminations with total exhaustion was a spectacularly poor idea.

Emotionally and physically hung-over, dazed and already spent, she staggered into the open dining-lounge area of the large apartment. Dee stood by a window with her phone to her ear. Spotting Kate, she waved brightly and pointed to some orange juice on the table. Feeling her still writhing stomach heat and contract at the thought, Kate shook her head, holding onto the back of a chair with her eyes closed. She carefully took a deep, slow breath to centre herself as another wave of nauseous dizziness passed through her.

Dee turned away to face the window, still listening to her phone before saying, 'Dammit Sheila! You should have told me this a week ago... No. Last Tuesday. I sent the dates to you by text... We talked about them!' After listening briefly, Dee said, 'Right... I hope you enjoy

your party... No, I don't think we will... No. Goodbye Sheila.'

She pushed the 'End' symbol on her smart-phone's display. 'God, I miss real phones – ones you could slam down!' Dee looked up from her phone and her eyes locked onto Kate. 'Did you sleep? Never mind, the night's over. Nutrition first, then hot water.'

Dee pulled out a chair and said, 'Here, sit.'

Feeling beyond making even the simplest decision and with her stomach still unsettled, Kate gratefully let Dee take charge, sitting as directed. She took tentative sips of some very diluted juice whilst Dee made a few more fruitless and frustrated calls. After she took another deep breath and decided that her stomach was holding, Kate asked, 'Trouble?'

'Sheila bailed on tonight's gig. She 'misread' her calendar... again. That was her last chance. I need to find a fourth body for tonight's gig and nobody else is available. This guy is going to be the city's new mayor. He's polling at over 70% and we can't afford to screw it up.'

'Dee, I haven't done banquets since we did them at school, but it would totally beat sitting here.' Seeing the look of concern on her friend's face, she added, 'Please Dee? Let me help. I need to contribute and I seriously need something to focus on.'

Dee looked deep into her friend's eyes for a few long moments before saying, 'If you truly think you are up to it, we could really use your help.'

Dee's private function business had started only two years earlier and was quietly building a reputation for excellence. Dee's partner in life and business was Carrie, a brilliant chef whose food halted even the most intense dinner conversations. Carrie far preferred her

nickname, saying that she only ever heard Carina when she was in trouble. Their business catered to in-venue, intimate gatherings of the rich and powerful. Dee, a sommelier, took pride in perfectly matching the wines to the food and setting of each function.

‘What do you need me to do?’

‘Mainly help Carrie, give Carla a hand on the floor when the food is going out, and let me know if you see anything that might be a problem.’

‘I can do that, Dee. I want to.’

Dee looked at her best friend and reached a typically fast decision. ‘Done!’

‘Where is Carrie?’

‘She’s been at her mother’s since Sunday. She’s due back in half an hour and we have to be moving by 11:30. Katie, she’s going to be so excited to have you on board today.’

Accepting the piece of toast that Dee was offering her, Kate smiled. ‘Me too.’



Kate had been the first person Dee had come out to. It was during their last year of high school. After several hours of uncharacteristically nervous and tentative behaviour, she had nervously stammered it out. When Kate had finally decoded her confused speech and realised what it was that Dee was trying to say, she laughingly explained to Dee that she had known forever, gave her a hug, and that was that.

Dee and Carrie had fallen in love at first sight. During their second year of tertiary study, Dee and Kate had met Carrie during a rock and roll concert, and sharing a late snack after the show, they became the

three amigas. Carrie's natural inclusion into Dee and Kate's strong friendship was both instant and effortless.



Standing in the checkout queue at the supermarket, Kate was thinking about how quickly her life had turned around in such a short space of time. Kate became an essential part of every gig from that very first night, and the three months since then had simply flown by.

Her mind went back to a special breakfast only five weeks ago when, over coffee and croissants, Dee and Carrie had announced to her that she was now a full partner on an equal 25% share of the net profit. Kate knew that a 25% share went back to the business; it had been her suggestion. As far as Dee and Carrie were concerned, Kate's partnership was exactly how things were supposed to be, and they told her so.

With a smile, she remembered Carrie meeting all of her reasoned objections head-on, saying, 'Catherine Jones, it's your own damn fault. You bankrolled us and you refused to let us pay you back. We love you and you are too bloody good at your job for us to let you go, so you're our partner; deal with it. Case closed!' She had even crossed her arms and 'humphed'. When Kate blew back a raspberry and crossed her eyes in response, they all laughed and the matter was settled. Still smiling at the memories, she paid the clerk for her groceries and walked into the bright afternoon sunshine.

The amigas were enjoying two very rare days without bookings. Carrying the shopping bags into the apartment, Kate found Dee on the phone. She was saying, 'Thank you... It's our pleasure. I will call Juanita tomorrow morning and we'll be there at four o'clock ...



yes sir, myself and a business partner ... thank you ... you too ... goodbye.' Smiling wildly at Kate, she made a great show of checking that the call had ended before announcing, 'Holy-Hot-Damn! We're doing Dominique Savagewood!'

Carrie heard her happy shouts and came rushing from the kitchen to find out what was going on. Dee said to her, 'We just landed Dominique Savagewood! Saturday, two weeks' time, afternoon and evening gig for fifty-five!' They hugged and danced happily.

'Who?' Kate asked, unsure of why this gig was such good news.

'Only the dreamiest damn man alive,' Carrie said, continually surprised at her friend's lack of interest in the social pages and celebrity gossip.

Pointing to the groceries, Dee said, 'I'll put that stuff in the fridge. Get dressed my loves, we are celebrating tonight, and Alberto's is happening!'

She was physically pushing them into action with one hand whilst dialling Alberto with the other, knowing he would have them eat with him in the kitchen before he turned them away. As soon as Dee knew that Alberto had the seats available, she sent text messages to their five casual staff, inviting them to join the celebration. An evening at Alberto's was always fun and they all agreed instantly.

Halfway down her hallway, Kate realised that Carrie had just described a man as dreamy. More strangely, Dee had just stood there nodding and grinning like a smitten schoolgirl instead of objecting. *That was very odd* she thought with a shake of her head.

Kate's little black dress and work heels came to her rescue. She darted to the bathroom to freshen her makeup, determined to find out over the course of the

evening why getting this guy's gig was something so worthy of celebration.

Looking at her makeup bag, Kate smiled. Carrie had handed it to her on the morning of their first gig. A terrible fibber, she'd glowed red as she tried to tell Kate that she had 'accidentally' bought all the wrong shades and said to her, 'since I've lost the receipt, why don't you use it, Katie?'



That evening at Alberto's, Dee announced the gig to the enthusiastic cheers of their small staff. When Kate tried to find out more about Dominique Savagewood, the effusive responses she received to her questions were clearly based on rumour and social page captions.

The frustrating inconsistencies suggested that Savagewood was a late-thirties to early-fifties male, very straight but possibly gay, a monastic kind of playboy who was reclusive and 'out-there'. The only common points of agreement were that he only ever appeared in the society pages at interesting events with interesting people, and that he was gorgeous. Kate ended up settling for the notion that everyone knew of Dominique Savagewood, but nobody actually knew anything specific about him.

Alberto served food and drink to his guests with traditional old-world generosity and the evening became a happy blur for everyone. He insisted on arranging taxis for everybody who didn't have a sober driver in their party. Alberto had even spent fifteen minutes convincing the girls that the night air was still too cold for them to walk the two-and-a-half blocks home. They couldn't

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help but smile when their driver revealed himself to be Alberto's second cousin.



## CHAPTER TWO

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Waking the next morning, Kate once again told herself to go easier on the alcohol around Dee. Though sober most of the time, Danielle was capable of casually drinking most sailors under the table. Worse, she would inevitably wake up bright and smiling after just a few hours of rest, and without the common decency to be even slightly hung-over. Kate could not remember Dee ever having had a cold or being more than slightly under-the-weather for more than a day. Kate felt tight, grabbing feelings in her forehead and sinuses, uncomfortable reminders that letting Dee's unstoppable constitution set the pace was a bad idea, especially when she was in celebration mode.

Dee pounced on her as she walked into their living-dining area. She pressed a rolled breakfast pancake into Kate's hand, saying, 'Good morning sunshine,' before turning her and pushing her back down her hallway. 'We need to get going in about forty-five minutes. I will have coffee ready when you're out.'

Kate would have told her that she was a bossy bully but the savoury pancake tasted too good.

They had a simple gig booked for the following evening, but today was clear. The three amiga's Friday morning passed in a blur of menus, venues, markets, staffing and planning. Their combined energy was unstoppable, and they quickly crossed one item after another from their to-do list until just their afternoon appointment remained.

After a relaxed late lunch by the water, they dropped Carrie home to play with some recipe ideas before singing along to classic rock tunes for their 45-minute drive to the Savagewood Estate.

When Kate first saw the house from its long driveway, she was intrigued. Given the neighbourhood and the man's reputation, she'd expected something a bit more ostentatious or grand. The house was a large single-level homestead, comfortably spread out in the middle of an undulating fifteen-acre property on the outskirts of town. She saw what looked like a small motel block and a large barn, partially hidden by the rolling contours of the land, and connected to the house by covered breezeways. A greenhouse and vegetable patch were set out a short distance from the garage side of the house.

After they'd parked, a fit, solid and serious-looking older man with a twinkle in his eye met them and introduced himself as Edison. As he walked them through the kitchen entrance, Kate found that his face and name felt familiar, but she was uncharacteristically frustrated by her inability to recall how or why. He said to them, 'Ladies, I am very sorry. An unexpected situation has occurred that will require the best part of an hour for us to deal with. May I ask if it is possible for you to wait until we are able to discuss the upcoming function? That you will be compensated for your time goes without saying.'

They looked at each other before Dee turned to Edison and said, 'We have nothing else planned for the afternoon. Where would you like us to wait?'

Edison turned to a phone and pressed a series of numbers, answered instantly by some faint clicks behind the walls. Turning back, he said, 'Please feel free to

explore anywhere with an open or unlocked door. Mr Savagewood has an interesting home and he delights in people enjoying it. Please help yourselves to anything in the fridges or bars. I must beg my leave. We will find you as soon as our situation is resolved.'

Dee and Kate watched Edison leave before turning to each other, excitement on their faces. They looked around the kitchen, beautifully finished in stainless steel, tiles and timberwork. The bench areas were generous, the vents were massive and non-slip mats covered the working areas of the floor. Everything about the space rivalled the quality of any commercial kitchen they had seen.

'Carrie will love it,' they said to each other at the same time.

Dee's eyes sparkled. 'Let's have a look around. When are we likely to get a chance like this again? Let's go.'

Kate assumed her best 'indifferent and bored' look and shrugged, sighing noncommittally. Dee grabbed her arm and dragged her out. They were still giggling as they entered the main reception area.

The quality of the home was immediately apparent. There were no unfinished or patched joints visible and the parquetry floor was immaculate. Simple care and uncompromising quality was evident everywhere. This house was clearly a lived-in home. It displayed no rich trappings intended to impress, but was all the more impressive for it. The furnishings were all stylish, practical and solid. *Definitely a man's place*, Kate thought.

Beyond the reception area, they found a deep room with a small bar, two long lounges, and a billiard table. Near the window at the far end, a chessboard held a

game in progress. Pieces of art decorated the walls, hung as someone who loved each piece would hang them.

Kate's eyes widened as she recognised the names and works of many of the artists. Her real surprise was finding all of the pieces signed with variations of, 'To my great friend, Dom.' Kate knew artists rarely did that, especially for works like these. Peering closer, Kate saw that some of the older pieces were dedicated to Dominique Sr.

In hues that almost hid each letter, the next piece said above its signature, 'To Dom. Thanks for being there.' She shook her head and took her time to look carefully at each painting.

'KATE!' hissed Dee in a loud faux whisper. 'You have to see this!'

Kate followed Dee's voice into an adjoining room. Thick cork tiles lined its walls, and some low chairs and stools, instruments on stands, and a baby grand piano, formed a loose circle around the room. She looked at Dee and asked, 'What?'

Waving wordlessly and looking like a child about to have an accident, Dee pointed to a guitar on a stand near a small drum kit. The body of a very distinctive guitar had writing on it and Kate leaned forward to read it.

~

*"Never without you brother, never without you."*

~

Understanding how special this moment was, her face turned pale as she looked back to Dee with wide eyes. Their musical hero, someone they regarded as a major part of the soundtrack of their lives, had once owned and played this very guitar. They picked it up with reverence, finding tour dates and venues inscribed on its back. They searched for and found a specific

concert date. Their eyes shone brightly as they journeyed back to one of their fondest and most poignant shared memories.



It had been a hell of a show. At that concert, after being bumped by another reveller, a girl had spilt her drink all over Kate's back. She could not stop apologising until Kate and Dee both hugged her, assuring her it was okay. As Dee helped to mop the last of Carrie's spilt drink from Kate's back, lightning struck and the pair fell hopelessly in love during an amazing solo played on that very guitar.



Dee wiped a wet sparkle from her eyes and Kate just sighed. They carefully replaced the guitar and continued to look around the room. Memorabilia decorated the cork walls. Like the paintings, Kate saw that most items bore dedications to Dominique Savagewood.

Kate blinked, recognising the thought that had been niggling at her. 'Are there any photos with him in them?'

'Strange, isn't it? Brag-walls are normally full of self-important shots with famous people and spotlights. Not like this. Everything about him feels different. It's like he knows who he is and doesn't have to show off.'

Kate started with her hands on her hips and said teasingly, 'Danielle Marie! You are smitten by this man. You know he will just leave you used and broken-hearted. Can you see any evidence of a woman here? There is not one, single, feminine thing! You're



infatuated with a man you've never even met. You don't even know if he's straight or...'

Following Dee's open-eyed stare, Kate turned, prickles of dread already stinging her face. He was leaning lightly against a doorjamb, grinning at her. Frozen by his smiling eyes, waves of déjà vu washed around her.

He said, 'I believe we have already met, my lady. A home reflects the life and interests of its occupant. In this case, I am he. Don't tell anyone,' he said as he touched his finger to his smiling lips, 'but very straight too.'

Kate knew her mouth was open, yet she couldn't seem to recall how to close it. Part of her wanted to run away but her body just stayed put, her limbs obstinately on strike. Her confusion burned on her face, totally contrary to her dignity's explicit demands.

'About four months ago, you were crossing near the courthouse. A lady had dropped her groceries?' His grin challenged her to either recall him or admit defeat. Shaking her head back into operation, she remembered the scene and smiled, relieved to understand why he and Edison were familiar to her. Her smile evaporated as other memories from that day pushed into her mind.

Dominique said, 'Your smile is still lovely, though it would appear that the day was not. My apologies if I struck a nerve.' He looked to Dee and said, 'We have about forty minutes before we're free. I hope that is okay with you both?'

'Totally fine, Mr Savagewood.'

'Please, in here and between us, call me Dom. I know Edison would have already mentioned it, but please do help yourselves to anything in the kitchen or bars. The yellow button on any phone will reach Juanita, my PA. My home is meant to be lived in and enjoyed.'

Please feel free to look around.’ Looking directly at Kate with playful mischief in his eye, he said, ‘I look forward to hearing your voice soon, my lady.’ He winked and left them alone before Kate could answer. Her face burned crimson as her mind raced with the many great one-liners and retorts she should have said, all far too late now.

Dee giggled as soon as he was beyond their sight. ‘You? YOU!.. Katie-J, lost for words!’ Looking wistfully at the door, she added quietly, ‘If I were straight though...’

‘Carina would be very shocked,’ Kate said, glad that her face had finally chosen to respond to her will again.

‘Ha! He is her ‘Straight Pass’. Mine too.’

Kate stared at her friend. Dee had never expressed even the slightest interest in a male for anything other than friendship since they’d attended preschool together. On the first day they’d met, Kate had just finished french-braiding Dee’s hair when an older boy pushed Kate over. Dee had punched him on the nose and sat on him, pulling and twisting his ears until he apologised. Their friendship had not faltered once in the years since.

Still blushing and giggling, they linked arms and continued their exploration. Framing the entrance to the next room, they found an open pair of Gothic timber and iron doors that felt heavy with age. Stepping into an octagonal library, the space and décor made them feel as if they were in a medieval castle. The centre of the space was a waist-deep sunken area, ringed by a built-in circle of generously padded leather lounges. An ornate compass rose was inlaid into the timber floor. An eclectic and bewildering variety of books occupied the shelves around the room. A wide, polished timber

walkway behind the ring of lounges offered easy access to the shelves.

The girls looked at each other and mouthed, 'Wow!'

Almost like a barely audible hum, Kate's feelings of déjà vu persisted. In a way she was not quite able to grasp, the room felt familiar; even intimately familiar.

Nestled between and throughout the bookcases were an assortment of photographs, some in black and white, others in colour. All were of people and places, many seemed to be of buildings and projects during their formal opening ceremonies, judging by the mix of dignitaries and workers in attendance. Kate even recognised a few of her father's projects in the assortment. Then she saw him in a black and white photo. She froze, remembering that project from her childhood.

'Katie, is that you?'

Following Dee's finger, she looked at herself as a six-year-old holding her father's hand. They were standing behind a man who looked a lot like Dominique did now.

Unable to speak, not knowing what she could say, Kate could only nod as a flood of memories and thoughts of her father threatened to overwhelm her. The picture of him holding her hand in front of that project was a poignant reminder of how he'd steadily built the company, and his pride in never having once compromised his integrity or his commitment to quality. She remembered how their men had cheered the day he'd passed the company's reins to Kate, readily accepting and celebrating her leadership. When just months later, her parents were lost to a wet corner on a country road, every man rallied around her and wept

openly alongside her. She remembered her pride in the company's steady prosperity... until Silvio's treachery destroyed it all.

Reading her friend's many expressions, Dee gave Kate's shoulder a little squeeze of solidarity. Kate shook her head clear and smiled back in thanks.

The next image they found was of Dominique, the side of his face messily and comprehensively covered by a recently landed cream pie. A tall and strikingly handsome man was by his side in a similar state of coverage and both men were laughing. Clearly just ambushed, other happy, laughing faces surrounded them.

Each image held something of Dominique Savagewood's life. Some were of grand ventures, others were of eclectic groups of people, and a few were of simple stick and thatch villages. Kate found little evident rhyme or reason to link the various subjects of the photographs. She could find no common thread.

Spying a text book from her early engineering studies on the next shelf, Kate smiled, remembering those days fondly. She had been the only female to finish that demanding under-graduate degree. Still a source of wry grimaces, her overall grades were consistently the second highest ever awarded by the institution.

Kate's perfectionist nature was slightly but constantly offended by the notion of being second best, even if the 'best' was now a Nobel laureate and had graduated four years before she was born. Her father and his men, her extended family, had mentored her and crowed like roosters in their pride of her and her achievements. When they attended her award ceremonies, they looked like *real* engineers in their slightly rumpled suits, standing and cheering as she received her accolades.

Pulling Kate back from her thoughts of the past, Dee was asking her, 'Are there really such things as cosmic rays, Kate?' She was pointing to a paper lying on a side table entitled "Cosmic Ray Propagation and Permeability; A Study in..."

Kate nodded, saying, 'You wouldn't believe how easy they are to demonstrate. The original experiment was one of the real moments in particle physics.'

Wondering how her friend stored all of that information in her head, Dee pulled a face and crossed her eyes at Kate. She did it every time Kate answered an intended yes or no question with an erudite explanation. It always made them laugh. Kate poked her tongue out in ritualised response.

In the next room, white boards were on every wall and a round table dominated the floor space. The table was topped with books on Andean and Amazonian herbs, cosmology and psychology.

They had spent nearly an hour looking through the man's home and Kate still felt no closer to understanding who he was. Music, charities, developments, science, arts, herbalism, spirituality and shamanism; the diversity left her greatly intrigued and slightly frustrated.



Almost too soon, Dominique and Edison joined them to discuss the upcoming event. Chatting easily, they made their way into a beautiful pool house, complete with its own bar and an extensive dance floor. Dominique said, 'We'll start in here with canapés for about ninety minutes, then into the courtyard for sunset cocktails and to enjoy a wonderful jazz quintet, then back in here for dinner and dancing in the evening. Two

of our people will be at your disposal for all lifting and grunt work. We have clear roll down screens on the patio edges to keep the chill out, my lads will see to those. Tables and chairs are through those doors, and direct kitchen access is through those, over there.'

The chirping of a mobile phone broke into their conversation. Dominique looked at it and glanced at Edison before saying, 'Please excuse me ladies; it has been a pleasure to have met you. Edison will conclude your tour.'

As Dominique left, answering his phone, Edison looked at Dee and said, 'I believe you know a little about wine?'

Kate laughed as she said to him, 'Meet the only sommelier who did a degree in organic chemistry just to understand wine better.'

'Indeed?' Edison said with a challenging twinkle in his eye. 'Shall we look at the courtyard for the afternoon's entertainment and then visit the cellar?' His conspiratorial tone said that he also had an interest in wines.

The afternoon passed quickly. Kate loved the playful banter that had quickly developed between Dee and Edison as they argued about preferred regions, styles and vintages. Dominique's home was beautifully set out. The entertaining spaces flowed so effortlessly that they would only require three additional staff. It was a job to look forward to.



On the morning of Dominique's gig, the three amigas shared a hearty breakfast, taking the opportunity to fuel their bodies for the very full day ahead of them.

The planned function was an early afternoon and evening affair for thirty-six guests, some with plus-ones, rounding numbers out to just over fifty. Dominique had asked that all staff, themselves included, be included in the meal plan. Carrie had carte blanche with the menu and had decided on a sophisticated variety of modern fare for the event.

As had become their tradition, they talked through each phase and aspect of the upcoming day's business after breakfast. Their functions could only run smoothly and effortlessly with careful planning, and the amigas discussed every potential sticking point and set their contingency plans in place.

Their two-month-old, custom-fitted van was already packed with everything they would need, and a good number of things they could possibly need as well. By mid-morning, there was little more to do but make themselves ready.



The girls watched Carrie as she slowly looked around Dominique's kitchen, already prioritising the afternoon's tasks in her mind and changing mental gears into Head-Chef mode. Looking through the glass doors of the walk-in cool-room and fridge, she seemed to go into a culinary trance.

'... And ... she's gone!' Dee said to Kate with a cheeky grin. Carrie didn't even hear her. Still giggling, Kate and Dee started their own end of the afternoon's set up. Carrie did not need them or want them in her kitchen now. Their staff would have to know the menu and the ingredients of each dish by heart before Carrie would let them out of her kitchen.

The young men that Dominique had assigned to help them were respectful, attentive and fast. As they set out the cavernous pool-house and paved outdoor area for the afternoon's festivities, Kate and Dee shared a look, silently agreeing that they could get used to this sort of help.

The guests started arriving in the mid afternoon. With flawless choreography, Edison smoothly collected each new group of guests after Dominique had personally met each of them, ushering them into the pool house.

People chatted in easy groups as canapés and drinks were circulated under the watchful eyes of Dee and Kate. The afternoon was off to a beautiful start. Classical strings played quietly throughout the house over an amazingly clear sound system.

Kate observed Dominique from across the room. He was wearing an open white shirt, slacks and boots, and his ready smile was confident and friendly. He was just a little taller, a little broader of shoulder, and a little narrower of waist than his peers. Soon, she started noticing patterns in the way he worked his guests. They were too close to see it, but Kate had a great memory for faces and people. She watched him shuffle his guests with purpose from one group to another, drawing some groups together before breaking a select few out to join another.

*That's it! Like Dracula with his minions, they are in his thrall!* Kate thought, smiling. She watched the group dynamics changing under his subtle machinations as he handled his guests with respect and intent. She quickly recognised how she could complement his efforts and began timing her visits to each group as she and



Dominique began a wordless dance, recognised only by his smiling eyes meeting hers.

When the gathering had been in full swing for just over an hour, she spotted two men standing beside a large potted plant and well away from the activity. Approaching to offer them drinks, Kate overheard a gloating whisper. '...in the bag. With the chairman's proxy assignments, Zimmerman has sixty percent for the SGM on Wednesday. He flips the contract to Woodside, they are all left flapping in the breeze, and we get to cash in on Woody's upswing and Houdini before he figures out what happened. Z-man wants thirty percent. I said yes.'

'I would have happily gone 40! What if *he* comes after us?'

'We are peanuts to him and it's not even his money. He'll be upset, but as long as we really disappear afterwards, it's easier for him to write it off. So some rural bumpkins get shafted? Whatever! We get to live like kings, far, far away, and nobody who matters loses out.'

Kate felt anger for a reason she could not articulate but put on her most vapid face as she came into their view, asking, 'Gentlemen, can I get you anything before we head outside?'

'Sure, cutie-pie, bring us two big glasses of the rich prick's best scotch over lots of ice,' demanded the fatter one, his eyes fixed on Kate's chest.

'Of course, sirs,' Kate said, scurrying away. Her mind raced as she tried to work out what, if anything, she should do. They might have been talking about something that she had taken completely out of context. They might have been, but she knew in her heart that they were out to do damage.

Watching him as he worked his guests out into the garden, she settled on her plan. The hall was nearly empty when Kate deliberately tripped, spilling a few pieces of cutlery and her two remaining canapés. Dominique immediately turned to check that she was all right and help her up. Bending to collect the same fallen fork lying near her foot, Kate said in her quietest and clearest voice, 'Mr Savagewood, I overheard something I think you need to know about, but I could be really wrong about things as well.'

Looking at Kate, he reached a fast decision. He nodded to Edison, now standing in a nearby doorway as if he'd been there the whole time. Edison returned a slight acknowledgement and Dominique ushered her into a discrete side room that she'd not noticed before.

'Catherine, I am intrigued but must ask that we be brief.'

'You know my name?'

'I heard you called Katie-J by Ms Danielle when she was teasing you in the music room. You were introduced to me as Kate and 'C.J.' is engraved on your bracelet,' he said, glancing down.

Kate looked down to see her bracelet turned inside out on her wrist and measured his words with satisfaction. Seeing nothing but patient stillness in his face, she said, 'There are two men, one in an ostrich leather jacket and the other, a fat man with white snakeskin boots and belt?'

'I know who you mean, Catherine.'

Kate squirmed slightly under the full intensity of his concentrated attention. She took a deep breath to focus before reciting the conversation and its context to him as he listened silently.

'How confident are you of your recall, Catherine?'

She closed her eyes for a moment before opening them to look straight through him, seeing another scene in her mind. 'The day you helped the older lady in the red jacket, she was bumped by a suit on his phone. She had dark curly hair and a clear umbrella hanging from her left elbow, no glasses. She had two green bags and one blue one. You held the blue one and Edison picked up and repacked the two green bags before you and he convinced her that he was going in her direction. He mostly picked up cans, and two bags of fruit; one of green apples and the other, oranges or grapefruit.'

Finishing her statement, she looked at him. He examined her face, replaying her words and blinking in his own recall. His eyes softened, lines returning to their corners. Taking her hand, he kissed it as he said, 'I truly appreciate you coming to me with this. Thank you, Catherine.'

After he'd left, Kate started shaking. Her hand burned where his lips had been. His voice had hypnotised her in two short sentences. He had listened to her and computed his solution. *He thinks as fast as you do, kiddo*, she realised with a start. Kate was accustomed to being the smartest person in a room. It was something she'd learned to conceal in general company to avoid upsetting fragile egos.

The rest of the evening passed as if nothing had happened. When Dominique's eyes met hers, they betrayed nothing beyond what had existed before their talk. That evening, she fell into bed, exhausted, still thinking about his simple acceptance of her words. No 'Are you sure?' or 'Could you have misunderstood?' or anything else so clichéd. Tossing and turning, Kate finally fell into a restless sleep, her hand still feeling the respectful touch of his lips in her memory, his

hypnotically calm voice saying, 'Thank you, Catherine.' Her name sounded so nice when he said it like that, clearly enunciated in three syllables.



The following morning started a relaxed day off for the girls, including their much anticipated Sunday Spa Day. Even better, the day was going on the business expense account. During her manicure, Kate blushed when she remembered how he'd kissed her hand. Giggling, she blamed her single glass of wine.

Dee and Carrie gushed about the elegant simplicity of everything about the man and his house. Even the spa personnel added their vote of 'yumminess' to the enigma that was Dominique Savagewood.



Kate jerked awake to Dee's knocking on her bedroom door and mumbled a response. Dee knocked once more and called out, 'Katie? Everything's fine, but you need to wake up.'

The fortieth birthday party they'd catered the night before had gone long past midnight and today was a designated sleep-in day. Kate sighed, swung her feet to the floor and called out groggily, 'I'm up.' She rubbed her eyes, found her robe and stumbled out to find out why she needed to wake up.

Dee never slept in. In her whole life, she'd only ever needed a few hours of rest. Kate found her on her phone and heard her saying, 'She will love it... Midday is brilliant... I will make sure she is ready... You're welcome and thank you... You too, bye.' Ending the call

with obvious glee, she looked at Kate. 'Get showered, love. You have a lunch date!'

'What? With who? Wait! What?'

'Mr Bright-Eyes. He said you did something special for him at the party and he is taking you to lunch to say thank you. We both know you would have found some limp, half-arsed excuse to say no, so I told him yes. Your bathroom is that way. I know what he has planned. Trust me Katie, it's good.' Dee pointed Kate back down the hallway, pushing between her shoulder blades with a firm hand to start her moving.

'Katie-J! What did you do for that man that was so special?' Carrie teased from the door of the opposite hallway, her eyes sparkling mischievously, despite having recently woken up herself.

'Nothing. I didn't do anything. Stop looking at me like that!'

Dee said, 'Get into that shower and call out before you get dressed. We need you in something practical. It'll be breezy where you are going, so you'll need a few layers.' She wiggled her eyebrows with innuendo.

'Damn, girl, don't wear anything too hard to get out of either!' Carrie said, teasing Kate into an even deeper blush. The laughter of her friends was a comforting and happy sound and she smiled as she closed the bathroom door.

Kate was looking through her still meagre wardrobe when Dee came in and immediately selected for her a new pair of jeans, a T-shirt and a long-sleeved cotton blouse. She darted back out, re-appearing moments later with a heavily lined jacket, a gift that had never fitted her well. It looked perfect on Kate in a slightly oversized, cute kind of way.

'This isn't dressy enough,' Kate said.

‘It is perfect, Cath-er-ine. You will just have to believe me.’

‘Dee, I don’t know about this.’

‘This is really something you don’t want to miss out on. Trust me Katie?’ Kate nodded, knowing that she did trust Dee.

Carrie helped with Kate’s makeup and hair, quickly achieving her typical perfection. Together, they bundled Kate out of the elevator as Edison pulled up. Meeting her at the door, he said, ‘Ms Catherine, a pleasure to see you again.’ He greeted Dee and Carrie warmly before ushering Kate to the car. She noticed his eyes methodically scanning the buildings and streets around them. *Another piece of the puzzle to add to the collection*, she mused.

He helped her into the back seat of the car and waited until she had secured her seatbelt before merging smoothly into the city traffic. ‘Where are you taking me ...’ She paused, realising she did not know how to address him.

‘Edison is fine, Ms Catherine.’

‘Is Edison your first or last name?’

‘Edison is simply my name, Ms Catherine.’

‘Okay, where are we headed, Mister Edison?’ she asked with a playful challenge.

Grinning, he said, ‘Fair play to you... Catherine?’ Kate nodded to his eyes in the rear-view mirror. ‘Thank you, Catherine. I am taking you to the riverside quay. Mr Savagewood wants to express his gratitude. You did a good thing that helped a lot of people.’

Realising she had no idea what the rules were in this situation, she recalled her father’s favourite advice for times like these, ‘When in doubt, say little, ask questions and listen carefully. Let information come to

you.' Kate asked, 'What in particular are you talking about, Edison?'

'You warned Dominique about a conversation you overheard. Your comprehensive and accurate recall offered us a highly elegant option to disarm their plan without revealing our hand.'

After taking a moment to analyse Edison's carefully worded statement, Kate said, 'The proxies!'

Edison smiled, nodding. 'Your timely warning saved a project that will result in a lot of people getting access to the same vaccinations and basic medical services that we take for granted. This is something very important to us all and you have our thanks, Catherine.'

Kate looked at the man in the rear-view mirror. 'You don't mean only you and Mr Savagewood, do you?'

'No, not only Dominique, my wife as well. That was a very astute pick-up Catherine. I don't mean that patronisingly in any way.'

Kate blinked several times, replaying his words. There is a whole encyclopaedia of sub-text happening here, she thought. He is much more than a driver. They've obviously discussed this in detail. 'Are you testing me, Edison?'

Edison smiled and said, 'All of life is a test, Catherine.'

'What is it that you think is being tested so rigorously?'

'Our personal integrity. Our self-determination. Our real worth and value to ourselves and our world.' Seeing the look on Kate's face, he added, 'Dominique is far better with words, sorry.'

Kate took a moment to think about their exchange before beaming a huge smile at him.

‘Thank you, Edison. You gave me a genuine answer instead of a throwaway sound bite. Would you please call me Kate.’

‘When we are not in unfamiliar company, it will be my pleasure. Thank you, Kate.’

Edison was an exemplary driver, gliding through the city traffic as if he had some magical powers. Kate found herself feeling secure in his care. ‘Edison?’ Kate asked with a cheeky sparkle in her eyes, ‘I know almost nothing about Mr Savagewood. Everything I hear conflicts and contradicts everything else. Who is he? Can you tell me anything without breaking some bodyguard code?’

Edison smiled at her in his mirror and said, ‘He is an honourable man and it is without reservation that I trust him completely. More I will leave up to your remarkable powers of observation. I will offer you one insight, if I may?’

Kate nodded to him in his rear-view mirror. ‘Please.’

‘Don’t overthink things with Dominique. He is, by nature, an intimate and caring man. I have often seen him create unintentional confusion with his kindness. He doesn’t even realise he’s doing it. It’s his blind spot. What you see is what you get with him. He will not offer you secret meanings or hidden messages, and his generosity is always without strings of any kind. Ask him a question and he will reluctantly tell you a hurtful truth before a comforting lie. Remember, if you want to know something, just ask him straight out.’

Motoring slowly along a marina full of private luxury vessels, Kate felt a little disappointed at the possibility of a mega-yacht cliché. He was standing at the far end of the public dock, his phone to his ear.



Edison accelerated a little just before Dominique ended his call, and she recognised that their sedate pace along the marina had been to give him time to complete his call.

Opening her door, Dominique offered her his hand and said, 'Ms Catherine, I am delighted that you consented to come on such short notice. I believe Ms Danielle was instrumental in your attendance as well?'

'I was railroaded and had no say in the matter,' Kate said, faking hurt pride as sincerely as an actor in a children's pantomime.

'Ah, the contract of love,' he said.

'Oh no, it's Dee and Carrie who are ... You're laughing at me.'

'Not at all,' he said, holding his hands up. 'Only at your defence of that which needs no defence. It's plain to see that those two share as much affection for you as you do for them. If you did not love and trust her, you wouldn't be here.'

There it was, wrapped up all nice and neat with a little bow on top. Kate found the grin on Edison's face of little support. *Damn it. It's the woman who is supposed to be the mystery*, she thought, feeling her cheeks flushing.

'It will be a little breezy where we're headed, did you bring a jacket?'

Turning towards the car, she said, 'Yes. It's ...'

Edison was standing behind her, holding her jacket out to her with a cheeky grin on his face. Accepting from him both her jacket and his grin, she thanked him. She had left it in the car on purpose.

Edison passed Dominique a large brown paper bag and warmly wished them a wonderful lunch before heading back to the car. Indicating a water taxi at the

base of the jetty with his outstretched arm, Dominique said, 'Shall we, my lady?'

Kate smiled. 'Let's.'

For the first time in what felt like a long while, Kate was genuinely intrigued.



## CHAPTER THREE

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Boarding the waiting water taxi, a uniformed man met them and made sure they were comfortable before piloting his vessel away from the dock. The small boat rocked slightly in the wake of a barge pushing heavily against the current in the main channel. Watching Dominique slip the paper bag into a cloth satchel that Edison had included in the bag, Kate asked, 'What if I told you I'm afraid of the water?'

'I would be very disappointed in Ms Danielle's powers of recall, Catherine.'

'Dominique, you have obviously corrupted her totally.'

'Please, call me Dom.'

Kate nodded. 'And I'm Kate.'

With a smile, he continued. 'Kate, your friend is a minor conspirator at worst,' he said, his eyes smiling. He followed her questioning gaze to their lunch now in the satchel. 'We will need to climb a ladder shortly, but I assure you that it will be worth it, and that you will understand why I confided my intentions to Ms Danielle.'

Only a few minutes later, they were under one of the largest traffic bridges of the city. Each of its huge steel legs was set into massive, boat-shaped concrete piers like long man-made islands. Kate's curiosity burned as the water taxi slowed and circled the base of the first leg of the bridge. The Skipper expertly nudged his boat against the concrete cliff and held station with his engine, allowing them to step directly onto a fixed

steel ladder straight from the deck. Watching Kate scale the vertical face with an easy confidence, Dom smiled from below. As soon as he was secure on the ladder, he pushed the bow of the boat back into the current with his foot before following Kate up.

Standing on top of the concrete island, the sound of the traffic above was distant on the clean breeze. Kate looked around slowly and saw their water taxi motoring back to the quay.

A small table and two chairs had already been set up on the three metre wide concrete ledge. After taking in the view for a few moments himself, Dom set their lunch down on the table before returning to where she was still gazing up at the structures of the bridge above. They started strolling along the wide ledge. Reaching the end of the pier, they looked down to watch the current swirling off either side of the pier's sharp leading edge like the bow of a ship, giving them a sense of movement through the water. After a moment, Dom's face became serious. 'Catherine... Kate, Thank you. You performed a great service when you were attentive enough to hear, and astute enough to recognise and pass on what you did. Your fast thinking resulted in some works of good occurring, and prevented some greedy individuals profiting from the misfortune of others.' They paused for a moment to watch a pair of birds racing each other low over the water below them.

'May I take a guess at how?'

'Please do,' he said as they strolled on.

'The two creeps had bought up as much stock in the other company as they could in anticipation of the contract pushing the stock value up. The chairman didn't get to vote the proxies, and my guess is that those two

now own a large and probably mostly leveraged percentage of a dud company?'

'My compliments, Kate. You hit all the relevant high notes exactly,' he said, his eyes sparkling.

'Can you tell me what it was all about?'

'The finer details are unimportant and would be uninteresting,' he said as they paused, already half way along the length of the concrete pier. His eyes shone as he looked at her. 'Kate, I have something of great personal interest to show you. I believe you know quite a bit of this bridge's history?'

Kate nodded cautiously. A small part of her wasn't sure where this was going but she was interested to find out. Dominique leapt onto the hip-high pedestal surrounding the bridge's steel leg in an easy movement and then turned to offer Kate his hand. She grinned at him and vaulted the height easily, pleased to see him looking a little surprised for once.

He pointed to an area of angled steelwork in deep shadow. At first, there was nothing to see but the wide surfaces of the massive metal leg supporting the bridge above. Her curiosity aroused, Kate walked closer to the area he was indicating. As her eyes adjusted, she saw the writing welded into the living steel of the bridge, each perfectly formed letter painted over many times.

~

THIS IS THE FIRST PART OF  
THE FIRST OF MANY BRIDGES  
BUILT BY NATHANIEL JONES,  
LOVING HUSBAND OF MARJORIE,  
PROUD FATHER OF CATHERINE.  
ALL I EVER BUILD, I BUILD FOR THEM.

~

Kate read and re-read the words, tears rolling silently down her face. Her father had written these words when she was four. This bridge had been his first major project, a venture upon which he had staked everything he and his family owned and could borrow. Her father's belief and hard work had realised his dream. She was standing on and beneath it right now. His dream had become their dream, until it had ended with Silvio's fraud and theft, stealing her family's legacy from her and stripping nearly forty loyal workers of their employment. More than half of them had worked on this very bridge. Like so much of what her father did, he'd made his tribute to last, but hidden it from view.

'PROUD FATHER OF CATHERINE.' She knew he'd always meant to say it to her. She had seen it in his eyes and actions hundreds of times, but to read his actual words...

With a light touch at her shoulder, Dom offered her a small packet of tissues whilst looking at her father's words and not her tears. His own eyes were a little misted as well.

There was nothing for it. She launched herself at him, enclosing him in a fierce and slightly soggy hug. Kate wanted to say and express so much, but it came out as a snuffly and muffled, 'Thank you.'

They leaned back, examining each other's eyes for a highly charged moment. Dominique hugged her tightly again before he broke away, smiling brightly. He said, 'I believe it's lunch time. Are you hungry?'

Kate was grateful for the deflection, especially because she knew that with the emotion of that moment, if he had tried to kiss her, she would probably have kissed him back. *Do I want him to kiss me?* she asked herself. She recognised that she was in no fit state to

answer her own question, and was thankful he'd not tried. Dom dropped lightly back to the wide lower ledge and he took her hand as she let herself back down to join him. He offered her his arm and they walked to their waiting table and lunch.

Sitting high above the water, and only a few strides away from a declaration of love and pride from her father, she was feeling more than a little overwhelmed. He was looking at her with deep compassion in his eyes. His gaze did not burn aggressively into her like so many alpha-male types tried to do, but instead, he gently seemed to invite her disclosure, offering her a safe space. She felt like she was letting him read her mind.

Dominique smiled cheekily before opening the brown paper bag and taking out two neatly wrapped sandwiches. Passing one to her, he said, 'Corned beef, horseradish cream, Swiss cheese, tomato, grated carrot, cucumber and lettuce with just a little pepper and salt.'

'Dee!'

'Of course, Kate. I'm not psychic, but I do pay attention. Events and evidence suggest that so too, do you.'

He opened two bottles of sparkling apple juice for them before unwrapping his sandwich. He finished his first mouthful and looked back at her. 'It's a delicious combination, Kate.'

She was reeling and trying to catch up with the rules as they applied to Dominique and this odd lunch meeting. Edison's words came back to her and she decided on the straightforward approach. 'Why did you ask me here today, Dom?'

He smiled, pleased at her directness. 'You saved a project by displaying atypical initiative and intelligence, and I wanted to say thank you by way of showing you

something that I knew about, but suspected that you did not. I am glad you saw your father's words. That he loved you both deeply is plain to see in the care he took with every letter. I feel honoured to have shared that moment with you.'

*Damn!* she thought, feeling her eyes prickle.

'His generation was not one which comfortably expressed praise and love openly. You knew how he felt though, didn't you?'

'Will you please stop doing that?' Kate said, far more sharply than she'd wanted to or intended to. She just wanted to change the course of the conversation and now she had snapped at him. His words mirrored the thoughts running through her mind, and at that moment, she was feeling piqued at her father's inability to express himself more openly. Expecting anger or annoyance at her outburst, she saw compassion and understanding instead.

Seeing the expressions parading across her face, he smiled. 'Kate, I apologise if I have intruded. I can see you are uncomfortable with our topic of conversation, so we should change it. May we talk a little business over lunch?'

*Will you stop being so bloody perfect and stay on topic for more than a millisecond?* her mind pleaded. Feeling like a pinball bouncing from spring to spring, Kate took a deep breath and shifted mental gears. 'Yes, please.' After a pause, she added, 'Dominique, I am very grateful that you showed me his words. Thank you. You were completely right, of course, and my frustration wasn't aimed at you. I did not mean to snap like I did; I'm sorry.'

Dominique's smile showed that he recognised and accepted every level of her apology. He bowed his head



slightly in acknowledgement before looking back up at her with a grin and pouncing on his sandwich, taking a huge bite and moaning with exaggerated joy and gusto. Kate found herself caught in his moment and laughed freely at his childish antics. Her laughter stopped him in mid-chew for a moment before he blinked and smiled, his mouth still over-full.

After struggling his mouthful away, he said, 'I would like you ladies to run a function for me every three weeks, starting on Saturday, a week from tomorrow. Most will be on about the same scale as the last, but with a slight amendment. Ms Danielle has already affirmed that the upcoming dates are available.'

*Okay, this is a business meeting.* A very small part of Kate was disappointed, but mostly she was relieved and thankful to have some measure of what was happening. He said, 'I would like you to overstaff my functions by two every time. No guest has ever complained about being served too well...' Kate nodded and tilted her head, inviting him to continue.

'Catherine, your timely observation was extremely valuable to me, and by extension, to a great many people who rarely have a voice. I would ask that during my functions, you and Ms Danielle remain effectively free to circulate with open ears and eyes, just as you already do. Your roles make you occupationally invisible, allowing both of you a high level of discreet freedom. We know Ms Danielle picks up on a lot too. She reminds me of a shape shifter, physically fit and athletic, but only if you look closely; so front and centre one moment, and so 'background' the next. Edison thinks very highly of her as well.'

'You want us to be your spies?'

‘That’s a fair question, but no. You already know that I know who is chatting to whom and, within reason, what they are chatting about. I simply want intelligent ears and eyes in the mix, alert to anything unusual or amiss. You have already demonstrated an excellent memory with near photographic recall. You have expert technical knowledge in many areas most would never suspect, especially of a beautiful woman serving them food and drinks. Edison says Ms Danielle reads people very accurately as well.’

Kate nodded, letting him go on.

‘You took effective and timely action when you accurately recognised something amiss. Your intelligent initiative negated a nasty plan by some now very lonely individuals who intended to reap personal gain from continuing the suffering of others. Aside from your observation, you all did an amazing job of the function. Ms Carina’s food is brilliant. If she had a restaurant, it would sport Michelin stars on the door. Your staff were possibly the best briefed I have seen.’

‘Thank you.’ Kate said, not wanting to interrupt his flow.

‘I am primarily offering a permanent booking under very favourable terms, in recognition of the professional excellence already demonstrated, and in expectation of its continuance. That you and Ms Danielle will be circulating with your ears and eyes open to the dynamics of the room is simply a value-added feature. I only want your relevant observations. You will know if something is not right. I trust your judgement.’

‘Is there any more?’ she asked.

‘I would have you and Ms Danielle familiar with the guest lists for certain functions so you might better understand the dynamics involved.’

Feeling more comfortable with his somewhat unusual proposition, Kate said light-heartedly, 'Let me guess, Edison will have a bunch of files on everybody with coloured tape on its edges?'

'Oh goodness, no. Rarely would he be so crass. I believe you made a first-approximation guess at his role on the way here. Close, but no cigar, as the saying goes.'

Kate knew that neither man had said a single word to each other until Edison wished them a wonderful lunch. *There is a lot of sub-text in his world!* her mind noted again, recognising both Dom's challenge to her and his clear affirmation that Edison was far more than just a bodyguard or driver.

'Unless you think we should know about something, you need not say a thing. My first priority and primary intent is to have beautiful events with wonderful food, drink and service.'

'I'll have to discuss this with Dee and Carrie,' Kate said, knowing that it was already pretty much fait accompli.

'I'd be surprised if you didn't. I want you and your business partners to feel ethically solid at all times. If there is nothing to tell, then there is nothing to tell. More often than not, it may just be as simple as alerting us to potential or brewing discord or tension between guests within a group. I trust your decision-making ability and discernment.'

A dark look flashed over Kate's face. 'You know my discernment has not been that fantastic lately?'

'Catherine, please allow me some disclosure. I have researched...' He saw the cheeky and challenging look on Kate's face before amending his statement with a grin. 'I have reviewed some research, and I am familiar

with the public record surrounding your recent personal and commercial history.’

Kate went to speak several times but was unable to find her words.

‘Silvio Schivello is a smooth and charming bastard. I am now aware of two other women who have been similarly injured by his lies. Kate, in my extensive and experienced opinion, you were blindsided by a very smooth, intelligent and clinically sociopathic con man. You loved him, and you had every right and reason to believe that he loved you back.

‘A very close friend is both a brilliant psychiatrist, and a gifted facial analysis and deception expert. During the course of her research, she profiled Silvio and found him to be a thankfully rare combination of high-level sociopath and self-gratifying narcissist. For the record, this was prior to our chance meeting in the city. The short version is that his pathology makes him incapable of disbelieving or feeling any remorse for whatever he says, no matter how outlandish or hurtful. That is why he is such an effective liar. She is citing him, and two others she’s found who share his specific pathologies, in an academic paper on undetectable conscious deception that should be accepted for publication this month. You are not mentioned beyond anonymous background.’

Moods, thoughts, memories and emotions all flashed over Kate’s face, reflecting her turmoil. Then something changed, making her feel quiet again. Kate looked down and realised that he was holding her hands from across the table, and looking into her eyes.

He said, ‘It is important that you understand this, Kate. Because of his specific mix of pathologies, in his private world, he is the only human being. He is incapable – not ignorant – but completely incapable of

comprehending that anyone else on this planet has value, feelings, rights, or even meaningful opinions. Kate, you got hit by a bus you couldn't see coming, so you were hit by a bus you couldn't possibly avoid. Even the best deception experts in the world can't tell when he is lying. His pathologies are why he can scheme so abhorrently, and lie without hesitation or remorse. He is a very high-level sociopath, bordering on psychopath, and is incapable of any level of genuine emotional empathy.

'His self-gratifying narcissism makes him unable to doubt himself. He sees himself as the most valuable and wonderful thing in the whole world, and nobody else's opinion has enough value to him to challenge that concept. That is why he acts with such overwhelming confidence but lacks the smugness that normally is the hallmark of a liar. You only made the mistake of loving the wrong person. That is something that can be said of many other intelligent people, the world over.

'Your actual business decisions were all conservative and solid. Your own leadership demonstrated a rare and commendable balance of intelligence, courage and imagination. Your company was, until the time of your ex-husband's rapine, a trusted benchmark renowned for integrity, innovation and quality. Since that time, you have joined your friends, and you have excelled again, demonstrating the same applications of intelligence and talents. Kate, that is a most enviable and honourable professional and personal reputation to have.'

After a long silent moment, he let go of her hands and grabbed his sandwich, taking an even bigger bite than before, nearly choking himself with his loudly exaggerated moans of gastronomic delight. As her

laughter echoed under the bridge, he smiled at her, horseradish cream still smeared on his cheek.

With some happy chatter and a number of slightly risqué jokes, including one that had her snort – to her embarrassment and his delight – he steered her back into a world of happier thoughts and positive outlooks.



Only Edison remained in her memories between the moment she left Dom at the dock and arriving home. Their return down the ladder, the water taxi back to shore, and the drive home all went by in a blur. Edison had maintained a respectful silence throughout their journey, just looking at her in the rear-view mirror now and then with a friendly smile. In private, with her, he was warm and compassionate; but Kate saw another face when he looked at the outside world, one that was far more ancient than his more jovial persona.

She remembered her father's description of what he called 'thousand yard' and 'thousand year' stares that his war veteran buddies often wore. She had occasionally seen the same look on her father's face. A thought occurred to her. *Edison and Dad would have been friends.*

When Edison helped her from the car and said goodbye, Kate hugged him on impulse. For a moment, when he hesitantly hugged her back, she was almost hugging her father too. For a few long moments, their embrace grew far stronger than either of them expected it to. She looked up, a tear shining in her eye, and kissed his cheek. 'Thank you.'

'It is my rare and valued pleasure, Catherine. A wonderful evening to you, and to your lovely friends.'

With a spontaneous bow and flourish, he skipped away as lightly as a dancer, winking over his shoulder before slipping into his car and driving off into the deepening twilight. Standing at the entrance to her building, Kate felt her world changing gears. The last efforts of winter tempered the late afternoon air and Kate was still smiling as she turned to go inside, steeling herself for the inevitable barrage of questions about the day from her friends.



That evening, the amigas met at Alberto's for a night off and some fun with their five casual staff and their partners. The four months since Kate had joined the team had been spectacularly successful and busy, and an evening at Alberto's was a reward for everyone.

As soon as the last of the appetisers disappeared, Carrie rang a spoon on her glass and stood. 'Kate has some news for us, and if she doesn't tell us soon, we will have to make her talk!' Carrie finished off the statement with a mime of tickling Kate's ribs, something that could reduce her to giggling tears of frustration in seconds.

Kate winked at her as she stood. 'Dominique Savagewood has asked us to do permanent gigs for him, starting Saturday a week from tomorrow, and then every three weeks after that. We're also overstaffing, so everyone is on.'

A chorus of cheers went up around the table. Everyone who had been there the first time had enjoyed it greatly. Having heard the stories, the two who had missed that first gig smiled in anticipation of attending the next. Dominique was a generous tipper and the

thought of another nice bonus was another good reason to celebrate.

Everyone noticed the shift in Kate that night. Her mood and manner was lighter, her smile had returned, and she laughed instead of chuckling. Their celebrations went long into the evening and as he always did, Alberto arranged taxis to ensure that those without a sober driver made it home safely. Dee looked more as if she'd been drinking orange juice all night as she helped Carrie and Kate walk the two-and-a-half blocks back to their apartment, goaded by the freshening wind.



It was nearly mid-morning the following day before Kate roused herself to some level of consciousness. Following the enticing aroma of a much wanted coffee, she found Dee at the table, clear eyed and bright as always. Carrie sat next to her in a bathrobe, looking the mirror image of how Kate felt. A text message was on Dee's phone and she held it up for Kate to read.

~

*“At your convenience, please contact Ms Juanita of Mr Savagewood’s staff to discuss upcoming events.*

*Prospective dates and anticipated numbers in the short term are ...”*

~

‘We have an interesting client,’ Dee declared.

‘There is more to it,’ Kate said. She told them of the other part of the deal, knowing that Dee would feel comfortable with the idea.

Carrie felt a niggling reservation that she couldn't quite put her finger on. The extra staff, the training opportunities, the generous fee he'd offered – much



more than they'd have asked for – and that they needn't mention anything at all had almost sold it to her. Then she realised what it was that was bothering her. 'Kate, is he doing this just to get to you?'

Kate thought about it for a long moment before answering. 'No. He knows he could have kissed me under the bridge and at that moment, I'd have kissed him back. It wasn't like that, though. He cares, but he was a complete gentleman the whole time. He is frigging hypnotic though.' Kate paused, a slight frown fighting with her smile. 'It's frustrating. He speaks and I can't hear anything else. Everything he says just seems to make perfect sense. He loves your food, Carrie. He loves our service and wants more of it. He seems able to pay for it, though I still don't know what it is that he actually does.'

Dee chuckled, 'Whatever. He is an easy client with a great venue and we have some gigs to plan. He wants us to overstaff them so we get an easier ride in the bargain. He also values our Katie's - ahem - *powers of observation*... and he wants *more*,' her suggestive tone and wiggling of her eyebrows accenting her teasing intent.

Kate threw her bread roll at her over the table in response. All in one movement, Dee snatched it from mid-air and bit a piece off whilst winking back at her. Their leisurely breakfast finished with the sounds of laughter as their day began in earnest.



Their next gig at Dom's place was a beautiful but very run-of-the-mill affair. The only challenges were an afternoon rain-shower that had everyone scurrying

indoors, and a slight issue with a guest who got a little rowdy. The situation was quickly sorted out when Kate charmed him into ‘deciding for himself’ to drink a few glasses of water and have a cup of coffee. Dee noticed Dom and Edison smile between themselves as they observed how smoothly Kate handled herself.



The following three weeks were wonderfully intense for the amigas. With the upcoming election only weeks away, political parties and dinners for the man who was almost certain to be the next mayor occupied much of their time. A 50th wedding anniversary for one of the city’s power couples was a highlight of the social calendar and the outlandish praise they received in the social column the next day resulted in four more significant bookings.

Almost before they had noticed the passing of the weeks, they were back at Dominique’s and their third gig for him was well under way. His guests were cheerful and the atmosphere was much more that of a party than a ‘power’ dinner. In the dynamic atmosphere of chatter and laughter, Kate again watched Dominique in action, further analysing how he worked his magic and refining how she could complement his efforts. Now and then Edison would be discreetly at her or Dee’s shoulder with a whispered insight to fill in a blank.

At one point, Kate noticed Dominique standing by an open door on the far side of the room, his shirt ruffling slightly in the swirling breeze. She took a moment to examine him as the afternoon sun highlighted his clean, well-defined features. He had a solid jawline

that matched his manner and his mouth and eyes held small wrinkles at their corners from smiling a lot.

Remembering an iconic cigarette advertisement from her childhood, she almost laughed out aloud as she recognised a remarkable similarity between that rugged image of a man's man and Dominique. *Just stand him on a hill with his horse, a hat and a lasso in his hand and that's him, right there!*

She found the only thing at odds with his relaxed demeanour were his actual movements. Like those of a stalking cat, each seemingly casual action held intent and purpose, but only if you looked hard enough. Looking again, Kate added Edison into the same mental basket as she watched them moving around the room. The rest of the evening flowed effortlessly and the guest's smiles were wide and genuine, even as they departed.

Whilst the staff packed up the evening's gig, Edison discreetly invited Kate into the same side room where she and Dominique had first talked. He showed her a manila folder with a teasing wink. Around its borders in heavy red marker were the words, 'Top Secret'.

Looking at the folder and remembering her joke with Dom under the bridge, she grimaced before chuckling, 'Very droll. Is he coming back out?'

'He is on a conference call and sends his apologies. I know Dom is very happy with how these events are working out, Kate. We all are. We feel you and Ms Danielle would benefit from familiarity with the guest list of the next event. They essentially represent three entangled parties and a project that could positively impact many people and communities. They are all in here,' he said, patting the folder. 'Dom asked me to reiterate that you need not do or say anything, unless you

feel it is right. You all throw a brilliant function, and he appreciates everything that is done for him. We all do.'

'Edison, what is it that Dom does?'

'Now a clever lady like you doesn't need me solving all of life's mysteries for her, does she?' He replied in such a disarmingly cheeky way that it came out as a dare to her.

She found herself smiling, but yet again she also found herself without an answer. 'You are just a little bit too smooth sometimes, Edison,' she said, acknowledging his deflection with a smile. Edison winked in response.

He opened the folder and passed her a folded sheet of A3 paper. Unfolding the sheet, Kate found nearly forty head-and-shoulder images, each captioned only with a name. Hand-drawn frames around most of the portraits indicated three overlapping groups. She looked up at Edison and he pre-empted her question. 'Just the names and basic associations. The rest is for your unbiased observation.'

Keeping the empty folder, he passed Kate a blank envelope, pausing to let her fold and insert the guest list. Offering her his arm, he said, 'I believe your companions have completed their tasks. Shall we join them?'

Finding their staff congregated around Dee and Carrie outside the kitchen entrance, Edison said to them, 'Thank you, everyone. It was another beautiful function. Mr Savagewood especially loved the Thai soup, Ms Carina, as did I.' He went on to offer praise to each person by name as he passed them an envelope with a thank-you note and a tip.

'Dee, that red was atrocious!' he said loudly and dramatically, baiting her. 'Do try to find something

drinkable next time?' Dee delivered a suitably inappropriate and earthy response, and with everyone still laughing, Edison warmly wished them all goodnight.

Kate saw genuine smiles on every face as they got into their cars. This was a special kind of environment. Smiles at the end of an evening were normally about heading home; these were about feeling happy and appreciated.



## CHAPTER FOUR

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The amigas and their staff had subconsciously started to mark time's passing by Dominique's gigs and another three weeks had flown by. The girls shared breakfast, discussing how much they were looking forward to tomorrow's day of indulgence, starting with a sleep-in and followed-up by a Sunday at the spa and dinner with Alberto and his family. The city's election cycle was reaching fever pitch and the amigas were ready for a break after working the last sixteen days straight.

Over their regular after breakfast talk-through, the girls reviewed their plans for Dom's afternoon and evening gig later that day. Two of the guests had medical allergies to peanuts, five were vegans and eight were on carbohydrate-free diets. Meticulous planning was the only way that these seemingly insignificant details remained insignificant.



Between their extra staff and Dominique's strong boys, the physical setup of Dom's gigs was almost effortless. As the guests started to arrive, Kate found it a little disconcerting to recognise every guest by name from Edison's brief. A glance at Dee told her that she was experiencing the same odd feeling of *déjà vu*.

Kate's role was to manage the 'floor' as *maître d'*. She watched Dominique's discreet machinations, marvelling at the skill with which he and Edison shuffled

groups of people to keep ideas flowing in a specific direction. She and Dom had formed a natural tag-team rhythm during his first gig. Now in their fourth, they had worked out a number of subtle signals to improve their timing as both enjoyed their wordless dance.

She made sure that she offered drinks to each group soon after Dom joined them. When Dom was ready to move on, she personally offered food to the group, helping him to break away. Kate then had a chance to invisibly gauge the tone of each conversation after he'd left. Dee had begun working with Edison in a similar manner, although his role tended to be a little more background for much of the time.

After she'd helped Dom to diplomatically break away from an infatuated admirer, Edison said to Kate over her shoulder, 'We are not paying you enough, Catherine. Well done.' Before Kate could turn to thank him, he was already gone, melting into another group of guests.

Carrie's spectacular flaming dessert acted as a catalyst for renewed conversations, and Dom's lads unobtrusively pulled the tables back a bit to open the main floor again as the guests reformed into natural groups.

Dee had noticed that one group in particular were consuming their drinks quite quickly due to the efforts of one man within that group. She mentioned the anomaly to Kate, who drifted over to keep an eye on them. It was a group of engineers discussing a recent building collapse following a sizable earthquake; she listened happily to their chatter of 'stress loading' and 'fracture points'. Her mind recalled many similar types of discussions between her father and his men. Her face softened as her memories took flight. She'd listened to

many similar exchanges from her corner of her father's office as a child.

Kate's attention snapped back to the present. *That wasn't right!* She commanded her face to show nothing whilst offering finger food to a nearby trio and replaying the words, listening intently to the engineers' ongoing discussion. She heard it again. *Twice is no mistake!* A minute later, she had no doubt.

She found Edison with her eyes a few moments later. He was already watching her tightened body language with interest and nodded subtly to her before vanishing.

A few seemingly endless minutes later, Dom caught her eye from a doorway as he walked past. Kate finished serving a couple before following discreetly after him. She found Dom and Edison in another small anteroom near the locked library, this one well concealed and virtually invisible from the hallway. Edison closed the sliding door, sealing the small room from the sounds outside as Kate gathered her thoughts.

'The man, Ashinkata, is not an engineer,' Kate said. 'He's using all the right words but in the wrong way. For a start, he has no intrinsic understanding of the differences between torsion and shear.'

Grabbing Dom's forearm at his elbow and wrist, she demonstrated, first twisting his forearm between her two hands. 'This is torsion,' she said before moving her hands to his wrist and pushed each in opposition to the other, as if to scissor his wrist, 'and this is shear.' The men listened silently.

'Dee noticed Ashinkata's handler, Rissi, making very sure that the technical people associated with the Myers' group have been drinking at nearly twice the rate of the rest of the room and he has been collecting their



drinks directly from the bar himself. I think that's why they missed Ashinkata's mistakes. No engineer would confuse those terms, not even casually. Torsion can lead to shear, but they are fundamentally different things. It's like confusing kissing and pregnancy. Twice, Ashinkata talked about shear when he should have been talking about torsion.'

She paused for a moment, ordering her thoughts, before she gave her assessment. 'They were talking about that building collapse last week and Ashinkata doesn't understand structural steel's behaviour to different stresses. He was guessing like a second-year under-grad. When he was talking about the water technology earlier, he spoke like an erudite professor. There is no way he could be that knowledgeable in advanced materials and not understand such foundational basics. It would be like a classical pianist not knowing how to read music.'

Both men's faces clouded over for a minute while Kate remained silent. Dom searched her face, his mind racing. Their faces showed far more expression in the privacy of the anteroom than they ever did in public. Unable to fault her logic or find any likely alternative explanations, they nodded to each other after concluding that Kate had exposed a fraud.

'Thank you Kate, for everything. You are a surprising lady,' Dom said warmly.

Edison opened the door with a smile and said, 'Well done, Catherine. Brilliant.'

Only moments later she was back in the noise and movement of the gig as if she had never left.

A few minutes later, Kate saw that the group of engineers had been joined by Dominique and another, slightly older, exotically handsome couple; both tall and

impeccably dressed. She recognised them as Mason and Madison Myers. The false engineer and his promoters were talking to them with increasing fervour and volume.

As was his custom, Dom walked his guests out and farewelled them personally at the end of the evening. He and Mason Myers saw Rissi and Ashinkata's group away first. They shook hands as their cars were delivered to them. Kate watched on as she and her staff packed up. The Myers departed last, embracing Dominique and Edison with genuine and obvious warmth. Mason saw Kate through the open windows and smiled, nodding to her. He said something to Dom before he got into his car.

Dom found her soon after and said, 'Catherine, my thanks are to you again. Please rest assured that tonight, you and Ms Danielle have realised every positive potential of our arrangement. I have some calls I must make, so Edison will see you all off. Goodnight.' Bowing from his waist, he kissed her hand lightly and was gone.

Walking through the house to rejoin the others, Kate's mind was racing, her imagination running into fanciful scenarios of espionage and intrigue. Shaking her head, she found her friends and staff outside the kitchen entrance, almost finished with the last of the packing already.

'The extra hands make this so easy,' Dee said quietly to Kate as Dom's strong young men carefully slid the last of the cases into its place in their van. Edison was smiling as he walked out of the kitchen entrance to join them. Again, he recognised each person's efforts by name as he handed each an envelope in turn. When Edison passed Dee an envelope for the three amigas, he

had extra meaning in his eyes. Very quietly, he said, 'This is no mistake and it is well earned. Ms Catherine can tell you why at a more appropriate time.'

Dee noted a subtle understanding between Kate and Edison. Her curiosity was burning, but it was clearly a subject for later. Right now, their evening was over and they said their farewells before everyone drove off, happy and well tipped.



The amigas had developed an after gig routine. Once showered, they would do a quick 'notes and noticed' debrief while everything was fresh in their minds. Dee was impervious to the effects of caffeine and always had a bedtime coffee. Carrie and Kate drank herbal teas.

'Notes?' Kate asked when they were ready.

Carrie said, 'Suzette and Giselle are working very well together and move quickly. Todd is still dithering at the pass and holding everything up. Every night we tell him the same things, and he still can't get out of his own way. I think we need to replace him. He just isn't getting it and Corey is doing both their jobs.' Dee added her affirmation to Carrie's observations.

After a few moments of silence, Kate asked 'Noticed?'

Dee placed the envelope on the table between them. 'I *noticed* this mysterious envelope. You open it.' Dee pushed the envelope to Kate.

Tearing the envelope open, she found a simple, hand-written note.

~  
*“Every cent is well deserved. Thank you.  
M<sup>3</sup> and Dom.”*  
~

She said, ‘M<sup>3</sup>, that’s Mason and Madison Myers.’ Behind the note was a cheque written against a company name she didn’t recognise.

Kate looked at it wordlessly before passing it to Dee, whose eyes went wide before she handed it on to Carrie. ‘Holy crap, Katie-J, what did you do now?’

Kate filled them in on the conversation, starting with Dee’s tip off. It took a little longer for Kate to explain the engineering nuances to the girls. Then she made some intuitive leaps for her friends. ‘They were about to sell Dom’s friends a large-scale water purification technology that was probably bogus. At least, I think that’s what was happening.’

Dee took a deep breath, still looking at the cheque lying between them on the table. She sat up and raised her coffee in salute, saying, ‘To Savagewood and his bloody mysteries.’

Carrie added, ‘And to his friends with fat cheque books!’

They clinked their cups, still unsure of what had actually happened. They did know they had an extremely generous tip to deposit on Monday morning. One thing they all agreed on was that life around Dominique Savagewood was certainly interesting.



Dee roused Kate the following morning, knocking on her door and waiting for a grumbled response before telling her, ‘Edison is here with a delivery for you. He

said to take as much time as you need.' Kate thanked Dee through the bedroom door as she started to pull herself together and locate some suitable clothing.

Edison was at their table, laughing and exchanging wisecracks with Dee. A recently awoken Carrie looked at Kate with a sympathetic expression. He stood to greet Kate, hugging her warmly. Carrie dragged Dee from the room, obviously and loudly enough that they all smiled, recognising the unspoken promise of privacy.

Edison began. 'Dom asked that I give you this in hope that you would attend an evening soirée a week from Thursday.' Kate opened the envelope and found a brochure for the city's gala opening night of Madame Butterfly. Already sold out for much of its international tour, the show was playing to rave reviews. Kate also found a card for a high-end couturier, and another for a spa near the couturier's address. She looked at Edison questioningly.

'Kate, Dominique understands that this type of event is attended by those who have a great deal of resources at their disposal.' Looking at the cards in her hand, he said, 'Simply call those people and your attendance will be without stress or burden.'

Unsure of how she should take the offer, Kate said, 'He wants to buy me a dress and send me to a beautician?'

Edison recognised the plea for guidance in Kate's tone. 'Catherine, you know better than that. May I be blunt?'

Kate nodded.

'Red-carpet dresses are ridiculously expensive and often take months to obtain. Dom has the means, and his motives are simply to show you a wonderful evening

whilst giving those you recently helped a chance to say 'thank you' to you in person.'

He continued. 'Off the record, you are going to meet Mason and Madison Myers, genuinely good people, and the intended targets of Rissi and Ashinkata's scam. Kate, enjoy the spoiling and enjoy the opera. Have an evening that you will treasure for many years. I'll also be there with my wife, if that helps?'

Kate paused, looking at Edison's challenging smile. She loved his cheeky alter ego. 'Actually, it does. I will say yes if you tell me that you let him buy your wife a dress.'

His widening grin told her she had just lost. 'He has bought her many dresses. He has bought us both many wonderful things and experiences over the years. He enjoys his good fortune with generosity and it makes him happy for people to accept his gifts, knowing there are never any strings or expectations attached.'

Kate's look told him that she wanted one more nudge. 'Please come?'

She nodded her assent. Edison's answering smile made her feel warm and safe. 'I will leave you to your day, Kate. The couturier is expecting your call. Please say goodbye to Dee and Carrie for me?'

Kate just needed to hug Edison. He hugged her back warmly and let himself out. *They all move like smoke*, Kate thought, watching Edison through her window as he stalked his car on the road below. She was sure she saw him wink up at her, but there was no way he could have seen her... was there?

Every Sunday following one of Dominique's gigs had quickly become a designated full day off for everyone, and a Sunday spa session for the amigas. A huge tip was just another very good reason to celebrate.

They had already decided to pay out the loan on their new van; it was their company's last capital debt. The three amigas had a wonderful day of massages, facials, pedicures, manicures and general pampering.

Kate's invitation to the opera came up, including the dress and spa, and the consensus was, 'Are you kidding? Go! Enjoy the heck out of it!' It was a unanimous vote in favour of taking up his generous offer without guilt of any kind, including the staff at their spa. A fantastic early dinner with Alberto and his family and a silly, romantic comedy on DVD was the perfect end to a completely enjoyable Sunday off.



Kate called the couturier in the morning. 'Hi my name is Kate Sh... sorry, Catherine Jones.'

A friendly voice said, 'Ms Jones, Mr Savagewood said you would call. May we set a time today for your final fitting?'

Kate protested. 'Excuse me, a final fitting? I haven't even had a first fitting-'

'Are you free later this morning? Harold is your driver and is at your disposal at any time convenient to you. Would 11:30 be suitable?'

Kate felt herself slightly overwhelmed. *Just let go*, her mind urged. She allowed herself to be swept into the current and said, 'Eleven-thirty is great. Do you need my address?'

'Ms Juanita has already supplied that information. Harold will collect you at 11:30 ma'am. I look forward to meeting you.'

Dee saw Kate looking at the phone on the kitchen table and asked what was happening. When Kate told

her about the call, Dee gave her a hug and said, 'Damn girl, you so deserve this. Have fun for us too!'

Kate surrendered. Everyone else was apparently comfortable with the idea and it seemed to be happening anyway.

*He picked out a dress and did not even ask you about it!* raged her inner feminist. *Go burn a bra!* replied every other part of her feminine being.



The intercom buzzed at 11:29. Harold was a respectful and serious middle-aged man of muddled ancestry and accent. Whilst not quite as magically smooth as Edison, he was a very safe and competent driver. He delivered her to a small shop-front boutique and said as he opened the shop door, 'Please enjoy, Ms Jones. I will pick you up whenever you are ready.'

The boutique's proprietess, a couturier of immaculate presentation, paused, looking Kate carefully up and down before smiling in a very self-satisfied way. 'Ms Jones, it's so good to meet you.' Ushering Kate into a spacious interior, she continued. 'Your dress is spectacular! I say this with shameless immodesty. May I offer you something to drink? Champagne, wine or juice?'

'Champagne sounds wonderful, thank you,' Kate said, deciding to throw caution to the wind and 'enjoy the hell' out of the experience.

A younger, more practically dressed woman was introduced as 'Kate's seamstress'. Kate was not totally at ease with a stranger helping her to undress, but the champagne helped. Then the couturier brought in the dress.



Looking at the pale creation, she was barely able to breathe. 'How did you do it without measuring me?' Kate asked, still trying to understand how this was a 'final fitting'. Smiling, the seamstress produced Kate's little black dress in the plastic sheath of a dry-cleaning service.

Quickly placing the pieces of the puzzle together, she smiled, realising that Dee already knew about this. A part of her mind chided her, *Well, how else did he know you had the night off?*

No, it was Carrie too. She had taken her dress along with some other clothes to the dry-cleaners on Sunday.

The couturier said, 'To solve the mystery, your dress was originally made for a lady of remarkably similar proportions over a year ago. She was a gymnast and you have a very similar body shape and movement.'

Kate nodded, answering the couturier's unspoken question, 'Gymnastics and swimming until I finished my graduate degree. Just work and yoga now.'

'I thought so. She fell pregnant before we could finalise her fitting. I knew the right occasion would present itself, and here you are. Mr Edison called me with your approximate measurements – he was very accurate, by the way – and once I'd seen your black dress, I knew this was yours. The rest is quite straightforward. Your breasts are slightly fuller than I thought, so we may have to do some minor alterations there, although it could also work to our advantage.'

The dress was a masterpiece of expertly cut, contrasting, cream and off-white silk panels. Tasteful accents of small, embroidered pearls made a subtle but stunning pattern. Kate was almost scared to touch it, much less wear it. It matched every curve of her body. The dress was a triumph of revelation and concealment,

hugging Kate's body almost as if it had been painted on, fitting her like an elegant glove. The couturier and her seamstress were radiant in their approval of Kate's taut, womanly figure.

Of course, there were matching mid-height stilettos. Kate did not doubt for a moment that they'd fit perfectly. She'd noticed five shoeboxes behind the counter. *It takes clever planning to do something effortlessly*, she thought approvingly with a private smile, remembering her father's often quoted words.

'Two spots to adjust slightly. You wear that dress so beautifully that you could almost get away with it as it is. I am so glad you know how to hold yourself; slouching would ruin the effect completely.' The couturier muttered some quiet instructions to her seamstress, who was taking notes. 'Please don't change your weight at all. You do need a little more of a tan though. Natural, please. No bronzers or sprays with this silk. I believe you were referred to Ms Killaine's establishment?'

Remembering the spa owner's name on the other business card, Kate nodded, still looking at her reflection in the mirrors. A phone appeared in the couturier's hand and a brief conversation was held on her behalf. Kate was now headed to the spa after the fitting. Shaking her head, Kate sent a fast SMS message to Dee and Carrie, "*Enjoying the hell out of the day. The dress!!! xo Kate*".

Ms Killaine's spa was beautiful. The ladies fussing over Kate decided that two short tanning exposures were all she'd need with that colour and style of off-one-shoulder gown. They already had colour photos of Kate's fitting from the couturier. They refused to let Kate go until they had performed a deep cleanse and

facial, explaining that, 'a break-out now is permissible, but a break-out on the night simply will not do.'



The amigas' gig that evening was a simple one, finishing up at a very reasonable hour. In bed that evening, Kate felt one of her dark moods brewing, but she was able to chase it away by refocusing on the wonderful things that had happened since her divorce. Catherine was almost back to being Katie-J again, the bubbly, natural, confident woman everybody loved, especially Dee and Carrie. Her friends loved her and celebrated their wonderful Katie-J returning to life.

They had seen straight through The Prick, but Kate had been blind to his lies. Silvio Schivello was a very intelligent man. Devastatingly good looking in a greasy kind of way, he was tall, rugged, and radiated self-confidence in kilowatts.

Those who loved Kate had found the way The Prick systematically forced Kate to shut each of them out almost unbearable, and they celebrated her return.



## CHAPTER FIVE

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In a luxuriously appointed room of her spa, Ms Killaine leaned back whilst tapping her foot for effect. She gave Kate a determined smile and said, ‘Catherine, I need you to understand something. Right here, right now, you are the most important person we know. Tonight, you are attending a much-anticipated red-carpet premiere on the arm of Dominique Savagewood. In all of the social circles that count, that makes you a princess. Our job is to make you feel and look like that princess. So how about you relax, stop trying to help, and just accept it like a princess, okay?’

Laughing, Kate held her hands up in surrender. Ms Killaine and her assistants cleansed and buffed her to perfection, all the while gushing over the reviews of the show, and gossiping excitedly about the celebrities in the audience tonight. Kate didn’t have the heart to tell them that she barely recognised any of the names they were discussing. She also made a point of listening carefully to each item of their chatter that sounded reliable, just in case it might come in handy later that evening.

After an almost obscene amount of preparation and pampering, they were ready for ‘The Dress’. Even Ms Killaine took a deep breath when the couturier and her assistant carried the gown into the room. Looking at Kate, they paused and smiled proudly for a long moment before taking over completely. Kate was aware of time passing, but her only option was to follow instructions and surrender herself to the decadent attention being heaped upon her.

Kate had never thought of herself as radiant and glamorous before, but there was no denying it now. The moment she looked into the extensive mirror, 'Kate' vanished; she was *Ms Cath-er-ine*, with three syllables. Her lightly tanned skin complemented the gown's pale shades perfectly.

Feeling like they might cramp at any moment, her cheeks hurt from smiling so much. Her attendants had transformed Kate from her usual state of casually good looking into one of flawless beauty. Her hair was perfect, her makeup immaculate, and her dress flowed over her, moving as if it were part of her body. She pushed her thumbnail into the side of her middle finger to stop herself from crying. The couturier had shown her that trick, telling her, 'Waterproof makeup can only withstand so much, dear. It is Madame Butterfly you are attending.'

With fifteen minutes to spare, they declared her preparation complete. Feeling her nerves kicking in, she was grateful to the ladies for insisting that she go to the bathroom a second time before fitting her dress. The couturier and Ms Killaine both used the remaining time to brief Kate on red-carpet etiquette. Their words echoed in her mind, "*The red-carpet is a mine-field to seasoned professionals. You are on the arm of someone that even the city's elite want to know more about. If ever in doubt, be less, not more. A dull reputation may easily be renewed, often to acclaim. A sullied reputation will never be fully overcome.*"

When he arrived to collect Kate, Harold's professional reserve was beaten and he stared at her for a long moment before gathering himself. 'Your car awaits, Ms Jones,' he stammered, his ears afire.

Graciously accepting his acknowledgement as a tribute to the previous five hours of pampering and preparation, she said with a smile, 'Thank you, Harold,' as she floated to the car. Kate might not normally float, but tonight, Ms Catherine did. Harold opened the door for her and offered his hand for balance as she slid into the limousine. Dominique was beaming at her from the opposite rear seat, his tuxedo jacket still on a hanger.

'Catherine! You look absolutely stunning.'

Kate realised she had not responded when he started chuckling. *He did it again!* she thought. *Frozen like a bunny in headlights, those damn eyes of his!* Blinking, she gathered herself enough to let him feel every bit of her experience so far. 'Thank you does not even start to cover what today has meant to me... my lord.'

His look was almost shocked for a moment before his usual calm and controlled persona reasserted itself. Leaning forward slightly, and with his head cocked to one side, he asked, 'Why did you call me that, Catherine?'

'Your name. Consensus suggests Dominique translates to lord, or of the lord.' Taking a slightly sadistic delight in seeing him a little off kilter, she plunged on. 'The spelling is interesting though, suggestive of many different cultures and gender-neutral. You, sir, are an enigma. I am also feeling like I could get away with murder right now, and that, my lord, is also your doing. Thank you, Dominique.' He smiled at her, quietly chuckling after a few moments at his own speechlessness.

With the overwhelming attention she had already received today, and now sitting in a limousine en route to a red-carpet premiere, Kate's mind, heart and libido were sending her mixed signals. His attentive respect

was not helping to clear things up, either. Edison's words came back to her; *Don't overthink things with Dom, just ask him.*

'Dominique? Today has been so special already, but I need to ask, what is happening here? You are by far the most attractive and intriguing man I've ever met, but I don't know that I am ready for a 'date-date', and I don't want to make a fool of myself and, and...'

Kate realised that she had stopped speaking. She imagined she could feel his mind occupy hers for a moment before he smiled, making everything feel safe. He was looking at her, his eyes soft. 'That you would even consider me potential 'date' material pays me a wonderful compliment. Catherine, you are an intelligent, wonderfully down-to-earth, and very beautiful lady. I do not present myself to you as a potential lover or partner, but rest assured that I revel in my role as your companion and devoted escort for the evening. My intentions are most chivalrous and my sole desire, along with that of Mason and Madison Myers, is to express our gratitude and admiration for your rare and valuable talent of being in the right place at the right time, with your brain switched on.'

He continued as Kate absorbed his words. 'Catherine, Mason and Madison want to express their thanks to you personally, and they are truly good people. You averted their exposure to both a potentially significant personal loss and a substantial professional embarrassment. For that, you have all our thanks.'

She could hear how close they were to him through his words and took a few moments to think, appreciative of Dominique's respectful silence as she gathered her thoughts whilst trying to ignore the wave of *déjà vu* she'd felt as he spoke. 'Thank you for being so honest

with me Dominique. You have a way of making everything sound so simple. I have no idea of how to even start thanking you for all of this,' Kate said, waving at the car and her dress.

'The pleasure is so totally mine, Catherine. It took a lot of courage to ask that question as openly as you did. Thank you for trusting me enough to be courageous. Whilst I have never underestimated you, you continue to surprise and delight me.'

Dominique reached into a seat pocket and produced a felted case. Opening it, he revealed an elegant set of pearl earrings and a necklace so fine that its single magnificent pearl seemed to float. 'These, unfortunately, must go back in the morning, but have been kindly left in our care tonight; they will complement that silken masterpiece perfectly.'

He lifted the necklace to her, leaning in close to fix the clasp around her exposed neck. Leaning back, he smiled when he caught her still inhaling with her eyes closed. The sparkle in her eye when she looked at him stopped his breath for a moment. 'Perfect,' he declared after Kate had hung the delicate earrings. She felt like the only thing she was possibly missing was a tiara, or whatever it was that princesses wear. 'Thank you,' was all Kate could bear to say before her voice caught.

After a highly charged pause, locked in each other's eyes, Dom broke the tension with his easy smile. 'Have you seen or heard Madame Butterfly before?'

She happily allowed their chatter to distract her as Dom gave her a rundown of the evening's agenda, and a synopsis of the opera's storyline. Kate had already Googled the opera that week, but the way he told it brought it to life.



Still six long blocks away, the theatre came into view in the distance. Kate's eyes went wide, seeing its entrance already awash with lights, reporters and camera flashes. With a vulnerability that nearly broke Dom's heart, she said to herself but aloud, 'I so don't want to make a fool of myself.'

'Kate, I will not put you in a position of ridicule, just be yourself. When we are inside, keep your hand on my arm and just follow my lead.' Seeing the look of hope in Kate's eyes, he added, 'It will be a fun and memorable evening. You'll be fine and we'll all make sure of it, okay?'

Controlling her breathing, she nodded, realising how much she trusted him.

Harold turned the car away from the theatre and drove two blocks further before navigating a long loop back, delivering them to the stage-door entrance of the theatre after squeezing through a narrow alley. Standing next to the car, Kate straightened Dom's bow tie after he donned his jacket. Harold wished them a beautiful evening and waited to see them safely enter the building. A non-descript side door opened as they neared it, and an usher showed them silently into the rear of the large foyer. The theatre's entrance was a cacophony of TV crews, reporters and their subjects, all competing to be heard.

'No red-carpet after what you spent on me today?' Kate asked, the relief in her voice clear.

Recognising her actual question, he smiled at her. 'The red-carpet is for those who seek assurances of their own importance. The least elegant image one can ever offer is that of getting out of a car. Eschewing the Peacock's Walk places you automatically on the to-be-respected list. Self-promoters are taken far less seriously

and are subjected to a far more invasive experience from the press. We, especially you, will be noticed soon enough. Subtlety is a highly prized but much under-expressed quality in this modern-day Temple of Narcissus.'

Dominique nodded a discreet smile to the city's soon-to-be new mayor and his wife, who were entering with another couple through the same rear entrance they had just used themselves. 'There is a man who well understands the value of subtlety in the public arena, Catherine,' he said as the candidate nodded and winked back at them in friendly acknowledgement before heading in another direction.

Kate squeezed his arm in understanding. She had noted how similarly he and Dom worked during their functions. She said, 'I have seen him in action and I'm surprised your paths don't cross more.'

Dominique leaned in close and said, 'We each have our roles to play and subjective impartiality is a valuable commodity. Were we to appear too obviously familiar with each other, certain assumptions could be made that might prove counterproductive to our common goals.'

Kate processed the depth of his statement and recognised how much trust he had just demonstrated with his disclosure to her. She said with a cheeky inflection, 'Would it be inappropriate to mention how hot you are when you talk like that, my lord?'

His happy laugh caught her by surprise. 'Thank you for your kind compliment, Catherine. Most glaze over.'

'My goodness, Catherine! You look like you should be on the arm of some dashing young leading man, not this old rogue!' Turning, she saw Edison standing there, beaming at her. On his arm stood a woman of striking beauty in a gown of royal-blue. Two crossed scars

marred her otherwise perfectly balanced features and light-olive complexion. One ran from near the top of her head and passed through the outer corner of her right temple; the other extended from the hairline above her temple to just above her right ear. Kate noted that she wore her hair drawn away to the other side of her head, showing them instead of hiding them. Both would clearly have been dire injuries.

'Catherine, may I present the love of my life ...' started Edison, only to have Dom say, 'The love of our lives ...' After a moment of almost ritualistically deep meaning passed between the three, Edison continued, 'Catherine, this is my wife, Juanita.'

Catherine looked into the most complex eyes she had ever seen. Eyes that held history and depth, but right now, they sparkled in a decision made. In a clear alto voice, Juanita said, 'Catherine, we have talked on the phone so often, it's a pleasure to meet you in person. You do know how beautiful you look, don't you?' *Another smooth one! Another smooth and genuine one,* she thought. Kate gave in and found herself instantly liking Juanita.

'Thank you, Juanita. It's great to finally meet you too, and you look amazing. I love that colour.' Kate said, her hand still on Dom's arm. A new face materialised briefly, his features a perfect blend of both Edison and Juanita. His serious young eyes flashed in a direction before he vanished again. Edison and Juanita turned and drifted away as Dom's elbow tightened around her hand, lifting her straighter and turning her slightly just as a photographer came into view.

'Hello, David. Are you freelancing tonight or on the clock?' Dom asked, halting the camera half way to the photographer's face.

‘Freelance tonight, Mr Savagewood. May I?’

‘Of course,’ Dom said, looking around and selecting a nearby spot with far more complimentary lighting. Kate felt his elbow locking her hand in place, offering her his lead as if they were dancing. Leaning in close to her ear, he said, ‘Think of watching two kittens playing tag and Grace Kelly’s calm smile.’ Kate squeezed his arm in thanks, standing as the couturier had made her practice.

The photographers quickly grew in number until more than a dozen jostled for their attention. Dom’s pressure through his elbow guided Kate. They looked to the far left of the group and they pirouetted slowly, followed by a wave of flashes until running out of cameras to look at.

Kate saw the serious young man guiding another couple towards them. Dom looked up as if surprised, greeting Mason and Madison with well-rehearsed spontaneity before drawing them into the group photo opportunity and another wave of flashes. Juanita and Edison appeared to their left, triggering a third choreographed sweep of the flashing cameras as Kate just followed Dominique’s lead. The three men took a half step back to feature their ladies, setting off a final wave of flashes.

‘Thank you, folks. Have a wonderful evening and enjoy the show,’ Dom said to the assembled paparazzi. Under the same hypnotic suggestion as everyone else, Kate watched them disperse to seek new targets. She watched them passing by Edison, who was handing each of them a small card.

‘He’s making sure they get the details correct,’ Dom explained quietly as her gaze broke from the group around Edison. A few more flashes went off nearby as

those who had missed Mason and Madison by themselves quickly corrected their oversight.

Juanita appeared at Dom's side, his free arm wrapping respectfully around her waist as Kate asked him, 'Do you manage everyone so easily?'

Juanita answered in a teasing tone, 'Ha! Yes, he does!'

'No, for the most part, all I do is give them a conveniently acceptable measure of controlled access in exchange for being left alone most of the time. In that lighting, you ladies shone. Now that we have all been seen and captured in our various combinations, we're essentially old news for the evening. Aside from one or two possible sound bites, the rest of the evening is mostly ours. That we are easy to deal with, avoid gossip, and do not seek the limelight generally ensures that we are treated with a certain level of respect, meaning that we are not inviting targets for unflattering stories or pictures.'

Dom released Juanita and performed a half pirouette, turning Kate to meet the radiant smiles of the couple now rejoining them.

'Catherine, it is truly a pleasure and delight to meet you under more suitable circumstances. I am Madison and this gentleman is my dearest friend and husband, Mason.'

Mason smiled at Madison before beaming at Kate. 'My wife is as eloquent as she is beautiful. I am very pleased to meet you, Catherine.' They both kissed Kate's cheeks in greeting, their warmth, genuine and comfortable.

Feeling willingly helpless, Kate found herself liking these people as well. Standing in their circle, she felt totally included. She looked to the couple and said,

‘Madison, Mason, on behalf of our company, I want to say thank you...’

With a courteous wave of her hand, Madison said, ‘Think nothing more of it. Now, tell me how someone as lovely as you ended up on this rogue’s arm?’

Edison chuckled and said, ‘I asked the very same thing only moments ago.’ Kate found herself warming to Edison even more in this context.

Kate smiled at each in turn whilst saying, ‘Dominique hypnotised me and abducted me into a world where everyone is simply beautiful and lovely.’

Kate watched ‘Young Edison’ brush past, barely touching Mason’s arm. Mason said, ‘That explains it then!’ The group turned to face another reporter in time to present a perfect picture for the TV camera and a ten-second sound bite with one of the many reporters in attendance. Edison passed over a note when they’d finished and the young journalist nodded to him before seeking new targets.

Kate was surprised when she tasted her Champagne. In their glasses, it looked the right colour, but tasted only of sparkling apple juice and soda water. Juanita caught her eye and toasted her, taking a slight sip. ‘*Message received and staying sober,*’ said Kate’s answering toast as the pre-show gala became a carnival of meeting this person and that person.

A subtle tone played and they were ushered into their stall. Until this evening, Kate had not experienced live opera, and it exceeded her every expectation within the first few minutes. It was far more than she ever imagined it could be. Carried by the power of the amazing voices and Puccini’s evocative score, Kate visited new realms of musical experience.

The long intermission commenced with another whirlwind of introductions and compliments from strangers, all automatically catalogued by the part of Kate's brain that did that. Dom's smile and pressure through his elbow guided Kate through the experience as if she'd been born to it. He regarded her with pride as she began to take the initiative, confidently greeting by name those she'd met only once before.

The show concluded with an enthusiastic standing ovation, and after a third curtain call, the house lights came up and stayed bright. A lot of the men were taking deep breaths and many of the ladies were dabbing carefully at their eyes. A few moments later, they were heading towards the excitement of the after-performance gala. Juanita came close to Kate's ear just before they entered the hubbub. 'It's feeding time and the hyenas are sniffing about. Be the top of the food chain.'

Kate walked on without reacting, processing Juanita's words with a suitably neutral and happy look on her face. Looking around, she saw it. Photographers and reporters moved through the now far more relaxed crowd with a darker intent, seeking the intoxicated, the love struck, and the indiscreet.

To her left, Kate heard a woman laugh too loudly and saw her position instantly become the focus of a predatory movement of notepads and cameras. *Blood in the water*, she thought, flashing a smile discreetly in Juanita's direction, answered by small nodding acknowledgements from Juanita and Edison. *Red-Carpet 101*, Kate thought, appreciating the care that her companions were taking of her. Reminding herself of all the good advice she'd been given for these moments, Kate relaxed, feeling Dom's elbow still holding her hand gently.

From the corner of her eye, Kate saw 'Edison Jr' lightly tap Dominique's back twice with his thumb as he brushed past. Edison and Juanita casually drifted away in one direction as Mason and Madison fell away in the opposite direction. Dom stepped back across Kate, leading her in a semi-pirouette, meeting the dazzling flash of a camera side on and standing tall. Behind the photographer was a woman with too many sequins on her jacket, and who was a little too mature for the style of makeup she was wearing.

'Savagewood! You are a scoundrel for sneaking in and avoiding me! I want that beautiful angel on your arm in front of my camera right now, with your own sweet arse too! Don't you even damn well try to charm your way out if it!'

Kate was interested to see how Dom would react to such an intimate intrusion. He smiled and asked the reporter innocently, 'How could I possibly say no to you, Sonia?' Then in hurt tones, he said, 'You never return my calls! I was sure you had found someone more deserving of your attentions, and I have been in a deep depression for weeks. Even Ms Catherine has barely been able to get a smile from me, but now, here you are and I am happy again.'

Seeing the imbalance his banter had caused the already blushing woman, Kate felt a pang of empathy as the force of Dom's charm overwhelmed her. *Too late, Sonia, he already has you.*

He theatrically proffered his arm to Kate, guiding her into the best lighting available. He could feel that Kate was feeling unsure of how to hold herself. Hidden from the camera's view, he leaned in and whispered to her, 'Just imagine her standing there in a leather bikini with a whip and a strap-on!'



His remark took Kate completely by surprise, and forgetting about the reporter, she looked at him; as the nearby camera strobed, her joyful laugh framed her face perfectly.

The photographer felt the thrill of knowing that he'd captured a perfect series of images to sell. He and Sonia knew that they had *the* headline image of the night. The reporter surreptitiously switched out the interview cards in her hand and set her recorder running, knowing that she had *the* interview to go with *the* images. Both journalists knew that their night had just become very profitable.



Sitting at the kitchen table and basking in the morning light, Kate felt oddly detached. The last twenty-four hours seemed more like an amazing movie than her real life, and were so far outside of her normal frame of experience that she struggled to categorise it.

Kate was answering Carrie's question. 'No. It wasn't a date. I asked him straight out and he said it wasn't. He and the Myers wanted to say thanks for what happened at his gig. He only kissed my cheek and my hand. They were all so ...'

Dee's hand slapped the table. Jumping in surprise, Kate realised that she had stopped in mid-sentence again. Dee had never been guilty of displaying excessive patience. 'Katie-J, you had better start talking or else!'

Kate shook her head, had a sip of her coffee, and tried to lay it out from the start. Dee and Carrie's happy interrogation went on through two cups of coffee, scrambled eggs on toast, and a little fruit salad. The

day's newspapers circulated around the table after breakfast, each gazing in turn at the pictures.

She and Dominique were *the* picture of the evening in every serious social column. Kate stared at the pictures of Dom and herself, still feeling like it was somebody else. It was as if the whole thing had been a glorious dream, and yet there she was in every paper.

~

*“Dominique Savagewood and his flawless companion, Ms Catherine Jones, made a spectacular couple at Madame Butterfly’s Red-Carpet premier. In a star-studded evening...”*

~

Two editorials went on to name their business, along with Dee and Carrie. The couturier’s boutique and Ms Killaine’s spa received mentions as well!

Carrie lit up her tablet and found many other images online, all with similar variations of the same captions. Kate explained. ‘Edison managed it. You can’t believe how smoothly they work together. There was a young guy there who just has to be Edison’s son. Exact copy, even the same serious eyes. Handsome bugger too. Moves like smoke, there and gone.’

Carrie took a fast breath in. ‘Holy crap! How savage are they? Do you know what happened?’ Kate knew Juanita’s scars were the subject even before seeing the image. Looking at the picture, Kate saw again how with Edison standing protectively by her side, Juanita let the camera see them.

Thinking aloud, Kate said, ‘No, but there is a lot of story there, Carrie. She has a presence that is palpable and has seen a lot. See the way she wears her hair to the other side so they’re not hidden? She’s proud of them.

The weirdest thing was that after thirty seconds with her, I literally didn't notice them again.'

'Here's one with the six of you. Wow, you look like a fixture in there.' It was true. The men were standing behind the ladies, their tuxedos elegantly framing the three women perfectly in every image. Looking closely, even when it was just Dom and her, the serious young man was often in the background, mostly facing away from the camera. She found his face in one and zoomed in. There was no doubt left in her mind, his face was a perfect blending of Edison and Juanita's features, and he was a perfect match to Edison's size and build. *Edison must have started training him when he was still crawling*, she thought, recalling how invisibly he slid through the crowd.

Dee asked with her typical candour, 'So, are they genuinely that nice, or is it wishful remembering?'

'I asked myself the same thing in bed last night. They really are that nice. The respect and warmth between them is real. They all care. The weird thing was that in that group, Edison and Juanita were totally equals. Madison and Mason as well. Other times, Edison is so Dom's man, but last night, they were all equals, like a really close family.'

'So, what do you think that means?' Carrie asked.

'It means there is a lot of history there. They communicate with bloody telepathy most of the time, cueing like a flock of birds. Bang! A synchronised direction change, everything normal. It was like we were dancing and I just followed his lead. It was amazing, like a dream.'

Rising to prepare for their working day, they all agreed that it was a nice dream to have.



A state of relative routine in the amigas' world reasserted itself and life went on. The next gig at Dom's was so smooth and easy that the girls voiced their concern to him that they were taking his money unjustly. He assured them that he was well ahead on the results delivered and that he appreciated the give and take of business as much as anyone did. The summer social season was only months away and the functions would be much busier then.



Walking into Carrie's queendom, her commercial-grade kitchen in their large apartment, Dee found Carrie and asked, 'Is Kate around?'

Carrie shook her head, saying, 'She's scouting the venue for the Thompson wedding.'

Dee smiled. 'Good. That was Juanita on the phone, from Dominique's. We've just been booked for a long weekend instead of his next weekend gig. Thursday morning to Tuesday morning inclusive, a casual breakfast, lunch and dinner for us, eight to ten guests and for five others with a couple of possible plus twenties now and then. Apparently there's plenty of help, so just you and I.'

Carrie looked at her with a hundred questions, but she let Dee get to her next thought. 'We will have to do it without Kate though,' she said cryptically. 'Dominique wants her to be off for the weekend but he doesn't want her to know until we get there. He likes his surprises.'

'That sounds too easy. Where is it?' Carrie asked.

With a growing smile, Dee said, 'His own private island! It gets better; lunch is a cold platter. "You two deserve some time to yourselves," is what the lady said. Private cabin and all facilities, baby. We get to enjoy ourselves too. Juanita said the name of the place translates to something like Magical Happiness. It's their own private sanctuary.'

Carrie looked at her lover, feeling tears prickling in her eyes. 'God, that sounds good,' she said, breathing deeply. 'We have been so busy. A few quieter days sounds so nice. Did you say he is paying us as well?'

'She said that Dominique refuses to let our business suffer just because he wants to steal Kate away. He even insists on paying our staff their usual Saturday wages! Juanita said that they recognise our loyalty to Kate and understand what we mean to each other.'

'So what do we have to do?'

'Pack for the country, warm and cool. A pantry list is being emailed over and you get to add whatever you like to it, but from the sounds of it, there is plenty there already.'

They hugged, giggling like mischievous girls. Suddenly serious, Dee asked, 'Are we feeding our Katie to the wolves?'

Carrie squared her shoulders and said, 'No. The man feels honest. They all do. They speak and act with respect to everyone. When Suzette dropped those plates, Edison put her at ease instead of getting upset. When Savagewood found Corey playing his piano, he picked up a guitar and joined him for a jam. Could you imagine them treating anyone much differently? That kind of chivalry is rare. They might be wolves, but when I think about those photos, I think Catherine might just be able to keep up with that pack.'

‘Jeez, babe, you have really thought about this, haven’t you?’ Dee said.

‘I have a lot of thinking time when I’m playing with new recipes. We are definitely in a different world with these people. They seem to have all the money but none of the hang-ups. Could you imagine anyone else we gig for being even remotely like them?’

Dee looked at Carrie with soft eyes. ‘It’s no wonder I love you so much. Let’s clean up and get an early night.’

Both fell asleep that evening, content in each other’s arms and with smiles on their faces, dreaming of some island paradise called Magical Happiness.



The following two weeks passed in a blur of successful events, most of them for the city’s new mayor. He had been throwing ‘thank-you’ dinners almost every weeknight since the elections. Just days after the opera, his victory in the polls had been almost absurdly one-sided, receiving well over sixty percent of the primary vote. The other serious candidate and the incumbent mayor both conceded defeat less than two hours after counting began. The girls were busy, happy and building their name in all the right circles. Business was good and everything indicated it was only getting better.



## CHAPTER SIX

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For nearly fifteen kilometres, Carrie and Dee had followed Edison's sedan along a series of well-maintained but unsealed tracks. Their sedate pace gave them a chance to appreciate the scenery as their route took them around wooded peaks and through unspoiled valleys. Edison pulled to one side and waved them by when they broke out of the trees and onto a picturesque shoreline bathed in the early morning sun. Kate and Dominique's faces beamed at them from the rear seat of the car as they motored slowly around, and Edison pointed to the area where Carrie could best turn around. Needing to drive straight off the vessel's ramp at their destination, vehicles had to reverse aboard.

Carrie backed the van towards the waiting flat-bottom barge with the same confidence and precision that she did everything else. The tyres growled and pinged as they pushed through the irregular volcanic gravel of the shoreline before climbing over the lip of the lowered ramp and rolling silently over the worn steel of the deck.

The barge's rumbling note changed; no longer pushing against the shore, it gently backed away before turning and moving off. In the still morning air, the clean smells of the forest behind them gave way to the richer estuarine scents of the foreshore. The shape of their destination was intermittently visible in the centre of the large lagoon as the strengthening morning sun dissolved the thick banks of mist still clinging to the water.

Standing at the front of the barge, their destination became clearly visible for a long moment and Dee and Carrie stared at the twin peaks of the island, one a little larger than the other. The saddleback between the tree-covered ends was the lowest point of the island's profile, rising just over five metres above the surrounding water. The island's otherwise uniformly steep and rocky shore was broken by a picturesque little beach in front of the saddleback.

The rocky shoreline itself was predominantly a two to three-metre cliff, irregularly littered with large and small boulders. Gentle slopes led inland from the raised edges of the island, growing steeper on the sides of the central domes of each end; rising some forty and fifty metres above water level respectively. Slim, upright spires of granite dominated each dome on their rear and outside quarters. Remnants of the volcano that had given birth to the island, the natural obelisks more than doubled the height of each end.

From the water, Alegria looked like a simple, wooded island in the middle of a lagoon. Only the faintest plumes of smoke rising from near the high points of the domes on either end of the island suggested any form of habitation.



Catherine and Dominique sat in the back of the town car with Edison and Juanita in front. They watched the barge heading out into the lagoon until a drifting cloud of mist obscured it from view. Dom touched her shoulder, and using her shortened name for the first time in company, he said, 'Welcome to our Xanadu, Kate. Welcome to Alegria.'



Juanita turned to kneel on her seat. Grinning over the centre console, she extended her hand and said, 'Hi Kate, I'm Nita. You know my other love, Dom. My true love remains, as always, Edison.'

Kate laughed and played along. 'Katie-J, pleased to meet you all,' she said, shaking Juanita's hand.

Juanita added in conspiratorial tones with a wink, 'None of the drinks here are watered down, either.'

Their passage was twenty-five unhurried minutes from start to finish. Circling wide around the larger eastern end of the island, Kate surveyed her surroundings. The morning mist had burnt off enough to allow her to appreciate the full scale of the lagoon and surrounding shoreline. Alegria stood in the centre of a body of water nearly six kilometres across and nine long. Both the island and the wooded mountains encircling the lagoon looked pristine. She could only catch the barest hints of structures on the island, all set well back from the shoreline in the woods. No obvious signs of settlement on the surrounding shore were visible.

Seeing the observations on Kate's face, Dom explained. 'We own all of the surrounding countryside for between twelve and fifteen kilometres from shore.'

Edison continued. 'The lagoon is an ancient volcanic caldera. In the shallower south-western end, the water is nearly twenty metres deep. The north-eastern end is regularly sixty metres deep and nearly ninety metres in its deepest parts. The island is a central remnant of a new eruption that essentially fizzled inside the old caldera before becoming extinct.'

Kate considered the information for a moment, assessing the unusual topography with her engineer's mind. 'Except for the spires, the land looks relatively flat, not really a classically volcanic shape.'

‘You’re right, Kate. The volcano that formed the island blew up and its bulk slid to the south-west. After that, it lacked pressure, more oozing than erupting in the end. Under the water on the northern and eastern sides, there are the steep slopes of the classic volcano shape, but as the volcano lost power, it lifted just enough low-velocity magma to seal the landscape as it is today before the geological hot spot closed or failed. At least one huge steam explosion cleared out the eastern end, which is why it is so deep. An explosion, maybe the same one, fractured the caldera’s rim at its northern most point and opened the lagoon to the sea. Fast forward with a few millennia of weathering and erosion, and here we are. Seawater comes into the lagoon through the Race with each tide, forming a horizontal waterfall. Three primary rivers feed fresh water into the shallows behind the south-western end. The lagoon has a huge bio-diversity; the water over the shallows is brackish, and the deep end is salty enough for most ocean species.’

‘I can’t see any structures out there,’ Kate said, indicating the surrounding shoreline.

Juanita said, ‘Our extended family choose to live subtly as custodians of the land. They ensure the privacy of all here.’ In answer to Kate’s questioning look, Juanita touched the scars on her head for Kate’s benefit, saying, ‘All are loved, loyal and trusted.’

*I am going to find out about those this weekend,* Kate promised herself. A thought struck her. ‘How many people do you mean?’

‘Alegria, the surrounding land and the island, is home to forty-four permanent inhabitants, including thirteen born here,’ Dom said.

‘We’re here,’ Edison warned just moments before the barge lurched as it bumped against the shore. With

its engine revving to hold its position against the island, the vessel's ramp lowered to let them off. *We and our, not mine and yours*, Kate noted, filing the thought away for future consideration.

They drove a short distance and pulled into a large, semi-subterranean garage with a sod roof that effectively made it all but invisible to any casual observation from the water or air. The men transferred their luggage into the tray-back of a buggy that looked like a stretched out golf-cart before climbing onto it themselves. Kate asked, 'Why not leave the cars on the shore?'

Edison recited automatically, 'What can't be seen, can't be noticed.' He paused before saying, 'Sorry Kate. We have privacy here and the vehicles could arouse curiosity if noticed on the shore. From time to time, we get lost and not-so-lost hikers through the surrounding countryside. With the vehicles here, there is nothing to arouse interest.'

'We?' The question tumbled out before Kate had the chance to censor it. She looked at Dom, hoping she had not crossed a boundary. His face was relaxed and a smile brushed his lips.

Dom said, 'It's okay, Kate. 'We' is all of us. One of 'my' companies might be seen to own it on paper, but Alegria is 'our' home. All shares are held in perpetual trust and give every person here equal standing.'

Kate nodded, looking around as they drove uphill through the light woods along a path just wide enough for their cart. They parked next to a large structure with a thick and irregularly thatched roof covering a cavernous, semi-enclosed space. Long tables ringed the interior and an unlit fireplace was in its centre. Juanita touched Kate's arm as they alighted the cart. 'This is Alegria's maloca, Kate, our communal space. We share

our meals here. We will have a little fiesta today, probably kicking off around lunch time...'

Juanita fell silent, smiling as she peered through the shadows of the interior space. Kate followed her gaze to see two men in casual clothes leaning against a handrail in the sunshine on the opposite side of the maloca. As her eyes adjusted, Kate recognised the serious young man from the opera. He was sharing comfortable laughter with a tall man. Blinking, she realised he had to be the son of Mason and Madison, his smiling face was a perfect blending of their handsome features.

Juanita took Kate by the hand and led her through the maloca to the two men. 'Kate, this is my son, Juan-Carlos.'

The young man gave Kate a respectful embrace with only shoulders touching. 'Welcome to Alegria Kate. You have already made my sunny day an even brighter one. You know it's not fair, don't you?'

'Sorry, what's not fair?'

'That you look as stunning in jeans and a shirt as you do in an evening gown.'

Seeing the cheeky twinkle in Juan-Carlos's eye, Kate knew exactly what Edison had been like in his youth. *And he called Dom a rogue! No wonder it took someone like Juanita to tame him.*

'Thank you, Juan-Carlos. It is good to see you looking less serious,' Kate said. His easy smile showed a ready sense of humour that warmed her heart instantly.

'Please, call me JC. That night was the first time Pops here let me take full lead.' Kate glanced at Edison and saw a very proud father beaming love for his son.

'He did okay, for a kid!' Edison said, throwing a slow, looping punch, ducked by his son, and returned in a practiced ritual.

Rolling her eyes in mock exasperation, Juanita told Kate, 'They keep doing that faster and faster, all testosterone and machismo.'

A resonant voice caught Kate's ear. 'Until one of them bowls the other backside over breast. A regular occurrence with paras!' Juan-Carlos turned, ducking one last looping blow and slapping Edison playfully on his stomach before they briefly embraced, laughing.

Juan-Carlos said, 'Kate, this is Ricardo Myers, Rick to those who can tolerate *pongos* long enough to get to know him.'

Kate took stock of him as he pouted in a pantomime-worthy display of 'hurt-feelings' at Juan-Carlos. He was tall, taller than Dom by four or five centimetres, in his early thirties, and seriously fit by the look of him. He brightened as his eyes swung to meet Kate's, and his smile was almost physical in its effect on her.

'Catherine, it is an honour and a pleasure to meet you. I see the extensive praise heaped upon you has failed most heinously to do you any justice in person. Please, call me Rick.'

*His voice!* Entranced, Kate stammered a response; one she later hoped had made sense. Her next clear memory was of smelling food cooking and racing off to help Dee and Carrie, only to find herself unemployed for the duration of their stay. Dom and the girls were smiling at her. 'You are our guest, Kate,' Dom said with his cheekiest grin.

Looking around, Kate saw three women in the cooking area just beyond the maloca, all of a light olive complexion, similar to Juanita's. The eldest of the three looked as if she could be Juanita's sister. Carrie was in her own foodie-heaven, already nose-deep in exotic

containers as they were opened for her by the youngest of the three, a delicately featured girl in her late teens. Dee and Carrie had been relegated to the role of 'guests' for this meal.

The aromas were already intoxicating and everyone congregated around the oven pit, interested to see what was cooking. A large joint of meat was roasting on a long spit at one end, a bed of fiery embers shimmering beneath it. Racks of vegetables and other meats lined the edges of the pit, barbequing slowly. Every few minutes, one of the ladies basted the sizzling and crackling haunch with a large bunch of rosemary and other leaves dipped in aromatic oil. There was enough food to feed thirty or forty very hungry people.

After introducing Kate to the new ladies, Dom said to her, 'Many of our friends from the shore join us for either our first or last meal. Normally our first.'

Juan-Carlos broke in. 'I apologise in advance for the noise and chaos you will be exposed to. Have you ever experienced a fiesta, Kate?'

'I was in Mexico during Cinco-de-Mayo celebrations a few years back,' she said. Kate's honeymoon still held many nice memories that didn't involve her ex-husband.

Rick laughed. 'Then you may be slightly prepared.' Offering Kate his arm, he asked, 'May I show you to your cabin, m'lady?' His unaccented voice was the only sound she could register. Kate just nodded. Her body had decided all on its own to take Rick's offered arm, noting how solid and muscular it was under his shirt. Rick looked at Dom. 'Birch cabin?' Dom nodded and his ever-cheeky smile widened as he nodded again in farewell before turning back to the outdoor kitchen area with Juan-Carlos.



As they walked across a cleared lawn towards the tree line, thirty metres away, Rick asked, 'May I give you the rundown on our beautiful piece of paradise?'

'Please,' Kate said, enjoying the sound of his deep, clear voice.

'Alegria is a peanut – or dumbbell – shaped island, running east-west. Overall, it's just under two-and-a-half kilometres long and about three hundred metres narrow at its waist, that's the Pinch. The northern side of the Pinch, where the barge lands, has deep water. Our beach is on the southern side of the Pinch, and it has beautiful shallow waters we call the Shelf. Those shallows are why the barge takes such a long course around. The eastern end, this end, is the Big End. There's a ring road a bit less than two kilometres long that circles around the Big End; it follows the edge of the steeper slopes of the central dome, roughly a hundred-and-fifty to just over two-hundred metres back from the shoreline the whole way around.

'The maloca is in the centre of that ring, and there are four paths running roughly north-south and east-west from the maloca to the ring road. Think spokes in a wheel, the western path is the one you would have come up on from the Pinch. We are on the eastern spoke, which is the longest path because it takes a bit of a detour around the high ground of the granite spire.' Rick paused, checking that Kate was keeping up with his fast introduction.

He indicated with an outstretched arm that they should take a path running into the light woods ahead of them. 'Big End is a touch over a thousand metres wide

and around thirteen hundred metres long. The other end is officially Little End, but we normally just refer to both it, and its village, as the Village. It's narrower, about seven hundred metres wide and nearly nine-hundred long. There is one east-west track to the Village from the Pinch. Uncle and Maria live there and are the spiritual and practical heads of Alegria. Their two households make up the five permanent residents of the island, but there is always a constant flux of visitors in the Village from the three villages on the shore.'

'We have no dangerous snakes, spiders or mammals here on the island, though you will see a variety of lizards and a few small tree and ground snakes. All are totally harmless to anything other than rodents or an occasional little bird. We have small and large raptors that mostly hunt over the water or along the shorelines. We do have a native wasp that likes to nest under fallen timber, but it is pretty inoffensive, and will 'buzz' at you a few times in warning first if you're getting too close. Just reverse course without flapping about and you'll be fine. We are free of most biting insects except for a species of fly that comes out for a couple of weeks each year when the summer weather first kicks in. You will see a good variety of insect eating birds around, and they seem to keep the bugs in check.

'The waters around the island are deep and cold within a few metres of the shore, and especially on the northern and eastern sides, the deep water is very deep. Depending on the wind and tide, we can get surprisingly strong currents.' Rick paused, smiling when she nodded for him to continue.

'The only safe area for swimming is the Shelf, where our beach is. We do see small brown stingrays in the shallows now and then, but they are very placid and



nobody's ever been hit. There are bull, whaler and dusky sharks in the lagoon all year 'round, but we have never seen a shark over the Shelf. They never come over the rocks that circle the Shelf, but they love the transitional slopes between the shallow and deeper water. There have been some encounters over the years, none too serious until a fatal attack at the Race a few years ago when we lost Rocha, the ferryman's son. We go out of our way to avoid encounters, as they are often quite large and can be very aggressive when the water is warm.

'The Shelf itself is a circular, almost completely flat, submerged basalt plain more than nine hundred metres in diameter. The rim of the inner caldera forms a continuous ring of rock all the way around from shore to shore, making it a huge, natural swimming pool. The waters of the Shelf are warm, safe and all about my shoulder-depth at highest tide and waist depth at lowest tide. The rocks can be quite abrasive and sharp on bare feet, so be slow and careful if you set your feet down whilst swimming. We have all learned the hard way that it's best to wear light shoes at all times on the island, even when you're swimming. The volcanic rock can be surprisingly sharp, even just the gravel.' Kate just nodded, listening.

They walked on silently, watching a pair of colourful dragonflies dancing an aerial ballet. Surrounded by light forest, the path brought them to a small clearing where Rick stopped and faced Kate, the serious look on his face almost one of pain. Taking a deep breath, he said, 'Catherine, I really need to say much more than just thank you. The whole time, I never once thought that Ashinkata was not a competent engineer. When you exposed him, you saved my family's reputation, and mine. As my parent's son, a

company director, and personally, I owe you a great debt of gratitude. That is a considerable debt, Catherine.'

Setting the pieces in place in her mind, Kate bypassed his declaration and focused her analytical attention to the crux of the matter. 'He was very well-rehearsed and I think he'd had considerable coaching. He and Rissi were deliberately keeping your guys half-tanked, and he was ad-libbing when I caught him out. You probably never had the opportunity to hear him in that role.'

'Nevertheless, Kate... Catherine, it was an astute and educated catch, and you have the thanks of my parents and myself. Please allow us our gratitude?'

*Damn it!* Kate's face was itching badly and she knew she was blushing vividly. Rick was politely not noticing, and almost containing his infuriatingly satisfied grin.

'Well, I think I can manage that burden, my good sir,' Kate said in a theatrical upper-class tone, breaking into a giggle.

'You have a beautiful laugh Kate, and thank you,' he said with his own quiet chuckle. Offering her his arm again, they walked on.

*Another one who walks like a big cat.* Rick's every movement was economical, athletic and fluid, his eyes slowly scanning ahead.

Breaking out of the scrub, they followed the unsealed ring road until they came to a break in the wild hedge. 'Watch for those pegs, they will glow red at night,' Rick said, pointing to a pair of low, light-green markers. They walked through the space between the bushes. 'The tracks and paths are lit with motion sensing lights so you won't need a flash-light if you give your eyes a few minutes to adjust.'

A log cabin almost magically appeared in front of them, its thatched roof hidden within the trees until they were almost under it. 'Here is your abode, m'lady, *Birch* cabin. May I?' he asked, indicating the door. Kate nodded, feeling a little overwhelmed and slightly light-headed. A wave of sensations like déjà vu washed over her, then another, this one bringing an almost nauseous dizziness.

His hands were at her shoulders in an instant, physically steadying her. Assessing her quickly, he looked hard at her before asking, 'Kate, when did you last eat something?'

She shrugged and said, 'Yesterday evening, I guess,' feeling how nice his hands felt as he held her.

Rick led her inside, sat her on a stool and ripped open a banana from a fruit bowl. 'Eat. Chew each mouthful as well as you can.' Kate's silent protests withered under his competent care. She started on her banana as instructed. It was delicious.

He quickly had a kettle boiling. After combining the ingredients for herbal tea and adding milk and honey, he poured the mixture through a strainer into another cup and handed it to her. 'It's lukewarm and has a taste never fully acquired, but will have you back in a minute or two. It's best to get it down quickly.' In four gulps, Kate drained her cup, hardly tasting it over the banana. The tea's aftertaste was unusual but not unpleasant, although it was definitely foreign to her tongue.

After a couple of minutes and a few deep breaths, Kate felt herself re-energising. 'What kind of tea was that?'

'A few medicinal herbs, no major stimulants or anything like that. In Chinese medicine terms, it prevents the effects of city life's hamster wheel from exhausting

the kidney's energy, as well as protecting the liver and spleen.'

He showed her a small range of jars with coloured lids in a pantry. 'We have gifted herbalists on Alegria. We are often exhausted when we get back and this tea helps; it's in the bottle with the green lid and white cross. Only one cup per day. It's really good in the morning, especially if you wake up tired. Two heaped teaspoons of the dry mixture, half-fill with boiling water and wait two minutes. Fill with milk and two flat spoons of honey; stir, strain and gulp.'

'Well, I feel alright again, thank you, doctor.' Kate even threw in a little curtsy at the end, amused at the detail of his instructions. 'Actually, I feel really clear and relaxed at the same time.' Rick smiled, 'It's amazing what fuel can do for an engine, Kate.' He led her back to her front porch. Pointing left, he said, 'That's south. I am in the next cabin, *Teak*, then my parents in *Oak*, Edison and Nita in *Eucalypt*, JC is in *Ficus*, and Dee and Carrie are in *Mangrove* cabin, at the head of the shortest, southern spoke path. To the right we have *Redwood*, Dom's cabin, and Natalie in *Willow*. I think she is joining us late on Saturday. The last two on the northern side, *Cypress* and *Yew*, are unoccupied. In all, there are ten cabins on Big End.'

'Who's Natalie?' Kate asked.

'She, Dom, and all of us go way back, just over twenty-two years. You'll love her. She is the closest thing I know of to a female version of Dom. May I show you around your cabin?'

Kate nodded. 'Thank you, I'd like that.'

Rick gave Kate a tour of the open-plan cabin. Its exposed beams were all of locally harvested timber. Local stone lined an open fireplace that shared its heat

with the whole cabin, including a spacious en suite bathroom. From the huge bed that comfortably occupied the open space of the bedroom, the view looking out over the water was magnificent. A private, scrubby waterline more than 300 metres wide lay far beyond the back door. The simple, solid furnishings of timber, leather and metal were all beautifully crafted.

Kate found herself completely distracted, lost in the distinctly masculine feel and smell of this man. Snapping back to reality, Kate realised he was asking a question. '... those plans? Maybe tomorrow, once you've settled in?'

*Oh shit, plans? Plans...* She shook her head slightly, her mind frantically trying to replay the conversation and coming up blank.

Seeing the look on Kate's face and hoping that he might be the reason, Rick smiled. He said, 'The solar distillery plans. The ones based on that stunt Ashinkata and company tried to pull?'

The smile Kate gave him was his reward. She said, 'Sorry, I have no idea where I was, but it felt far away. I would love to, Rick. The functions are fun, but I love engineering.' The look in Rick's eyes stopped her. They had a passion in common, and for whatever reason, this was important to her.

Rick blinked first and they laughed, realising they had both stalled, lost in each other.

'Lunch will be about another hour yet, Kate. You will hear when it is ready. Until then, I will get out of your hair and let you settle in. Your suitcase is in your bedroom. If there is anything you need, just yell.' Pointing to a phone, he said, '#99 or the red button is for any emergency, it gets everyone on the island. The emergency alert is one constant ring; if you hear it,

please pick up as soon as you're capable. I am #16. This cabin is #15, Dom's is #14. Your friends are on #20 and the maloca is #10. A directory card is under the phone.'

As he respectfully took his leave, Kate said, 'Thank you, Rick. I will see you at lunch.'

Before her door closed fully, he turned and said, 'I very much look forward to lunch for another reason now, Kate. Thank you.' His reward was Kate's face glowing bright red again, her smile crooked behind the closing door.

'Oh shit, Katie-J, you just got hit by a bloody train!' she said to the empty cabin, falling back against the now-closed door. *I need to speak to Dee and Carrie.* After lunch, she decided.

*Damn it, woman, stop smelling after him!* her rational mind chided. 'Shower time,' she announced aloud, 'I need hot water.'

Refreshed, clean, and smartly dressed in comfortable clothes straight out of her suitcase, Kate heard the staccato clangs of a bell in the distance announcing lunch. Walking into the sunlight on the ring road, she met Dominique strolling towards the head of the path that led to the maloca. 'Katie! Walk with me.'

Kate took his arm and they walked in a comfortable silence, turning onto the eastern path. A few metres into the trees, he pointed to a colourful lizard up on a high branch. An intricately marked tree snake was stalking it. 'You'll only see those snakes high up except in the hottest weather. Any moment now...'

Just as the snake started sliding into position, the lizard stopped advertising for a mate just long enough to notice the approaching danger and stay in the gene pool. It leapt clear of the snake and the tree, gliding on wide membranes between its legs into the thicker scrub below.

'Wow!' Kate said. 'I'm not that keen on snakes, are there many here?'

'Believe it or not, that is a big one. Most here are no more than double the size of a large earthworm and all are harmless. Kids sometimes see how many they can put in their pants. There is a species of python on the island that grows a little larger, but it's very shy and rarely seen. We occasionally see a snake in the water near the outer shore, but they never make it here. Our people sustainably harvest the lagoon and there is a very active food chain out there. A swimming snake is just a convenient lunch for any number of aquatic or winged predators.

'The only predatory mammals on the island are bats. We have an active population of raptors too. They circle over the spires at either end of the island as they warm in the morning sun and are a spectacular sight.'

'I look forward to seeing them. Rick told me about your wasps. Is there any other wildlife I should know about?'

'Yes, there is,' he said, his memory prompted. 'Sometimes a particular owl that hunts around here can startle you in the later evening. It sounds a lot like a very young woman screaming. Whilst harmless, it can surprise the hairs clear off the back of your neck.'

'Something to look forward to,' she said. He laughed. It always took her by surprise how the word 'generous' applied to everything about Dom, even his laugh. They walked on with their arms linked, enjoying the sounds and smells of the scrubby woods around them.

Her face clouded in thought as they entered the small clearing where Rick had thanked her earlier. She heard Edison's words again, '*Just ask him.*' A question

had been burning in her mind for the last hour. ‘Dom, are you trying to set me up with Rick?’

He stopped and hit her with his most infuriatingly knowing grin. ‘Ah, you are telling me Rick has caught your eye.’ He held up his hands as they stopped to face each other. ‘Kate, I recognise something in you. I also recognise the injustice of the hurts and traumas that have recently been inflicted upon you, and your company’s men.

‘Your question tells me that a man who I love as my own flesh and blood has caught your eye. If the two of you found happiness, for a weekend or a lifetime, I would consider the matter one worthy of celebration.’

‘But...’ Kate stopped. Yet again, she was completely without words.

‘Did I know the two of you would have common ground? Yes. Do I know he’s about as evolved, charming, bright and handsome as anyone has the right to be? Of course. Did I intend for you to become attracted to him or romantically linked in any way? Not specifically. But Kate, neither did I *not* intend it. You are both good, smart, beautiful people whose paths have crossed at this time and in this place.’

She playfully slapped his chest, part of her noting how firm it was. ‘I hate the way you can say anything and make it sound so damn reasonable. Do you really think it’s that easy, Dom?’

‘Kate, unlike most divorcees, you are not faced with any deep philosophical or emotional questions regarding your divorce. A predator that is completely devoid of social, moral or ethical conscience specifically targeted you. His pathology leaves him incapable of feeling or receiving love at any meaningful level as we might define it, so you are free of all the normal, ‘what’s wrong



with me?' questions. May I offer an appeal to your objective mind?' She nodded, feeling bewildered at his concise summary of her marriage and divorce.

'Place any length of time from a day to a decade between your divorce and this moment, and you would not change any of the pertinent details, not one. You are Kate and he is Rick. You are both intelligent, wonderful, and talented people in a place of magic and beauty.'

'I can't argue with you there. The cabin is absolutely gorgeous, Dom. Thank you so much for sharing all of this with us.'

'It is absolutely our pleasure, Kate. All of us live in gratitude and we celebrate our fortunate lives by living them with humour and honesty.' He placed his hands lightly on Kate's upper arms, saying, 'Give yourself permission to be all that Catherine, Kate, and Katie-J can be. If pleasure, lust, or love visits you, I pray you let yourself enjoy it. In translation, Alegria means a wondrous and magical intensity of being. You deserve happiness, Kate. We all do. Welcome to Alegria.'

Kate silently processed his words, her tears threatening. He offered her a direction and they resumed their silent stroll, enjoying the cool shade and clean scents of the trees on either side of the pathway.

As they broke through into the clearing around the maloca, Kate grabbed Dom and hugged him, letting every bit of her gratitude flow into him. His kiss on her forehead was all the response they needed. For a very long moment, they looked into each other's eyes, breaking into mutual smiles of understanding. As he led Kate towards the cacophony of voices and laughter, Dom said with a chuckle, 'Ready?'



## CHAPTER SEVEN

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As Dom led Kate into the maloca, they entered a space filled with colour, movement, and three overlapping groups of joyous people. The tables were covered in bright fabrics and topped with baskets of ripe fruit.

Carrie was with the group closest to the cooking area, and talking animatedly with the three women who had been tending the food earlier, as well as a number of new faces. Kate watched as each of them took turns to smell and taste the different bundles of herbs passing between them. She smiled fondly, knowing that Carrie had obviously found some kindred culinary spirits.

Dee was naturally in the centre of the largest and noisiest group, along with Edison, Juanita and Juan-Carlos. Edison was singing a fast chanting song as everyone clapped in time whilst doing their best to make him lose track. Dee looked up at Kate and they shared a moment of deep bliss. Their reverie was broken when, with a start, Dee realised a decorated stick had been pushed into her hands. It was her turn to take up the song where Edison had left off, and the laughter and teasing got louder when she made up her own words, barely missing a beat.

Dom led Kate to a group centred on an elderly woman who Kate immediately felt to be the oldest soul she had ever encountered. Mason, Madison and Rick were in close attendance together with a number of others Kate had not yet met. Dom led her over and spoke to the matriarch in a language Kate didn't recognise.

Then he spoke again in English. 'Grandmother, this is Catherine.'

When Grandmother looked up at her, Kate found herself locked in a tunnel that ended with the matriarch's clear eyes. Her intense stare made Kate feel as if she were in contact with something alien and oddly familiar at the same time, something timeless and very big. Grandmother jumped to her feet and held Kate's face gently with her weathered hands before examining her closely.

With a clear voice and sounding more like a young television reporter than a wizened old woman, she said, 'I recognise you, Catherine. Welcome home.' She laughed as Kate stared in shock both at her words, and at the clarity with which she spoke. Leaning in, Grandmother let her shoulders hunch and croaked in a faux elderly whisper, 'Gotcha, you young whippersnapper.'

The whole maloca had been quiet for this meeting, and when Kate laughed in surprise, everyone laughed with her. Happiness and acceptance wrapped the entire group in a sense of unity that was wonderfully overwhelming for the newcomers and residents alike. When the matriarch placed her hands on either side of Kate's face again, the group fell respectfully quiet and listened intently to her words.

'Catherine, you are my granddaughter. It is correct and right that you call me Grandmother. I am daughter of the stony mountain, counsel to my people. Welcome, granddaughter.' She turned to the waiting faces and announced, 'Come and recognise my granddaughter, Catherine, now returned to us,' presenting Kate to the crowd.

A young man stood and came to her. He said, 'I am Pedro, son of the Race,' and whilst holding her shoulders in both hands for ten or fifteen seconds, he memorised her face before embracing her. 'I am a fisherman and provider for my people. Welcome to Alegria, Catherine, granddaughter of my grandmother. Welcome home.'

Kate's mind raced to process the pattern of speech before she said, 'I am Catherine, daughter of a great builder. Thank you for your welcome, Pedro, son of the Race, grandson of my grandmother.' A murmur of appreciation ran through the crowd at her words, and Kate saw Grandmother and Dom smiling at her in approval.

One by one, they came to her. Dom was second last to greet her, and then there was one. 'I am Ricardo. Son of the Pumas.' He smiled as he studied her face, even blushing slightly. 'I am a builder for my people. You are very, *very* welcome to Alegria, Catherine, granddaughter of my grandmother. Welcome home.' He leaned in close and whispered, 'Pace yourself, this will not break up until near midnight.' When he kissed her cheeks on both sides, the whole room exploded into noise and laughter. Within a few minutes, the revellers had picked up almost exactly where they'd left off before Grandmother's proclamation of welcome.

Kate took a few moments to look at each face, re-associating each person's name and organising folks into their own proclaimed groupings. As she quietly recited each person's name, Rick affirmed her recall. She started seeing familial traits within those groups. The ritualised greetings seemed as old as time and filled with meanings that she knew went far deeper than she could understand at that moment.

Kate did not know of any indigenous group in the area that looked anything like these happy and vital people. The groups soon merged into one and picked up the singing game that Dee, Nita and Edison had been playing earlier. Hysterics broke out when Grandmother grabbed the singing stick on the way past and added her own ribald and teasing lyrics.

Most of the children were on the lawn kicking a soccer ball about, and the adults would step outside for a few minutes at a time to join in. When Maria started doing tricks with the ball, bouncing it from foot to foot in increasingly complex patterns that included her knees, head and shoulders, the kids cheered loudly and the amigas looked on in amazement at her skill.

The celebration was organic and natural. Food and drink seemed to find its way out in copious amounts without any specific pattern or organisation. Music, dancing, and laughter filled the hours, along with some good-natured teasing when someone did something especially silly. Kate found the people's accepting and joyful dynamic wonderfully different to her city conditioning. Nobody seemed particularly drunk or loud, and everyone remained respectful and inclusive of all in the group. Most unusually, none of the teasing, jokes or banter had a sharp edge to it.

Late in the evening, as yawns started and conversations slowed, Uncle brought silence with three raps of his long staff on the concrete floor. Following the cue of those around them, the girls joined the circle that was forming around the room, everyone with their neighbour's arms over shoulders or around waists. In her clear voice, Grandmother said to the group, 'I offer my thanks to each of you for sharing your acceptance with me this day.'

All responded, 'We accept your love in gratitude, and return it twice over.'

Dee and Carrie caught Kate's eye from the other side of the circle as they felt themselves drawn in by their neighbours until in a tight group embrace. '*Can you believe this?*' was the clear message on Dee's grinning face. Carrie was in tears with a silly smile, and Kate realised she was not alone in those tears; her own eyes were moist and stinging. As the group broke up into individual hugs, many others also had moist smiles on their faces.

Everyone pitched in and the cleaning up was done in minutes. Kate stifled a yawn before she realised that Rick and his parents were standing next to her. Madison asked, 'May we walk you back to your cabin, Kate?'

'Thank you, I'd like that. Is it like this every time?'

Mason laughed. 'No, sometimes things get loud.'

Madison playfully slapped her husband's shoulder. 'You know that isn't what Kate meant.' Turning to Kate, she said, 'Acceptance and gratitude are the central and enduring themes of Alegria.'

'I have so many questions, but they can all keep for later. Bed sounds like an incredibly good idea.'

With the rest of their goodnights already said, Madison negated any potentially awkward moments by taking Kate's arm in her own as they walked out into the night. The four passed two glowing posts marking the start of the eastern spoke path. A short way along, Kate paused to examine the discreet down-facing lights that illuminated the path with just enough light to walk safely.

Rick said, 'The path lights are all concealed LEDs, and will stay on for seven minutes from your last movement. The buttons on the back of any of the lights

or markers will automatically summon help if you need it.'

Their walk was relaxed and comfortable as they enjoyed the light breeze that carried the clean scents of the sleeping woods and the noises of the night. At the clearing, they paused to gaze up between the trees at the moonless sky above them, splashed with bright stars. Walking Kate onto the ring road and approaching her cabin, Madison said to her, 'Sleep as long as you like. We don't do much before lunch time after our first night back.' Then she added, 'The dark jar with a royal-blue ribbon, two heaped teaspoons with just a little honey, no milk, and leave it drawing until it's lukewarm. It will make sure you get a clean and deep sleep.' Kate squeezed Madison's arm as she thanked her.

Arriving at the steps of Kate's cabin, Mason and Madison hugged Kate in turn, saying a simple and fond goodnight before stepping back a little. Rick's goodnight and embrace was the most formal, but he held her the tightest too. *Old fashioned*, Kate's mind narrated, *but that's really nice as well*.

After a quick shower to freshen up, Kate discovered that the suggested tea was delicious and reminded her of a number of different flowers, none of which she could quite manage to identify. A deep, dreamless sleep carried her to nearly mid-morning the following day.



As her consciousness returned, Kate felt profoundly rested, relaxed and calm. Revelling in the feeling, she propped herself up with pillows to gaze out at the water in the distance as she snuggled under the warm covers for another half-hour. Finally, the insistent call of nature

became too much and forced her to get up. *This is pure heaven!* she thought, donning a luxurious robe that was draped over the back of a chair near her bed.

Exploring the kitchenette, she found a fully automatic coffee machine with a generous mug already placed under its spout. Powering the machine on, multiple options lit up on its control panel. Kate selected a double-shot flat white and waited for her request to be completed.

She strolled the 200 metres from her back door to the water's edge with her steaming mug. The water lapped gently around the boulders and stones of the rocky shore, almost three metres below where she was standing. A green and red dragonfly flashed in the sunlight as it danced over the shoreline, hunting.

A single-seat lounge swung on ropes beneath the branch of a large tree, perfect for enjoying the view in the dappled morning sunlight; it even had a foot swing and a cup holder. Kate sat back and gazed at the far side of the deep lagoon, watching the barge that had carried them to the island now working in the distance as a fishing vessel. As she sipped her coffee, the warming breeze pushed against the tree, rocking her gently.

A shrill birdcall roused her from her doze. Kate took a moment before shaking her head, not believing that she had fallen back to sleep again. She discarded the contents of her now stone-cold mug of coffee under a nearby bush, and giggled as she stretched before heading back to the cabin.

Emerging refreshed from her hot shower and wrapped in a towel, she found a rail full of clothes in her wardrobe. Pinned to the shoulder of one was a note that read, '*Kate, welcome to Alegria. These are yours.*' She selected a pair of pants and a shirt with rolled up sleeves,



unsurprised that they were a perfect fit and marvelling at the care and consideration she felt from everyone here.

Kate stopped to look back at her cabin from its ring road entrance. The cabins were hard to see from the road, or standing right in front of them for that matter. They just blended into the countryside. She had noted earlier that even the floor to ceiling windows facing the water were sloped outwards at the top so that they offered no reflections. The engineer in Kate appreciated their clever and unobtrusive design. As she strolled along the ring road, she heard a hawk whistling high in the sky. It was barely a dot against the blue when she located it after a minute of looking.

Kate found her friends' cabin and knocked on the door. When Dee opened it moments later, the look on her face told Kate that she and Carrie were feeling the magic of the island as well. The only greeting that seemed appropriate was a silent hug, broken by eventual giggles. 'Coffee?' Dee asked softly.

'Yes please. Is Carrie up?'

Dee pointed through the rear windows with a smile. 'She's asleep out there.' Carrie was dozing in a chez lounge near the water's edge.

Kate giggled. 'That was me an hour ago. I was still in a dressing gown though. Did you make the tea as well?'

Dee nodded in response before saying, 'Kate, I don't think I've ever slept so long or so deeply.'

'Can you believe this place? These people? It felt like we were back in time and in some far off jungle fantasy land.'

Dee stopped and thought for a while. 'Yes, but they're like no people I know of from around here. They're almost psychic in the attention they pay one

another. It is such a nice vibe. I like them. I think we were invited to stay with every single family last night.'

'Me too.'

Dee started making some fresh coffees and a few minutes later, Carrie wandered into the cabin, still shaking off her slumber. She looked at Kate, brightened and said, 'Katie-J, you've done it again! That young man was looking at you at every opportunity yesterday. Did he stay the night?'

'Carrie!' Kate shrieked. 'He didn't even kiss me goodnight.'

'Did you want him to?' Carrie asked, her eyes locking onto Kate's.

'I have no idea,' Kate said, suddenly serious and feeling in need of her friends' input. They shared a few moments of contemplative silence until Dee passed Kate and Carrie steaming mugs of fresh coffee. Carrie looked at her and said, 'The last one went cold out there.' Kate laughed and told her that the same thing had happened to her as well. They walked back towards the water and sat on a large deep semi-circular lounge that was lined with cushions. It offered a beautiful view of the Shelf, and the waters of the lagoon beyond.

Without waiting, Carrie said, 'Right, Katie-J, what's going on in that over-heated brain of yours?'

'I thought Dom was hypnotic, but Rick is completely...'

Her friends waited for her to finish her thought until Dee's impatience got the better of her. 'Perfect?' she suggested.

'Kate, First answer, here and now, what do you want?' Carrie asked.

'I feel like ... He's so nice, and...'

'First answer, Katie!' Carrie demanded.

'I really like him. I don't know what I want, but I really do like him. I think Dom is trying to set us up.'

'Noooo! Really?' Dee asked in her most playful and sarcastic voice. 'You saved his family company, he's an engineer who actually understands the stuff you talk about, you look like you were physically made as a matched set, and his folks are amazing. Katie-J, don't you dare deny yourself one moment of pleasure with that gorgeous man. He is *nothing* like Silvio.' Dee's final proclamation laid the crux of the matter bare.

'Katie, The Prick is not worth in totality what Rick would flush away on any given morning!' The venom with which Carrie made her statement took them all by surprise, even Carrie, who blushed before smiling and saying, 'Katie, I'm sorry that The Prick did such horrible things. Until last night, he would have been the one person in the world that I hated.'

'Both of us,' Dee added.

'Last night, Grandmother and Uncle had a long talk with us. You know they're shamans, right? She said that she's had dreams of you, which is why she said that she recognised you. They told us to celebrate your trials and to be sure to offer gratitude to both your angels and your demons for leading you here. Actually, they kept saying, for leading you home.'

Dee said, 'We talked about this last night. That old woman is one of the oddest contradictions either of us has ever met, but she's right, and damned if she and Uncle didn't make sense. You have gone from strength to strength since The Prick. We can both see it. Something wonderful is in motion and I have never felt more strongly about anything, except how much I love you and Carrie.'

Carrie nodded to affirm the thought. 'Katie-J, if you have half an interest, go with it. These people are different, and this place is different. I already trust them all almost as much as I trust you two. I have no idea why but I just do.'

'We both do,' Dee said.

'Make that, we all do. I love you guys!' Kate said, wrapping them both in an awkward, seated hug. She giggled as they broke apart. 'He is pretty cute, isn't he?'

'Yeah, and the surface of the sun is a little warm too!'

The ringing of the bell in the distance caught their attention. Answering Kate's questioning look, Carrie said, 'Juanita and Maria told us that the kitchen was theirs for lunch. They're cooking something special.'

'Well, we better go and have a look then,' Kate said.

Walking up the short southern path to the maloca, a delicious aroma met them as they drew near. It was familiar and slightly alien at the same time. They had already exchanged quiet greetings with those present by the time Dom walked in with the Myers. Mason and Madison stayed a pace back with Dom whilst Rick headed straight for Kate. When he asked how she'd slept, she complained that she'd slept too long and too well, and they all laughed.

'Alegria,' Dom and Rick's parents chorused.

Still chuckling, Rick said, 'Sleep happens here, real sleep, not those periods between waking we get in the city.'

'Whatever it is, my God, if you could bottle it-' Kate started to say.

Juanita's modulated voice cut in from the other side of the space. 'World peace would be a reality. I hope

you're all hungry.' She was carrying a platter of toasted corn bread.

The aromas suddenly reminded them of their missed breakfasts. A young couple were setting out cups and filling them with water. Uncle, Maria, and her daughter, Paz, carried in a platter supporting a large, vine-secured package of charred leaves, setting it on one end of a long table. Without the people from the shore, the fifteen of them were the current population of the island, all sitting on the cushioned benches of one table.

Uncle stood in front of the package and everyone fell silent after joining hands. He spoke in a clear and heartfelt voice. 'We recognise and value these blessings. We give our thanks. May the spirits of our food know the truth of our gratitude and be at peace as they join us.' He paused for a moment longer before attacking the top of the package with a hooked knife, unwrapping more and more layers of leaves until he broke into the meal itself.

Dee asked about the unusual words of the meal's blessing, and Maria answered. 'If one thing can have spirit, then everything must have spirit. The earth and rain that become the plants and animals, the wood that burned and the fire that cooked our food all have spirit. Those who had a hand in harvesting, carrying or preparing the meal all added a part of their spirit to our food. We honour with gratitude and acceptance every part of the food that will become us and sustain us.' Carrie was almost in tears when she said, 'Maria, that's beautiful. I love everything about what you just said.'

Uncle was carefully serving out their meals, and Maria smiled as she passed Carrie her meal. It looked a little like a cross between a Spanish paella and an Irish stew, depending on how you viewed each dish. Mostly

rice and vegetable, the flavours were exotic, the sparse meat was tender, and it was all scrumptious. Something about the island encouraged everyone to eat slowly, appreciating each mouthful more than they did in the city. A few pleasant comments were made here and there, but mostly, they enjoyed their meal without the need for chatter. Alegria's warm soothing breezes worked its relaxing magic as it washed around them.

Mopping up the last of his meal's juices with a corner of bread, Dom said, 'Nita, Maria, Paz, as it always is when you make it, that was brilliant, thank you.'

'I've never tasted those flavours together and some I don't recognise,' Carrie commented, 'but they worked so well together.'

'I would be happy to share with you, Carrie,' Paz said.

Kate blinked, realising how familiar these people felt already. It sounded so natural to hear Carina's nickname, even from Maria's teenage daughter.

Paz offered to prepare some small bowls of sweet rice and fruit for dessert, but her suggestion was declined. They had all eaten too much of the main meal.

Curiosity got the better of Dee and she asked, 'Why is there an empty place with food at the head of the table? I noticed that yesterday too.'

Uncle answered, 'The reason is twofold. That space is for gratitude. This is why we serve a little mouthful of food from everyone's plate to that place, so we are connected to it. Kind spirits are welcome to visit and sit at that place in peace. The other reason is that all of us speak with the same rights. It is a concept similar to the legends of King Arthur, where he had a round table so there was no head. None of us will sit at the head of a

table. The two concepts come together to form a guiding principle of Alegria, that we are led by gratitude.'

Uncle then smiled a wry grin. 'You see, Dee, our people are also a passionate and stubborn lot, and disagreements happen in any family or society. You will often see arguments settled when people serve a little from their plates to that space at the same time, ending a conflict without loss of face. If the argument was significant, you will see each also serve their choicest bit to the other's plate as well. It shows the rest of our people that those involved have set their differences aside.'

Their lunch finished naturally a short while later and everyone pitched in to clean up. Leaving Kate and Rick alone in the maloca, Dee and Carrie were already giggling in the cooking area with Maria and Paz. Everyone else was visiting the village with Uncle and the young couple who, the amigas had found out, were apprenticed to him.

Deliberately being cheeky, and leaving her question open to many interpretations, Kate asked Rick, 'You mentioned something about plans?'

His responding smile heated her very being. 'I find myself unable to think of anything else that would please me more, my lady.' He paused before adding with flirtatious humour, 'Your place or mine?'



They spent their afternoon immersed in engineering bliss in Kate's bright living room. Kate was impressed with the ingenuity of the modifications that Rick had made to the design of the solar distillery. At one point, he summarised his intent. 'With these working, people

who have no power and no supply of clean water can have access to safe water. It should be able to process saltwater or even polluted fresh water. It's close, but the energy budget is paradoxical past this point. If I can get it to work though...'

'I love it,' was Kate's only possible response.

For the rest of the afternoon, Kate found herself distracted, almost willing Rick to make a move. The respect he showed her at all times made it clear that only with effort was he resisting. *He really is a throwback to a chivalrous past*, she thought at one point, before sinking back into the bliss of their shared engineering Nirvana.

Rick took his leave as the sun was low in the sky. At her door, he turned to her and said, 'Kate, I have a confession to make. I find myself attracted to you and everything about you.' He rushed on. 'I know you have had a rough time of it, so please know that unless you're comfortable with the idea, I will not push. Please say nothing now, Kate. I want you to have time to think without needing to say anything. We, my parents and I, are visiting with Grandmother at Race, the village on the northern shore where the sea comes in, and we'll be staying the night. May I offer you a guided exploration of our beautiful island in the later morning?'

Kate did not trust herself to do more than smile and nod, appreciating his consideration whilst processing his words. Standing on the step of the balcony, he kissed her hand for a little longer than chivalry suggested was strictly appropriate before he melted her with a smile and vanished into the early twilight.

Her mind observed drily, Still moving like a big cat! A sexy, big, sexy, confusing, sexy, man-cat!





Kate shared her evening meal with Dom, Edison, Juanita and the girls. 'Carrie, this dish is wonderful. You have used some of our island's herbs,' Dom said.

'Dom, you have some amazing produce here. I have not even seen some of it before, but tastes and smells don't lie.'

'She cooks with her eyes closed half the time,' teased Dee.

Juanita responded, 'So do I. Aroma is the language of food. It's how it talks to you.'

Carrie looked at Juanita with a huge smile. 'Perfectly said.'

Comfortable and easy conversation filled their relaxed evening. At one point, Kate shivered when the cool evening breeze penetrated her shirt and Dom had his jacket draped over her shoulders in an instant. He gave her shoulder a light squeeze to acknowledge her thanks before she had a chance to say anything. Everyone helped with the cleaning up before saying good night and retiring for the evening.

Indicating the eastern path back to their cabins, Dom offered Kate his arm, and she smiled, nodding her acceptance. As soon as they were alone, Kate said, 'Rick told me he was interested in me this afternoon.'

'And how did you respond?'

'He didn't give me a chance to answer him. He wanted me to think about it before I said anything.'

'He's a smart man. A considered decision is far better than a hasty conversation filler. He is a kind and considerate man by both nature and upbringing, and he's about as hard as flint as well. How did you want to respond?'

Kate held her breath, thinking. ‘I don’t know where my mind is at. I don’t know if it is him or the whole Alegria thing...’

Dom halted and faced her squarely. ‘Those words pay suitable homage to the perceived expectations and conditioning of society. They are also a total deflection. Kate, what do you want,’ he respectfully touched the centre of her chest, ‘here?’

Kate felt his touch simplify everything, but her instinctive answer confused her, going against her mind’s instinct for self-protection. Kate said in mock frustration, whilst stamping her foot, ‘Will you lot stop being so bloody perfect!’ She was trying to deflect the question, but Dom held her eyes. His question was not going away and they both knew it.

‘Carrie asked the same damn thing this morning. I wanted him to kiss me, all right? I wanted to run away, and I wanted him to stop me and kiss me.’

‘Carrie does not disappoint,’ was all Dom said in response. They resumed their strolling pace in silent companionship, enjoying the sounds and smells of the woods. Kate’s mind replayed his question. She decided in a moment of abject self-honesty that she had even thought about a little more than just a kiss with Rick.

After a couple of minutes, Kate asked, ‘Do you really think it’s that simple Dom?’ ‘Why on earth should it be any more complex?’ He asked. She chuckled and grabbed his arm tighter. ‘One day, I am going to hear you say something that I can argue with.’ They both giggled and strolled on.

Reaching the steps of her cabin, Dom turned and hugged her. ‘Good night, Kate. May you sleep well and dream vividly of wondrous beauty.’ He kissed her respectfully on her forehead and bowed lightly, and then

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disappeared like smoke into the night. Kate slept from the moment she hit the pillow until light flooded into her room when the sun's leading edge broke over the horizon the following morning.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Deciding to experiment a little, Kate made a cup of the reviving herbal tea that Rick had previously made for her. Whilst enjoying a banana as an early-morning snack, she followed his instructions and drank a mixture that tasted just as odd as the one he had served her. During her shower, she felt her mind clearing, throwing off the last vestiges of sleep. Her body felt wonderfully relaxed and energetic as she dressed. Spying Dom's camouflage-patterned jacket on a chair, she decided to return it.

Feeling adventurous, Kate walked out of her back door, wanting to do some exploring and see if she could follow the shoreline to Dom's cabin. Although still early, the clear warm sunlight of another beautiful day had already replaced the golden glow of dawn. Kate heard a distant screaming whistle, and searched the sky behind her for a moment before she spotted a pair of eagles. They were circling in the weak thermal lift already rising from the slim granite spire that dominated the Big End.

Almost two-hundred metres of wild scrub lay along the shoreline between the semi-cleared wedges of land behind hers and Dom's cabins. The volcanic shore was too irregular and steep to traverse, forcing her to be a little creative in how she worked her way through or around a few large patches of surprisingly thick scrub. Along the foreshore, a pair of shrieking birds startled her when they rocketed out of some low vegetation from almost directly under her feet. A little further on, she sat

on a small boulder to watch three butterflies flicker and dance in the still air. In the morning light, their iridescent flashes of blue captivated her.

A large fish swirled the surface of the water only four or five body lengths from shore, driving a cloud of baitfish into the air as they fled. A kingfisher flashed, rising from the water with its silver prize wriggling in its beak. Kate's cheeks were starting to hurt from smiling. The constant lapping of the water at the base of the rocks and the warmth of the early sun made her meandering explorations completely enjoyable. She stopped again, this time to watch two lizards bobbing their heads in territorial competition on a large boulder, their throats bright against the dark volcanic rock. Eventually one darted forward, chasing the other out of sight.

Climbing over a cluster of boulders to bypass some wild tangles, she followed a small bird as it flitted just ahead of her, its vivid emerald breast flashing garishly as it danced and trilled for her. It settled on a large shrub and flitted from twig to twig. She managed to stalk close enough to almost touch its tail feathers, when a faint noise suddenly focused her attention inland.

*Crap!*

She found herself behind a chest-high, and thankfully thick bush, looking directly at the rear of Dom's cabin. Worse, the noise she'd heard was his cabin's back door opening. Dom walked out into the morning sun, wearing only a pair of jeans, his muscular torso bare. Knocking on his door was one thing, but being discovered prowling in his back yard was something else. All Kate could do was freeze and hope for an opportunity to slip gracefully away.

*Oh, double crap!*

Dom was not alone. A statuesque woman followed him into the sunlight, her lightweight wrap doing little to conceal her smooth, muscular body. In the dappled light, her blonde hair flared with hints of red.

*God, they look amazing together,* Kate thought, whilst failing miserably to avert her eyes. She looked around carefully, but could not see any suitable way to depart. The cleared land on either side of her offered little hope of slipping away unnoticed. Looking to her rear, a sheer four-metre drop to the water prevented her from slipping down to the shoreline.

Embarrassed by her presence and her possible discovery, Kate held still, hunching low into the deepest shadows under the compact tangle of vegetation. Her sole goal was now to remain unseen. She slowly drew Dom's jacket over her shoulders and raised its hood, hoping its camouflage pattern would help to hide her.

With her heart in her mouth, she watched the pair walk towards her before stopping under a large tree less than fifteen metres from her hiding place. They embraced and kissed deeply before the woman dropped her wrap, exposing her nakedness to the cool of the morning air and the warmth of the low morning sun. After one very charged moment of looking into each other's eyes, Kate watched Dom throw a rope with practiced ease over a branch above them.

*Crap, crap, double crap!*

Using movements that seemed oddly sensuous to Kate's eye, he tied the woman's forearms and wrists together. Taking the other end of the rope, he pulled downwards, raising her arms high; stretching her upwards until she was on her tiptoes and giggling for a few moments before lowering her so she could stand comfortably, but only just.

Stretched up taut as she was, Kate saw real beauty in every part of her. She could see that the woman was about Dom's age, and she was striking in every sense. Her features were refined, her smooth skin was unmarked, and her body was strong and lithe. Her face had a look of hunger and bliss. Dom reached out and stroked her breasts and tummy, his fingertips playing softly over her skin as he circled her, grinning.

Kate felt mortified as she realised the enormity of what was happening in front of her, wanting to stop breathing in case it attracted their attention. Her eyes remained locked on the scene before her, an unwilling voyeur, but unable to look away. She watched Dom running his hands over the woman's body, moving gently and lightly at first. With patience, he started to increase his pressure, kissing her randomly, on the lips, her shoulders, over her back, and anywhere else that took his fancy.

He ran his nails over her squirming body, resulting in loud squeals from her and laughter from them both. He kept running his nails and fingertips over her until she took some deep breaths and stilled herself, taking on a dreamy and trance-like expression. The woman's face, and the entire scene before her, spoke directly to something deep inside Kate's body, and she felt her own stomach clenching urgently in response.

Dom leaned forward and took one nipple in his mouth, grasping the other between his fingers. She squirmed and gasped, making small mewling noises, but he didn't stop until she relaxed into his attention. With one hand still pinching her nipple, he ran the nails of his free hand over her skin, not stopping for a moment as they shared a long, deep kiss. Her body squirmed as she greedily kissed him back.

Kate was transfixed. Dom was taking his time, slowly building the intensity, his attention totally focused on his captive lover. Part of her was saying that watching them was not right, but the over-ruling majority of her mind and body compelled her to keep looking.

He said something to the woman, and she responded with a smile and nod. He worked his way behind her, still running his nails, hands, lips and teeth over every part of her. That it felt good was evident by the look on the woman's face. He started rubbing and kneading her buttocks, and her eyes closed as she lifted her buttocks out towards him.

The sharp report of the spank reached Kate, followed by an unrestrained cry that ended in an animalistic sound of pleasure. The woman's eyes snapped open and it seemed to Kate that she was looking directly at her. She stopped breathing. Kate was sure that she could see the striking blue of her clear eyes in the sunlight. It seemed as though Dom's captive was inside her head for a long moment before her eyes softened, a luxuriant smile on her face. Finally, still smiling and breathing deeply, she looked away, moaning as he spanked her other cheek before massaging her buttocks again.

Dom leaned in and said something to her. The woman smiled and nodded as he continued to massage her shapely backside. A look of needful desire burned on her face as each spank brought a pleasurable growl or moan in response. Kate felt her own body stirring to the scene before her. The woman rose to her tiptoes to lift her bum even higher. She wiggled it and was answered with a firm spank. Her cry was not pain to Kate's ears. It



was a primal sound of pleasure and release, a cathartic sound, filled with energy and life.

The woman was looking back in her direction, a sleepy, hungry smile on her lips. Kate willed herself to be still, knowing that she must be all but invisible in her concealment under the thick leafy tangle. Breaking her gaze, the woman looked over her shoulder and said something to Dom, who started tapping her backside with his fingers in response. She lifted her bum to him, and at the bottom of each breath, he delivered firm spansks in pairs; her face showed that she was revelling in the intensity. Kate watched as the woman breathed in deeply and slowly with each set of sensations. She settled as a look of vacant peace washed over her face, her rhythmic growls sounding almost like a chant.

For ten minutes, maybe more, Dom watched her carefully while coaching her softly. She was floating in her far-away and trance-like state as he timed his actions with her breathing. Kate's mind raced. She had heard of kinks and fetishes of course, and had read some popular novels, but never had she heard of or imagined anything like this. Nothing in her experience described even a fraction of the mutual devotion, pleasure and intensity of the scene before her. Watching his eyes and intention feasting upon his captive, Kate felt a flash of comprehension when she realised that Dom's torture was his control of himself, and his own desires.

He broke his attention from the woman's backside and turned her under her suspending rope towards him. He bodily dragged her to him to receive his deep kiss. He wound her hair into his fist and sensuously pulled her head back in slow motion, drawing her neck into full arching extension. Kate almost moaned herself, watching the woman writhe and hearing her uninhibited

responses to his licks, kisses and nibbles over her exposed throat. He drew her close, kissing her urgently, his knee widening her stance until she was half on tiptoes.

Clearly without force, and completely without warning, Dom slapped low under the woman's pussy with his fingers and palm. His hand held still, keeping a firm pressure for a long moment before he started moving. The woman's body contorted as she groaned in response, her sounds muffled by their kiss.

With one hand still holding her hair, he drew her head back, kissing her throat, chest and face, moving her to receive his attentions. His massaging was clearly taking the woman to her climax. Her movements were no longer under her conscious control as her body writhed. Her face showed only peace and bliss, but an undercurrent of something else was also showing through. Her pleased moans had become almost continuous as he focused his attentions on her.

He gave her another light, controlled slap, this time resulting in her loud growl, one that sounded to Kate like purified want and need. He chuckled softly and started moving his hand once more before giving her another light slap. She snarled viciously at him when he denied her for a fourth time, holding her firmly by her hair at arm's length, and grinning wickedly back at her. At that passionate moment, the woman's face and expression belonged to something that lurked in a dark jungle. Watching her as she glared and growled at Dom, there was no doubt in Kate's mind that if given the chance, she would have bitten him at that moment if he weren't holding her tight.

The intensity of Kate's own surging arousal surprised her as she watched Dom repeat the pattern and

began to understand. Every time the woman was about to orgasm, his soft slap seemed to push it away, but not far away. The woman's breathing was deep and hard, coming out in growls and groans that were no longer human. As he denied her release yet again, her protesting growls of savage and primal desire found a target deep in Kate's own body. Stretched by the rope and held fast, his captive's muscles worked against each other, trying to find release. Her whole body moved in serpentine rhythms, working her groin into Dom's hand as he continued his measured, deliberate building and denial of her release.

The sun had moved, forcing Kate to work herself deeper under the bush to stay in its deep shadow. Still relentlessly massaging her towards pleasure and denying her with one hand, she watched Dom turn the woman again. He gave her now glowing buttocks more attention with his free hand whilst alternating between pinching her nipples and running his nails over her body from knees to scalp. The woman was deep in her reverie, quivering, receiving each sensation with primal sounds of joyful abandon. She looked back and they had a quiet word. Dom nodded with his answer and stepped behind her.

He drew his hand back and spanked her arse, the sound sharper than before, he held his hand firm and still for a moment as she growled deeply in response, lifting her bum higher to him. He started alternating hands, massaging a buttock cheek with one hand whilst spanking her with the other. This session was much more concentrated, covering her buttocks and upper thighs, his fingertips and nails dragging over her until she was ready, or delivering brief and intense moments of massaging to keep her climax close. Dom's

unrelenting attention challenged her to soar higher and higher to stay above the sensations that were flooding into her body. She cried out, her unrestrained growls coming with every outbreath, her body writhing and her legs trembling.

At the end of a particularly intense series, she was so close that he had to gently slap her pussy a third time to deny her. Kate heard the woman's rich contralto voice start with a snarl but end in, '...ease!' The urgent need in her voice spoke directly to Kate's own body. The woman's eyes were seemingly locked with Kate's again, almost like she was daring her to keep watching. Deep in Kate's own psyche, something was now awake and stirring; something ancient, primal and hungry. She knew she would not look away. She couldn't. She didn't even want to blink. The woman broke her gaze with a smile, feeling Dom's rhythm change.

Dom turned her to face him again, paying out the rope to lower her hands a little. She sank, spreading her stance at his silent insistence until the rope bore much of her weight again. With her straight legs spread wide apart, Dom again started to massage into her pleasure, his fingers exploring her before retreating. Each time she started moaning too loudly, he carefully denied her with pressure alone, holding still until her breathing changed before starting again, biting and kissing her skin. Each denial brought a new chorus of growls and hisses from her. It seemed to go on for hours, but was probably more like fifteen or twenty minutes. Dom, his captive, and Kate, were all far beyond such mundane concepts as time.

Dom fell to his knees, his mouth meeting her desire, dragging her body to him by her buttocks with both hands. Kate saw on the woman's face what total rapture

looked like. The woman's body started moving under its own volition, her breathing pulling her from her previous state and into one of pure aggressive lust. She grabbed the rope above her hands, lifting herself from the ground and locking her legs around Dom's head and shoulders, pulling him hard into her body. Her groaning cries sounded like distilled desire, purified and concentrated.

Kate heard the woman plead, 'Please, my lord? Please may I come? Please, my lord, I need to come, please, please? Please let me come?' Her only answer was Dom's continuing attention, kneading her buttocks deeply as her legs held him fast. She kept begging him between moans until she was unable to speak, her release drawing closer with each breath.

Her deep screams erupted without censor as Dom took her into her long-denied climax; her body twisting and contorting, she convulsed in her ecstasy. Her cries became growls with every outbreath. She was still holding herself up on the rope, her body writhing wildly as her legs kept Dom locked firmly in place. Kate didn't know that orgasms could go on for so long, and for a moment, she wondered if he could breathe. He continued pulling her into him until her legs dropped away, her last spasms still shuddering through her. Watching him set her back down, Kate realised that he had been supporting a lot of her weight.

He stood, gently helping the woman to her feet. He reached up and pulled on the end of the rope between her wrists, releasing the knots and freeing her arms in seconds. He supported her wrists with one hand and slowly lowered her arms, massaging around her shoulders with the other.

She wriggled her bum against his erection, taking obvious delight in how it pushed against her bottom

through his jeans. They locked together in a passionate embrace, kissing deeply before letting themselves fall back onto the grass, still laughing and kissing.

Surprised at her body's urgent physical readiness for such attention, Kate felt as though she had nearly climaxed as well. She watched the couple giggle and talk for a while before Dom stood. For one short moment, she thought Dom was about to walk to the water's edge and find her. She breathed out when he bent to collect the woman's discarded wrap and turned back. He hoisted his blonde prize effortlessly over his shoulder before loudly smacking her bum once more. She reached down and returned his spank as hard as she could from her compromised position. The sound was a dull thud, followed by a feminine protest. 'Owww! Goddamn you've got a bloody hard arse!' They were still laughing as he carried her inside. At the last moment, the woman flashed a dazzling smile right at Kate before the shadows of the doorway swallowed them, the door swinging closed behind them.

A minute later, Kate sensed her moment had come and she slipped away, retracing her steps quickly until well beyond any chance of discovery. Her mind racing, she sat on a boulder in the shade and looked out at the water, unzipping Dom's jacket and pushing the hood from her head.

She had just vicariously experienced something that she never thought she would. Even more surprising to her were her own responses to what, until now, she had essentially thought of as practices of objectification and abuse. Her concepts, based on popular literature and hearsay, had failed to capture even a fraction of what she had witnessed.

Thinking hard, she analysed what she had seen. Dom had shown care, control and respect in everything he did. Pleasure and desire was evident in every action and reaction. The woman's orgasm was undeniably intense and her entire experience had been clearly pleasurable. The memories of the woman's cries echoed in her memory, causing another wave of deep tightness within her. She wasn't even sure how to begin to start ordering her memories and feelings as she walked back to the sanctuary of her cabin in a daze.

Sitting on a comfortable seat in her bedroom and looking over the water, Kate took stock. Her sexual experience was clearly far more limited than she'd thought. What she knew about kink was, by recent evidence, apparently wrong at pretty much every possible level.

Replaying the scenes, Kate felt her body's demands reasserting themselves. For the first time since Silvio's treachery, Kate touched herself, orgasming so quickly and intensely that it took her by surprise. Normally self-conscious of 'excessive noise', her cries of pleasure flowed freely and without censor. Basking in her own blissful afterglow, Kate started laughing aloud as her mind exulted. *Alegria!*

Sitting on the rear deck of her cabin and sipping her third cup of coffee, Kate was still trying to understand her own responses to what she had seen when an alien sound penetrated her thoughts.

*Phone! A phone is ringing. That means you pick it up and answer it!* Kate's mind reminded her. The phone's display showed '16: Teak'; it was Rick.

'Good morning, Kate. I'm sorry, we took longer to return from shore than planned. May I invite you to my

place for lunch, with the possibility of exploring later?’ he asked in his rich and deep voice.

‘I would like that, Rick.’

‘Is half an hour enough time for you?’

‘Your cabin in half an hour is perfect, thank you Rick.’

‘A pleasure, Kate. See you soon,’ he said, ending the call.

Hanging up, a realisation hit her. *My lord is what the woman called Dom when she begged him for her release.* She thought of the evening of Madame Butterfly, in the limousine, and Dom’s reaction when she’d said ‘my lord’ to him. *No wonder he stopped cold!* She laughed happily, now understanding why he had reacted so oddly.

*Would you have wanted him or even let him do that to you then?* she asked herself. She knew the answer was no, not with Dom. When she asked herself the same question, but about Rick instead of Dom, a spasm deep in her belly answered her mind’s question. *Part of me says yes,* she thought, smiling and slightly perplexed.





## CHAPTER NINE

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Taking the more orthodox route of the ring road, Kate walked to Rick's cabin. She had to double back after missing its discreet and somewhat overgrown entrance on her first pass, and marvelled again at how subtly the buildings of this island melded into the natural landscape. Unless you knew what you were looking for, it would be easy to walk past all of the cabins and never even suspect they were there.

Being distracted by thoughts of ropes and pleasure, and seeing overhanging branches everywhere, Kate walked squarely into the single wooden step of Rick's cabin. The sound of the impact, together with her muttered expletives, brought Rick out just in time to see her exposing a small bleeding wound on her already swelling shin. Wordlessly, he assessed her and made a teasing, tutting sound before he picked her up. Cradling her in his arms, he carried her inside and set her down neatly on a kitchen stool. He disappeared for a moment and returned with a small dark bottle and a first aid kit.

After washing his hands, Rick cleaned the blood from her shin with a wet gauze pad, slapping her hands out of the way as she tried to help. He tweezed a substantial splinter out and looked carefully with a magnifying glass before he was satisfied that her wound was clean. He opened the dark glass bottle and tipped a little reddish-brown liquid into his palm before foaming it into a white froth with his fingers. He carefully dabbed it around and over her wound. Expecting it to hurt, Kate

took a breath, only to discover that she could only feel her injury in a distant kind of way.

‘What is that stuff?’

‘The sap of a special tree mixed with the juice of a canopy vine. In combination, they stabilise each other so we get a couple of years out of it, provided it’s kept out of the light. It’s highly antiseptic as it oxidises, promotes healing, and forms a natural and completely waterproof barrier over the wound to stop dirt getting in.’ He inspected her injury, wiping on a little more of the mixture and blowing gently across it until it dried. ‘There,’ he said with a wink, ‘I think you will live.’

Kate leaned down to feel something like a plastic skin covering her injury. ‘Wow. That stuff is amazing. I saw something similar on a documentary about the Amazon.’

Rick regarded Kate with a happy look. ‘The Sangre de Grado tree. The vine is from the upper canopy and its juice is the anaesthetic and insect-repelling agent. Each stabilises and potentiates the other,’ he said with a smile.

Kate thought again about how much she liked his smile.

‘And now we are done with the first aid; good morning, my lady,’ he said with a little bow and a flourish.

Kate laughed, saying in true pantomime fashion with fluttering eyes, ‘*My hero!*’

‘Coffee?’ Rick offered, still chuckling. He looked at her face and amended his offer. ‘How about a nice soothing herbal tea instead? It looks like you have had a distracting morning.’

‘Why do you say that?’ Kate asked, feeling her face reddening by the moment.

'Well... you did miss seeing a two metre wide step with a bright yellow safety marker on its leading edge, not to mention the attached, kind-of-large structure we are currently occupying, right behind the afore mentioned step,' Rick teased, his tone heavy with irony. Kate poked her tongue out at him and they laughed.

He rubbed his hands vigorously with soap and water to wash the last of the sticky sap off after switching the kettle on. Kate took stock of him as he prepared their teas, and then she saw it. *His every action is deliberate and measured*, she realised. He deliberately poured the water, added a specific amount of honey, and finally a precise squirt of lime.

He placed the steaming cup on the bench in front of Kate and asked, 'Are you hungry? We have a cold antipasto selection.'

'Maybe in a moment?'

Rick nodded with a smile in response. He picked up both cups and led her from the rear of the cabin to a beautiful garden grotto with two comfortable chaise lounges, already set up with fresh towels.

After taking a few sips of their teas, Rick looked directly at her and asked, 'What's going on, Kate? You've been very distracted and you haven't stopped blushing. I don't think it is my company, so may I offer you my ear with privacy assured, but no pressure of any kind?'

A very long silence fell. *How the hell do I even start?* Kate wondered as she repeatedly faltered, trying to find a way to begin. Rick remained silent, waiting. Eventually he said to her, 'You know Kate, Mary Poppins said to start at the very beginning. She said that it's always a good place to start.'

Kate's look became deeply mischievous. 'Well, around thirteen-point-eight-one billion years ago, there was an almost infinitely large amount of energy compressed into an almost infinitely small space until a really Big Bang...'

Laughing, Rick suggested that maybe her story could begin a little more recently than the birth of the universe. It was their shared laughter that did it. Kate let it all out, telling him nearly everything, doing her best to narrate her morning as matter-of-factly as possible. The only thing she didn't share were her own physical reactions.

'Well, now you've met Natalie! I didn't think she was due in until this evening.' Rick said when she finished, smiling. Seeing the look on her face, he took her hands and looked directly into her eyes. 'If I were in your exact situation, I would have done exactly what you did. From what you've said, I can't see how she could have seen you. You were even wearing the right kind of camouflage pattern for where you were hiding.'

Seeing hope on her face, he added, 'Kate, Natalie is happily uninhibited to the point of exhibitionism. Even if she did catch on to your presence, I can assure you that it would not upset her in any way. She is probably the smartest person you're likely to meet. She's even smarter than Dom and mum! If she was aware of you, I know she would have accurately computed both your circumstances and your actions.'

Kate looked hopefully at Rick. 'I really hope so. No, I really hope she didn't know I was there, but it felt like she was looking right at me.'

'Seriously, Kate, don't worry about it. Should you declare everything to them in abject confession, you will find no embarrassment or judgement from Dom or

Natalie. If anything, they would probably be far more interested in your responses and reactions...'

Kate felt her cheeks prickle instantly.

'... although I see they would not have to dig too deeply,' Rick said. 'Kate, may I be very up-front?'

'Oh God, yes please. Anything to change the subject.'

'Dominique is not the only man on this island who loves sexual domination play.' Pausing to let his statement sink in, he continued. 'Kate, as a yes or no question, did you find Natalie's role one that excited you?'

There it was. Kate's mind raced in circles as she reviewed his question. 'Yes, I wanted to feel what she was feeling. But ...'

After a long pause, Rick asked, 'Kate, what you saw was D-s, Domination-Submission play. Do you know anything about it?'

'Right here and now, I don't think I know anything about anything. Is it the same as BDSM?'

'Only broadly, and by inaccurate common definition. Domination-Submission play, D-s, is similar in some ways, but materially very different in others. BDSM is Bondage, Domination, Sadism and Masochism.'

'I guess I only know what I have heard indirectly and read in magazines and books. You know, things like pain, obedience, not looking in the eyes, that kind of thing.'

'Did anything that you've heard or read, in any meaningful way, describe what you actually saw, Kate?'

'No... not at all.'

‘And what was it you actually saw expressed in that scenario? Don’t overthink this Kate. It’s a simple question,’ Rick asked.

Kate recognised that he was helping her order her own thoughts and let herself relax into his questions. Letting go of her internal censor, she responded. ‘Pleasure, care, release... I know what Dom was doing should have hurt, but it looked more like pleasure than pain. He was so attentive, watching her all the time. She was his total focus. He didn’t look like he was trying to hurt her, just the opposite, he was careful and timing everything. She definitely loved it and was into everything that was happening.’

‘Kate, you have it nailed. Pain is not a goal or an end in itself. It is not even a necessary part of it. D-s is all about the intensity of the experience. Would it help if I dissect it a little?’

Kate nodded, unable to trust herself to say anything at this point. Just talking about it with Rick, she was almost painfully aware of her own body’s needful responses.

‘The ropes are not a constant thing. They’re just a mechanism to physically take away the option of retreat, forcing the submissive, or sub, that’s Natalie in this case, to have to face whatever Dom deals out. His total aim is to help her find a state of mind called sub-space. It’s like a fully aware version of a deep mental trance. She breathes the sensation in and uses it to push everything else out.’

‘I saw it on her face. It looked like total bliss.’

Rick nodded. ‘Totally. When the physical sensations are coming in so intensely, and retreat is not an option, the sub has to change how their body receives and processes the sensations; changing them into

something they can learn to shape and use. Are you ticklish?’

Kate tensed as she said, ‘Very.’

‘Relax, Kate.’ Rick laughed. ‘I asked for information purposes and would not presume without your permission. Imagine yourself tied in a way that you were comfortable but immobile. Now, in that state, you are going to be tickled mercilessly until you have learned to change the way you receive the sensation. When you learn how to exist above it and outside of it, you have found your own key into sub-space.’

‘Kate, close your eyes and place yourself in that scenario, as deeply as you can. You can’t get away and you can’t make it stop. It is inevitable and won’t stop until you learn to rise above it, to change the sensation. Then you can form it and use it. Some describe it like riding some wild roller coaster or big-wave surfing.’ Rick paused for a moment before his eyes lit up. ‘For the purposes of example, may I speak in the first person and talk you through a scenario?’

*Whoa, this is getting interesting!* she thought before answering. ‘Sure.’ After a moment longer, she added, ‘Thank you for asking, Rick.’

His responding smile caused her stomach to clench. ‘Inside will be better. Shall we?’ He walked over to her, took her hand and led her into the living area of his cabin. At his gentle direction, Kate kicked off her shoes and lay along the length of a long sofa. He stretched her arms above her head, with wrists overlapped, resting on the arm of the comfortable lounge. With his hand, he gently closed her eyes. She heard him sit in a nearby chair. Keeping her eyes closed, she took a deep breath. At that moment, his modulated voice filled her being.

‘We are inside a cabin much like this one. You are tied with a rope, your arms secured over your head, just as you are now. You feel my hands gently and slowly rubbing your body. I am using my whole hands, from your thighs to your elbows, giving you time to become comfortable with the contact. As the sensations become familiar, you feel my touch become firmer at times. You can feel me starting to accent the pressure through my fingertips.’

*Dammit!* Kate thought, hearing a sigh escape her lips.

‘You can test the ropes all you like but there is no avoiding what is to come. Your only option is to stay there and feel everything, leaving you only one possible course of action. To accept it. You must breathe it in deeply so it can lift you. Most people drown in sensation and panic; but just like being in water, you can drown, or you can learn to swim. When you can swim, then you can learn how to surf, and then you can ride it. You learn how to feel the sensation that is pouring into your mind in a different way. You can direct it, using it to scour away everything you want to release, pushing it away with every breath out.’

Kate’s eyes wrinkled in a silent smile as she visualised everything that he said. That her mind followed his words so easily was surprising her.

Shit! I actually moaned, dammit!

‘Kate, you’re allowed to make noises. That is your freedom. You are in a space of permission and acceptance, a space to be your completely authentic self without judgement. You can trust your Dominant enough to abandon all need to conform to any social construct. I don’t care if you need to swear like a merchant sailor. If it is your authentic reaction, it’s



beautiful to me. D-s, this, is about you finding your keys to letting go of everything the outside world tries to hang on you. When you're ready, take a deep breath and hold it.'

Keeping her eyes closed, she took her breath and nodded, understanding what he was telling her.

He modulated his voice slightly; again, he took her mind. 'Very slowly let that breath out for a slow count from five to one. Good. Two more times.

'Now your breathing can take care of itself. Every breath is rhythmic and easy, relaxed and free.'

Her sigh was unedited as Kate felt her breathing slow. 'Ah, yes. You were feeling me rubbing your body. You feel my fingernails slowly rake down your body, not too hard, from armpit to hip, then you feel me rubbing the intensity away. As your breathing settles, you feel a greater intensity start at your arms, over your armpits, down your chest, your sides, slowly and inevitably to the soles of your feet. You can squirm, swear, or fight, but it will not stop until I make it stop.'

Rick paused to let Kate's mind dwell upon the scenario until her breathing changed, slowing again. 'We'd keep this up until I can run my fingernails all over you without you squirming at all. Can you feel what you would need to do to change and accept the sensations, Kate? Breathe the energy of each point of intensity into your heart, welcoming it, not fighting it. It's beyond surrender. It's about total acceptance. Let the sensations wash through you and lift you. Find your key to not feeling the intense sensation in the same way, find your way into your space above the sensation, or outside of it.'

‘Yes,’ Kate said through her smile, her eyes relaxed and closed. ‘It feels different, even though I’m only imagining it.’

‘Once I can see that you are working with that level of sensation, I would add a little more pressure and speed, not hurting, just more intense. The rope is still holding you fast.’

Kate squirmed as she thought of the helplessness of the situation, then she found her key to changing the shape of the imagined sensations, letting them wash past her, intensely aware of her mental and physical arousal in that moment. *Breathe it in.* Almost like she touched a live wire, she felt her body pulse deeply when she tried to breathe her arousal into her heart. *Oh my God, breathe slowly woman,* she thought.

Seeing her breathe deeply again and smile, Rick continued. ‘Yes, you can breathe every sensation into your heart, Kate. That’s where the magic is. Now I run my nails over a wider area... your neck... your shoulders... up and down your arms... over your back and sides and front... your legs too, right down to your feet. Every now and then, you might fall out of sub-space. I would increase the intensity in that single area of your distraction until you learn how to move beyond it. Sub-space is your space, a place where only a single value of ‘now’ exists, not as a transit point between past and future, but as a single, endless moment of creation and life.’

A loud moan escaped Kate’s lips. *Double Dammit!* She opened her eyes and looked at Rick, still sitting there. He looked as relaxed as if they were discussing the weather. ‘What about pain?’ Kate asked.

‘Lie back again, Kate. Relax, breathing slowly and effortlessly, just like before.’ Kate felt herself doing

what he asked almost automatically. It was a wonderful release to let go, even like this, just talking about it.

‘Now you are at the stage where you find it easy to take yourself beyond my fingernails. You feel me take a nipple between two fingers and slowly start to close them. Each time you breathe out, it gets just slightly tighter. Each breath out, a little more intense than the last. Every little breath out, even a gasp, it will not end until you can change and rise above everything I can give. I will keep going until you find your way above the sensation.

‘You can try to slow your breathing to delay each incremental increase of pressure, or you can rise above the sensation. Now you have worked out what the rules of our new game are, I loosen my grip. You feel me take both nipples, light at first, and we begin anew. Deep breath, my lady. Every breath out, the sensation intensifies very slightly, but always more intense...’

For the next few minutes, each time Kate breathed out, he said quietly, ‘A little harder,’ or, ‘The sensation is growing, building,’ and ‘you can feel each pulse trying to push past my fingers.’

Rick watched her in the midday light as Kate squirmed and sighed on the lounge. Only after he was silent for nearly a minute did she finally lie still again.

She opened her eyes and started laughing. Feeling a small cushion beneath her legs, she grabbed it and threw it at Rick before falling back to the couch, saying, ‘Oh my God! Rick!’

With a broad smile, he said, ‘Kate, pain, when it’s like that, is only a more intense sensation. When built properly, what would be painful at the start can be intensely pleasurable when worked up to. For Dominants, a big part of the kick is controlling a sub’s

experience, guiding them into sub-space, and holding them in that state to explore and expand their limits of desire and thought. In a scenario, the sub's experience becomes the Dominant's work of art, and the subject of his creative flow. The depth and authenticity of your experience is a real dominant's masterpiece. Our goal is to defeat your rational mind, holding a space where you are secure enough to bring your authentic and uncensored self out to play.

When you find that depth of subspace, you are in a state of complete acceptance. It is almost like a state of enlightenment where you resist nothing and end up accepting every part of yourself, as you are, without conditions. The exchange of total trust is a big part of the kink. For me, D-s is never about pain. It's only ever about intensity, passion, exploration, and desire. Fun and pleasure too, of course.'

Kate nodded, thinking about his words for a moment. Then she nodded again, encouraging him to go on.

'A big part of a submissive's kink is totally gifting their power to another, surrendering everything in the process so completely that the only thing left behind is purely themselves, nothing more. No ego, no image to maintain, no job, no masks, just themselves... pure. Trust is a huge thing. Actually, it's the only thing. You have to know that you will never be judged or taken where you don't want to go.'

'Were you trying to hypnotise me?'

'Absolutely not, Kate. Language and syntax are vitally important though. Subspace is a highly suggestible state of mind. Clear, positively worded suggestions that conform to both your desires and your ethical boundaries are easier to accept and follow. It

falls, in broad strokes, under Neuro-Linguistic-Programming, or NLP. The intent is to offer an acceptable path of least resistance, helping you to explore a place you desire to be, but free from coercion or manipulation.'

'Thank you, professor,' she said with a wink. Laughing, she added, 'Seriously, thank you. I love the way you put things so clearly.' He nodded in a seated bow, accepting her praise graciously. Quick as a snake, he threw the cushion back, getting Kate on her bum as she was repositioning herself, and they laughed again.

After freshening up, Kate sat back down opposite Rick, her feet on the edge of the chair and her arms around her knees, and a piece of melon from the table in her hand. 'What about signing contracts and hard boundaries and being beaten until you're bruised?'

'Ah, I think I know where some of those ideas came from.' Rick smiled patiently. 'Aside from safe words, most popular literature on the subject is unschooled fantasy mixed with some quite poorly understood or described BDSM concepts. You witnessed the reality of it today. One cannot, legally or morally, consent to actual assault; nor can you legally place yourself into any form of slavery. Such concepts as 'contracts' are part of the role-play at best.'

'What about not being able to have normal sex?'

Rick laughed generously before answering. 'Not being able to enjoy vanilla sex – or non-role-play sex, which is what vanilla means – describes a pathology. Healthy D-s is just spice and fun. I am just as fulfilled and uplifted kissing, making out, making love or in a deep role-play session. For me, it is always and only ever about being in the moment with complete connection; it's about sharing mutual desires and intents.

Anyone who “can’t do vanilla sex” either has some deep psychological problems, or is not being honest with themselves. Often a mix of both. It’s about understanding the boundaries between perception and desire.’

‘How do you know where the boundaries are?’

‘That’s a Dominant’s skill. Until this morning, what we just talked about would have been well beyond your pre-perceived boundaries, correct?’ Kate nodded. ‘Yet you seemed to find the exercise, as presented, enjoyable and intellectually stimulating.’

Thinking long and hard, and frowning as she felt her face heating up yet again, Kate realised he was right and nodded. ‘A damn sight more than just intellectually stimulating I think.’ They both giggled a little.

‘If it was a one-time thing, then a discussion of general experience, desires, likes and dislikes would be had beforehand, that’s for sure. Lists, bullet points and contracts though? No. Realistically, if you’ve never even come close to experiencing a thing, how could you be expected to have an opinion on a thing?’ Seeing Kate was keeping up, he continued. ‘Okay, let’s start at the start. It is role-play. Delusion – or intoxication, when it comes to that – has no part in safe play. You might play the role of a slave in a scenario, but at no time would either of us believe that you were actually owned property, devoid of rights.

‘We use the word, ‘scenario’ for a role-play session, and it is also a code word for saying something that is not within the scenario’s role-play. If, as a sub, you said, ‘scenario – bathroom break’ it would mean you like what’s happening and want to keep going, but you need to get comfortable first.

'Safe words are generally the colours of traffic lights. 'Green' means keep going, I am into this. 'Yellow' is a scenario's pause button. It halts a scenario without necessarily terminating it. You might just need some time or to stop for a moment and adjust something. If anything is happening that you're actually uncomfortable with, or need to stop immediately, you say, 'red'.'

'Makes sense. So if I said, 'red'?'

'Red is a stoplight. The scenario terminates at that moment and my immediate priority is to physically free you, no exceptions. Kate, most of the time when a red call is used, it is nothing to do with the actual play. Say a position is causing a cramp in your back and you can feel it going out, that is when you'd call red.

'Yellow would have it pause while we discussed what was happening. It could be something as simple as a knot digging in that is distracting you or a bit of skin pinching. It might be that you like where it's going and don't want to stop, but just need a little more time or to have things slow down a bit. Play is supposed to be mutually fun and satisfying. When a sub can trust that their Dom will respect their boundaries, magic happens. It is receiving the gift of trust that is part of a good Dominant's kink.'

Seeing that Kate was keeping up, he continued. 'That single word, *scenario*, makes all the difference. In a role-play, you might feel the need to scream it away instead of breathing it in, or feel a need to beg and plead for it to stop, and the scenario keeps going, but just say, "scenario – ouch" and it pulls back immediately without ruining any moods. A status check to follow-up and make sure everything is good, and the scenario continues.'

‘What about the stuff like no looking in the eye and no touching?’

‘Only in a specific scenario or with certain kinks does that become a factor. Some people get off on the total power exchange and subservience thing. I like interaction and play during sessions. Actually, that brings us to the ‘status’ check. ‘Status?’ or ‘scenario – status?’ is my chance to make sure you’re comfortable with what’s happening. I might be introducing a new element, and I would use a status check to ensure you’re okay with it. A status check might be called if I think you are pushing against a personal boundary, but not willing, for whatever reason, to call it yourself. A status check asks you to ask yourself directly where you’re at. It reminds you to not think about what I want for a moment, and acts as a safety valve for any given situation. If we were playing, and I said “status” to you, and you said “green”, I know beyond doubt that you are into what is happening, and we keep going. That is a vital part of our trust, to always be totally honest with each other.’

A sudden, loud growl from Kate’s stomach made then both giggle. Rick said, ‘Lunch, by your command,’ and leapt to his feet, assembling their lunch from a small refrigerator.

Kate took care of water and juice whilst Rick laid out a platter of antipasto and cold meats, fruit, nuts and bread. Standing side-by-side and checking the table, she unconsciously sighed again. They both looked at each other and started giggling until both were helpless with laughter. Kate looked at Rick when the situation became one of those highly charged, first-kiss kind of moments. Feeling a little panic, a thought surfaced and she said to Rick, ‘Yellow, just for now?’



Kate panicked a little when Rick looked surprised. She asked, 'What's wrong, Rick? I didn't mean to say anything that ...' She halted as he held his hands up.

'Kate, thank you. Nothing at all is wrong. I consider your desire to move thoughtfully an intelligent one, especially given the circumstances that 'trusting' left you in recently.'

Now Kate's powers of speech deserted her. A man who already felt to her like a lifelong crush just set everything out in the open, and offered her simple acceptance. Her mouth opened and closed like that of a landed fish.

Rick held his silence, waiting to let her finish her thoughts. Why the hell are you all so bloody perfect, and what the hell do I do now? Kate heard Carrie's question again. First response, Katie. What do you want in your bones?

She grabbed his shoulders firmly, squaring him to her, stood on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around him, feeling the wide, muscular hardness of his back and shoulders. After a moment, she felt Rick hug back, hunching slightly to tuck her head under his chin. They started giggling again, still locked in their embrace. The kiss that followed was natural and spontaneous. It was a very long kiss.

'Damn it! Damn you. Dammit!' Kate cursed at Rick, pounding on his chest with her fists. 'Do you have any idea how many times I promised myself I would not do that? You just smile, and all my good intentions evaporate.'

Laughing happily at her faux rage, Rick asked her, 'Would you take it back?'

She stopped and looked at him. 'No. I have wanted to kiss you pretty much from the first moment I saw

you.’ She pounded her fists playfully onto his chest, feeling again how wonderfully solid he was. ‘You went and ruined every single good intention. I feel like you have already ravished my mind, and I loved every second of it. I am going to step back now and we are going to have lunch.’

They sat back on opposite sides of the table and started sharing their lunch in total silence, broken by long looks and an occasional giggle. Something clicked and Kate asked, ‘You said, ‘we’ before. Who is, ‘we’?’

‘Dominique and Natalie, they trained me.’ Seeing the shocked expression on Kate’s face, he added quickly, ‘Nothing between us!’

‘Go on,’ Kate said, failing miserably at trying not to think about the two men with one woman.

‘During a sweat lodge, I was nineteen or so, we were talking about things and the subject came up. The women have their own lodge. We rarely combine sexes for sweat lodges, it keeps the egos out.’

Understanding, Kate nodded, encouraging him to continue as she nibbled a piece of toasted corn bread after dipping it into a delicious and spicy vegetable dip.

‘We were talking about a recent heartache of mine. Dom recognised what was happening with me. He talked about how he felt about things before and described his own sexual dominance kink. I immediately recognised what he was saying. Edison and Dad were there, JC too, although he was too young to catch what was being said. Dom suggested that I train with him and Natalie, and we literally held classes. Sometimes it was just Dom talking to me about things, sometimes just Natalie and me, doing visualisation exercises and learning NLP basics. Larissa was being helped by Natalie to explore her submissive kink, so later on we learned together.’

The question on Kate's face made the response natural. 'Nat is a switch. That means she likes both dominant and submissive roles. Dom is the only male I have known her to be submissive to. To answer your next question, she is openly bisexual.'

'Anyhow,' he said, plunging on after a slight pause to gather his next thoughts, 'our first session was very much like the one you vicariously experienced today, watching only, except with breaks for question and answer sessions. Kate, I trust Dom and Nat. I trust everyone here on Alegria without reservation. It was a case of Dom and Nat having the skill set to teach me how to constructively express my innate nature. There was never anything sexual during the training, if that helps?'

'How? How could there not be anything sexual?'

'For us, I mean. The men. Dom and Nat wanted me to focus on the lessons.'

'Tough!'

'Very. By the way, I'm glad you didn't say, hard.' They both laughed as they browsed on their lunch. Although their topic of conversation was unorthodox for two people who had only just met, neither Kate nor Rick felt like they'd just met. They were both pleasantly surprised at the level of intimate comfort that they shared.

'Kate, I was just a young man, I thought I had a good handle on sex and masculinity, but damn, I was a babe in the woods. Natalie taught me about the D-s experience from both sides. Dom is a man we all look up to, and he is still a hero to me, as are all of the men on the Big End, even JC. I dare say that he would say the same. Dom taught me about myself. He helped me to understand and re-frame my concepts of manhood, of

chivalry, and a lot about my own self-image and personal code of conduct.

‘All the self-help weekends keep telling men to explore their feminine aspects; God, Kate, that is what women are for. Dom and Nat showed me how to constructively explore and express the higher octaves of my masculinity. Both of them taught me about a woman’s body. It was training that could not have happened without the love and trust we share, and I am profoundly grateful to them for it. You know, in a strange way, you could not have had a better introduction to these concepts than your experience this morning.’

‘I kind of understand, but I still need to get my head around all of it.’

‘Of course.’ Rick thought for a moment and added, ‘Kate, I would be greatly surprised if all this was something you could process immediately, but it is like the scene you witnessed earlier today. Until you experienced the reality of it, it was far beyond where you imagined your boundaries to be. Their teaching me was a pragmatic solution to an otherwise challenging situation. That our love and trust was strong enough to discuss it openly is proof of that love and trust.’

They sat quietly for a few moments before his eyes examined her intently. ‘Kate, please answer only if you want to... did you climax while you were watching them or imagining yourself receiving what you saw, afterwards?’

*Oh shit! Shit, shit, triple shit!* Kate’s mind raced. *Red light, dammit!* A realisation hit her. *I thought ‘red light’.* *Okay, honesty it is.*

'Yes – to the second one, and it was huge. Rick, you are taking me places I don't go with anyone. Well, I didn't, until now. I'm...'

'We should stop this line of discussion then.'

'For now? Yellow only?' Kate added. She needed to let him know the subject wasn't closed, but that she had experienced about all the surprises and revelations she could handle for one morning.

Rick's smile melted her again as he spread a little more double-brie on a cracker and added a grape before offering it to her. A warm breeze wafted in through the wide open sliding doors, and he looked at her brightly. 'How about a swim? I need the exertion, and I dare say you could use some physical release as well?' He was rewarded by a very cheeky smile as she acknowledged his obvious double meaning.

'You could be right, Rick. Somehow, I just know that there is going to be a costume that fits me perfectly in that wardrobe, isn't there?'

'You know,' he said, 'there just might be. Personally, I hope there is only a very tiny one in there. Shall we? If you are finished with the food, of course.'

'I am, thank you. Do you mind if I run back there myself and meet you back here in twenty or thirty minutes?'

'I shall count the seconds,' he said, flourishing a ridiculously deep bow. 'Why don't you head off now, I am quite happy to clear this little bit away. There will be towels at the beach and there is sunscreen in the bathroom cabinet.'

'Thank you, Rick,' Kate said, recognising and appreciating his chivalrous respect. Bouncing out the door, Kate almost skipped up the ring road and into her cabin. Dom saw the spring in her step from the

overgrown entrance of his cabin, but Kate was too distracted to notice him.

He turned his attention back to a small falcon circling over the trees above him. He flung a small piece of meat high into the air and the raptor dived, easily catching his offering as it reached the top of its arc. He smiled, looking back towards where he'd seen Kate, silently wishing them well.



## CHAPTER TEN

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Nearing the end of the path, Kate could see the beach and the waters of the Shelf through the last of the trees. She stopped to look for a moment, examining the entirety of the Shelf's unusual geology for the first time. The light, clean and slightly coarse sand of the wide beach led down into the protected waters of the Shelf, which was, in essence, a gigantic natural swimming pool over 900 metres across. Its boundary was encircled by a continuous wall of jagged volcanic rock that protruded from the water the whole way around. Dotted by resting water birds, the ridge physically separated the warm shallow waters of the Shelf from the deep, cooler, and sometimes choppy waters of the main lagoon.

When Rick and Kate came into view, smiles shot around the beach as everyone immediately noticed they were holding hands. The rest of the Big End's population, along with Maria and Paz from the Village, were already there and scattered about the beach. Kate felt like she was approaching the set of a Hollywood 'Hunk' film. The men were all topless, their muscles glistening in the sun from recent exertions.

Edison and Juan-Carlos were crouched low, each stalking the other in what looked to her like a wrestling match in progress. Covered generously in sand, Dom and Mason were breathing deeply as they cheered and teased father and son alike. Watching them as they circled each other, it seemed to Kate's eye that Edison's and Juan-Carlos' muscular bodies were almost exact copies, differing only in age. On closer inspection, their

bodies bore a good number of scars as well. Looking at the other men, she saw that they too shared a similar collection, arousing her interest in their combined history.

They each held an arm behind their backs as they moved. Kate quickly guessed that they could use only one hand at a time to push on the side of an opponent's shoulder or hip. Rick leaned in and said to her, 'the goal is to grab the other person's ankle.' The contest was a test of skill and speed. Each leapt and rolled, trying to grab the other, whilst evading their own capture. Everyone was laughing and heckling as the combatants traded taunts and goads. Never looking away from each other, they blew grains of sand from their mouths whilst trying to get the other to commit to a course of action.

As they drew near, and startling Kate, Rick called out loudly, 'Fighting over second place again lads?' The grin on his face and tone of his voice was a clear challenge to both men. Father and son instantly slapped their right hands together in agreement and stood upright, inviting him into the fray. Rick stripped his shirt off in a single motion, stretched and jumped around for a few moments in warm up before crouching. Edison and JC readied themselves in response, and the contest began anew.

Dom invited Kate over with a cheeky smile and a wave. Winking outrageously to her, he loudly explained how Rick was the 'second best' amongst them at this old game. More often than not, it came down to he and Rick in the final round.

Edison and Juan-Carlos worked well as a team. Driven by training and instinct, Rick repeatedly leapt free at the very last moment as their fingers brushed his ankles, never quite managing to grab him. Kate



marvelled at the deflections and counters employed by the men, each moving with fluid grace as arcs of sand flew high into the air. She caught the fresh scents of their exertion on the light breeze; a clean, masculine scent that spoke to her reawakening desires. *I wouldn't even have noticed that a few days ago*, she thought with a smile.

The sun was overhead and casting clean shadows, highlighting the definition of the men's muscles as they moved and faked. When father and son circled and leapt after a double feint, Kate was sure that they had him. Just as their fingers started closing, Rick vaulted upwards, twisting in mid-air. He flipped his body lengthways over his own shoulders and grabbed the ankles of both Edison and Juan-Carlos as he landed. Springing to his feet, he lifted their legs high in victory. As everyone clapped and cheered, he belted out a very acceptable rendition of a Tarzan call.

Natalie walked into view from the other side of the contest, her tanned body looking pin-up perfect in a bright-yellow strapless bikini. She called out in a clear and commanding voice, 'Everybody warmed up? Blue – Yellow – Me – Back... Go!'

Like a shot, the five men were swearing under their collective breaths as they charged into the water, stroking hard and racing for the blue buoy. Natalie watched until the men were nearly two-hundred metres out, and about to round the buoy before she walked over to Kate with her hand outstretched. 'Hi, you must be Catherine. I'm Natalie.'

Kate looked into Natalie's eyes and saw no hint of any hidden meanings. Taking the woman's hand, she said, 'Hi Natalie. I am. I'm pleased to meet you.'

Natalie said, 'Don't you just love raw testosterone served by the bucket full!' She smiled at Juanita who

was walking down from the tree line to join them after packing her camera away. The three of them shared a joyful laugh and strolled to the water's edge to join Dee, Carrie and Madison, who were happily chatting with Maria and Paz whilst watching the men powering through the water.

'Madison, how old is Mason?' Dee asked without preamble.

'Sixty-two in a few months' time.'

Carrie looked at her in disbelief. 'Holy crap! I was thinking early fifties or late forties!' Dee and Kate added their voices to Carrie's exclamation. Kate looked hard at Madison in her bikini; her toned skin firm and her muscles still very evidently well used. The question on her face was transparent and Madison giggled at her. 'I am sixty, Kate.'

The open mouths of the amigas brought laughter from the rest. Dee managed to stammer out, 'My scale is right off because I was thinking well-preserved late forties for you.'

'Thank you, Dee. I shall take that as a compliment.'

Dee said, 'It is! It's also an observation of fact in evidence. Okay, what about everyone else? How about I start, Thirty-one.'

The others looked away from the swimming men and smiled. Madison nodded at Natalie, 'Forty-six,' then towards Juanita, who was doing some deep bends and twists on the waterline, 'Forty-five.'

Maria said, 'I'm thirty-nine and Paz will be eighteen in autumn.'

Carrie chimed in. 'Twenty-nine'. Kate finished, saying, 'Thirty-one as well.'

Natalie looked at Carrie. 'I assume you and Dee are lovers?' Seeing a little discomfort on Carrie's face, she added, 'If it helps, I am openly bisexual.'

Dee grabbed Carrie from behind in an embrace and kissed her noisily on the cheek before they both giggled. She said, 'We are indeed, Natalie. Kate was the first person I came out to, and we started preschool together. We met Carrie after high school, and we've been together ever since.'

Kate wanted the men's statistics, and couldn't contain her curiosity any longer.

'Let's see,' Juanita mused, joining them as she stretched her shoulders, drawing her arms across her chest. 'My teddy bear is fifty, Juan-Carlos recently turned twenty-five and... have I missed any one? Yes, Dom is forty-eight.' Juanita was wiggling her eyebrows in a transparent baiting of Kate.

Laughing, Madison added with a wink, 'Rick is thirty-four.'

A glance out over the water showed that the men had rounded the yellow buoy and were steaming in almost neck and neck, directly towards the beach to complete the 750-metre triangular course. Natalie said, 'Excuse me for a moment,' before walking into the water until she was standing chest deep.

The swimmers surged around her before racing back towards the yellow buoy. From his place in the lead, Dom stripped Natalie's bikini top from her on his way past, taking it so smoothly that he was already away before she could react to its loss. Rick surged past him and into the lead as Dom missed a stroke rolling to flick Nat's top back with a cheeky grin. The women laughed as Natalie retrieved and replaced her top. She walked

back towards the beach, still smiling and shaking her head. *'Boys!'* the contented look on her face said.

It took Kate a moment to realise that Juanita was now swimming with the men, and even sharing the lead with Dom and Rick. Natalie said to her, 'Handicapping. Nita is a damn good swimmer, but the boys are nearly unstoppable over 1500 metres when they're that fresh. Walk with me?'

*Oh shit!*

As soon as they were out of the sight and hearing of the others, Natalie said, 'There is something you're not telling me that you think I should know, or something else about me that you're uncomfortable with. I know it can't be my sexuality, since you share your life with two lesbians. May I ask what it is, Catherine?'

Kate rarely blurted her words out, but after a small tornado of emotions, thoughts and fears, she found herself confessing her voyeurism and the circumstances around it to this remarkable, blonde woman. This remarkable, blonde, beautiful, smiling, laughing woman.

'Catherine, there was an emerald finch in that bush; probably the same one you were following. That's what I was looking at this morning. Grandmother says it's my totem animal. I often see one when something wonderful is happening.'

She grabbed Kate's shoulders warmly, saying, 'See, it's true, here you are. I am so glad you told me. I thought all sorts of things might be wrong.' Breaking apart, she looked at Kate with a wicked grin. 'He is one hell of a lover, isn't he?'

'Dom?' asked Kate, deflecting for time.

Kate realised just how much she had admitted when Natalie's eyes sparkled mischievously. 'Why, Catherine! Who else could I possibly be talking about?' Yet again

Kate's blush answered for her. Natalie chuckled happily as Kate realised what she had just acknowledged to herself. 'Did you like what you witnessed?' Seeing the look on Kate's reddening face, Natalie added, 'There is no judgement or competition here, Catherine.'

'Yes. Yes, I did, Natalie. I talked to Rick over lunch about it, sorry.'

'The thought that you watched us like that is a bit of a turn on for me, and speaking with Rick about it is a healthy and logical thing to do, so there's nothing to apologise for. To answer your unspoken question, I won't bring it up with Dom. I know that if you did feel the need to confess all to him, he would only be concerned for you, and would probably laugh at the situation that you found yourself in. If you feel uncomfortable about it at any level, just talk to him. What did Rick say about it?'

'Just what you said then, almost word for word. He also said that you and Dom taught him about that stuff.'

'That seals it then, Catherine. He would not have shared that with anyone that he didn't both trust, and more-than-like. I assume by your earlier Freudian slip that you also more-than-like him?'

Kate said, 'Yes. I do like him.' Natalie stayed silent, but raised an eyebrow at her. 'Okay, I more-than-like him... a lot.'

'Would you like Rick to give you a similar experience to the one you saw Dom give me?'

Kate almost stammered, not used to talking this freely. Her conservative self was having to run to keep up with the conversation. Kate surrendered and abandoned it. 'Yes, very much so, but I am scared by it as well.'

‘Catherine,’ Natalie said, standing square in front of Kate and holding her lightly by her shoulders, ‘there is absolutely nothing to be scared of. Nothing. Rick would never take you past where you actually wanted to go, even if you don’t know where that is yet. Every man here would die before they allowed harm to befall any of us. I unhesitatingly trust everybody here with my life, and Ricky is a gem beyond trust. I am not saying to rush it, but if you feel the desire for the experience, take it.’

‘Thank you, Natalie,’ she said. A thought came to her as she remembered Juanita in the car, when they were waiting for the barge. She held out her hand. ‘Hi Nat, I’m Kate.’ Giggling, Natalie stepped past Kate’s hand and wrapped her in hug filled with friendship and warmth.

Kate was shocked at the instant connection she felt with Natalie, and held her tight for a moment, trying to work out why her eyes were stinging again, and wishing they wouldn’t. Their smiles were wide when Natalie took Kate’s hand and said, ‘C’mon. Let’s head back.’

‘Five on Dom to win,’ Nat said loudly as they walked back down the beach. She then added quietly to Kate with a wink, ‘Although he may be a little tired.’

The swimmers were on their final leg and stroking hard back towards the beach. Dom and Juanita were two lengths ahead of Rick, who was leading the rest by a similar margin. As they rejoined the others, Nat asked, ‘How’s Nita doing?’

Madison said, ‘Not this time, she’s cooked herself trying to keep up with Dom on the back stretch. I don’t know, Nat, he still looks *waaay* too fresh.’ The heavy innuendo of her last line was met by chuckles all round.

Natalie’s face lit up. ‘When doesn’t he, Maddie? When doesn’t he?’

Madison giggled. 'True.'

Dom gradually pulled ahead of Juanita with his relentless pace, finishing almost a body length ahead of her and sprinting up the beach to slap Natalie's backside lightly, making his first place 'official' as he fell backwards to sprawl on the sand. Juanita just managed to touch Natalie's thigh with a flailing finger before she flopped heavily beside Dom, joined only a moment later by Rick and then the other men. They were all gulping for air and gasping loudly.

Natalie said quietly to Kate before breaking away, 'Talk to me about anything, Kate, any time. Remember that you and I are family now, both granddaughters to Grandmother.'

Kate recognised the magnitude of Nat's statement and acceptance. Her joyous smile in response took Natalie's breath away and she said, 'Thank you, Nat, for everything. I can see us having some interesting talks.' They shared a moment of deep understanding before Natalie grinned and leapt away in a predatory pounce, finishing in a deep push-up position over Dominique's head and kissing his salty and grinning lips.

Kate joined the rest of the women, standing to one side and gazing at the recovering bodies sprawled out in the afternoon sun. As their chests heaved to take in more air, the sunlight, water and sand made their freshly exerted bodies look spectacular. Gazing at the recovering competitors with great interest, Madison said, 'Shall we do a more refined and somewhat less strenuous version of that, ladies?'

The afternoon passed with more horseplay, laughter and swimming in the warm protected waters of the Shelf. Kate's favourite sporting event at school and university, after gymnastics, was the 800-metre freestyle.

When she and Juanita raced a single leg of the 750 metre course and tied, everyone applauded loudly. After finding out that Juanita regularly trained with a squad that included most of the swimmers from the state team, Kate understood why.

The breeze fell away into that magical late-afternoon calm as the shadows lengthened. Carrie and Maria excused themselves to check on the earth oven that had been slowly roasting bundles of meat and baskets of vegetables all day. The new evening breeze wafted over the beach, languid and balmy. It carried rich aromas from the ovens that spoke directly to their well-earned hunger. With growling stomachs, they collectively decided that it was time to wash the salt off and prepare for the evening meal.

Walking up the beach, Kate noticed a number of boats converging on the island. *Another fiesta, by the looks of it.* Part of her was hoping to get some alone time with Rick, but the pure joy of the people was also something to look forward to. Kate just surrendered to the situation, deciding that she would enjoy whatever happened.





## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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After a quick shower and donning some warmer clothes, Kate walked outside to find her world awash in a fantastic light. Already in shadow, and bathed in reflected hues of gold and red, everything around her looked magical and slightly surreal. Feeling like a stroll, Kate turned right on the ring road and was entranced by the constant colour changes of the surrounding landscape and the wispy high clouds.

Entering the clearing of the maloca after wandering up the steeper and thickly wooded slopes of the northern path, she was surprised to see only Maria, Paz and Dee in the cooking area, especially given the number of boats she'd seen headed for the island. Kate returned the waves from the villagers as Dee, looking relaxed and happy, met her half way across the short grass surrounding the maloca. In a joyous, wordless, pirouetting hug, Dee squeezed the air from Kate's lungs as she whirled her around.

'What's going on with you?'

'It's this place and these people. Oh Katie! Carrie and I have never been happier. It's like we're finding each other again, and we didn't even know we were lost.' Looking closely at her friend's face, she added with a grin, 'I see that happiness is catching too!'

'It must be something in the water.'

'It was in the water and on the beach this afternoon. I saw you staring at all of those glorious muscles!' She looked at Kate with a devilish glint in her eye and added, 'One lot of muscles in particular.'

Kate blushed as she said, ‘There were a lot of muscles to look at. I saw a lot of people headed over, are they not here?’

Maria and her daughter had quietly joined them, and Maria answered for Dee. ‘We have a ceremony in the Village this evening. The Big End’s oven pit is far larger than the Village’s, and most of the food will soon be headed there. It also gave Dee and Carrie time off since we set everything up this morning. We are just waiting for sundown before we take the food out.’

They strolled into the cooking area at the end of the maloca as Carrie walked out to join them. ‘That looks very full,’ Kate said.

‘We are feeding nearly fifty tonight. This is one of the two times a year when everyone from Alegria gathers together without exception. Tonight is the evening of the Spring Equinox and tomorrow morning is the start of Watch,’ Paz said.

Maria explained. ‘During Watch, we mark forty-six sunrises in memory of those not with us. Our other gathering is New Day, in six months’ time, on the day of the Autumn Equinox, the same day we arrived here. The Village, on Little End, is where Uncle and Dom lit Alegria’s first fire. At the Race, where we celebrate New Day, the Mother gave Uncle a huge fish on his first cast, showing us we are welcome here. He released it again to show the Mother, and the spirits of this place, that our people would only ever take what they needed. Our tradition during Watch is to focus on each of those we lost, and to remember the lessons each taught us. We do not tell the stories of other places or things during this time.’

Brightening the mood, Paz said, ‘New Day is our most special day. On New Day, Grandmother, Uncle and

Mother sing the songs of Alegria, our histories. It's the only other time we speak of our home before Alegria, and is our most special day. I hope you will come?'

'I think I can say, on behalf of us all, that we shall be here with bells on,' Dee proclaimed.

Maria said, 'You will have to do a lot better than just bells, Dee. We make much noise and laughter, all day and all night. Few can even talk the day after, and we are all glad for the quiet by then.'

Kate said, 'That sounds wonderful, Maria. Is there anything we can do to help tonight?'

Maria shook her head. 'No. No, thank you, Kate. Dee and Carrie have also offered.'

'Dom, Edison, Juanita and JC are participating tonight,' Dee said to Kate before looking at mother and daughter, saying, 'We understand totally. I look forward to finding out more about how this place came to be with the New Day stories.'

Maria and Paz were visibly relieved at the understanding shown by the three newcomers. As the last of the sunlight left the granite obelisk that stood over Little End, a distant, flat and mournful note echoed from the direction of the Village. A distant chorus of wild howls echoed from the other end of the island, raising goose bumps on the amigas. The desolate sounds went on for nearly five minutes before falling silent.

Mother and daughter looked grief stricken. After a moment, they nodded to each other before walking back to break open the earth oven, politely rejecting all offers of assistance. Maria served out a hearty amount for those eating in the maloca before packing the Village's share of the food into woven panniers, already set over bamboo poles. When Dom, Edison, Juanita and Juan-Carlos appeared, they nodded sombre greetings to the

amigas. With Maria and Paz, they lifted the three heavily laden poles and departed for the Village.

Mason, Madison and Rick had entered the maloca from the other side, and Madison had already set out their plates when Kate, Dee and Carrie carried two steaming platters of food and a large bowl of rice into the dining area.

Walking into the maloca moments later, Natalie said in her clear voice, ‘God, that smells superb! Can I help plate up?’ Natalie lifted the mood in the maloca, and everybody welcomed her positive presence. Honouring the traditions of Alegria, they all served a mouthful of food to a plate at the head of the table, and Mason offered thanks for their meal. Over dinner, their discussions turned to what was happening at the Village, with Rick being elected to start the explanations.

‘Alegria celebrates two unique events. Tonight is the start of Watch, which goes for 46 days in remembrance of forty-six lives lost. Each day is dedicated to a life lesson either from, or about, each person who was lost. New Day, in half a year’s time, marks the anniversary of the settlement of Alegria. New Day this year will be our twenty-first. As the dawn breaks, everyone calls out over the water to declare their gratitude for everything they can think of until they literally run out of breath. It goes on for ages. You have to hear the din and feel the vibe to believe it. Once the echoes have died away, a huge log drum gets worked over, and all hell breaks loose. The party happens like a tornado and the mood is euphoric.’

‘What about the story telling?’ Dee asked.

Rick smiled. ‘That starts about an hour or so later; after the initial steam has been let off, and the first course of food has been served and eaten. The dishes on

New Day are mostly vegetarian, but not all. Fair warning though; the food is simple, succulent, and will keep coming all day and night.' Rick paused to emphasise his point. 'Really! Course after course until sun-up the next day. A full 24 hours. Make sure you remember to pace yourselves. After the first round of food is mostly finished, Grandmother, Uncle and Maria will tag-team telling the stories – the songs – of another place once called home, as well as many new songs of Alegria. The songs are the oral histories of the people and Alegria. About mid-morning, most of us will start drinking Grandmother's Journeying Tea. The best way to describe its effect is that it unites us in mind.'

Madison joined in, explaining, 'The brew is slightly psychoactive by common definition, but its action is totally different from any common definition of a drug effect. Drinking it is entirely optional. It's a little like South America's San Pedro cactus or Ayahuasca, but nowhere nearly as intense or physical. As long as you only have a little food from each course, you will not feel ill with it, and you will experience a vastly more open state of mind, as if you are sharing memories and feelings with everyone there. You never feel like you are losing control or seeing things. It's not like that.'

Natalie suggested to the amigas, 'Why not wait until you are in the vibe of what's happening? The effect of the Journeying Tea can be quite challenging, because as they're told, you will feel and live the stories. The stories are all true, and not all true stories are nice, or have happy endings. I love the experience. It is honest, confronting, uplifting, and brutal, all at the same time. Nothing is held back. Personally, I feel enriched by it every time, and I've never felt or seen an ill effect from

it. Anecdotally, it seems to be as safe as anything can be.'

Madison added, 'That's good advice. Until you are there, you cannot begin to understand what New Day means. Regardless of your choice to participate, or not, in any part of the festivities, there is never any pressure or judgement.'

The three amigas nodded silently, recognising the wisdom of the advice offered. Their conversation reached a natural pause, and Carrie asked, 'Forty-six lives?' Rick looked at his parents, and then at the girls. 'We are not bound by the taboos, so the prohibitions do not apply to us, but I will answer in broad strokes if that's okay? The story is not a nice one, even without details.' The girls all nodded. Even his parents leaned forward to listen.

'The people of Alegria are originally from South America. Their village held ninety-two people and was a regular, thriving little jungle village, with a few added amenities. Dominique senior, Dom's father, had been sponsoring the village for nearly four years at Edison's behest. Edison had met Juanita, married her, and sired JC all within a year of arriving there, quite literally by accident. Juanita's father, Carlos, found him still in his Jeep, hanging upside down in a tree, very drunk, and happily singing his lungs out, but that's another story. Things were going along fine until an illegal gold mining interest started spilling mercury and cyanide into the river upstream. Without warning, the village's river was barren and toxic. Eight people in total died from that contamination.

'When the local drug cartel's goons came a week later, it was pure coincidence that Dominique was there with Edison, working on the water problem. The goons

knew all about the water problems already, of course. They shot Juanita's father, who was the village's leader, in cold blood. Then they killed her two brothers. They didn't say a word; they just gunned them down. Dom and Edison were in the bush and unarmed, and it took both of them to hold Juanita silent. JC was about four, I think. When nobody else came out to challenge them, the druggies told the villagers they would now be processing and growing coca leaves in exchange for drinkable water.'

The girls were silent, reeling at the horror of the story, and thankful for the lack of colour in Rick's recounting of what happened.

'They gave the village until sun-up the following day to be ready to learn how to process coca leaves for them, or else. In the morning, the village rose and fought them, mostly with single barrel shotguns and arrows. Dominique and Edison made the difference. Their unit was in country and they had pretty much their full field-kit with them, including modern small arms. They took the druggies down, losing only two people. That afternoon, the druggies came back in greater force and more people died.

'Nearly two weeks after the fighting started, Juanita was caught in the open by a goon during another raid. JC saved her life with his slingshot. A goon was taking swings at her with his machete and misjudged his range after JC got him in the eye. JC's second rock got the guy between his legs just as he was taking another swing; he was a great shot, even then.'

'Her scars!' Dee said, voicing their collective thoughts.

Rick nodded. 'Juanita got clipped twice before she reached her shotgun. She shot the guy as she fell, and

Edison and Dominique both nailed him too, the three of them, all at the same moment. They patched her up as best they could, but field medicine is not cosmetic surgery. Mum still says it's a miracle that they saved her.' Madison nodded in affirmation before Rick continued. 'That battle was won, but the conflict was far from over. The fighting had left thirty-three people dead by the end of the third week, plus eight more from the poisoned water.'

After a moment of silent contemplation, Mason said, 'All of Dom's unit went 'on leave' as soon as word got back of what was happening. They arrived two days after Juanita was hurt. They were eleven trained soldiers with modern arms, and they took the fight to the local cartel in some very unofficial, but completely one-sided engagements. The local army started to sniff around when there were no bad guys left. Their streams of bribes had dried up, and they were looking for revenge. The big cartel was sniffing around too, looking for someone to blame for the halt in production. It was a bad time.

'Dom Senior, Dad, and Dad's brother had great political connections. When the water pollution first happened, they had started calling in a huge number of favours to have the people relocated and resettled here. Dominique Senior had half inherited and half bought this whole area ten years before the fighting as a private conservation project.

'In the end, forty-six of our people were lost, including five who later died of wounds on the way here. Because of political and logistical situations, it took just over five months to get the people here. It took them nearly three months just to walk out of the jungle. They had to avoid the army and cartel, who were both still



looking for them, so the rivers and usual methods were not available to them, and they had some badly wounded people as well. The first death from the pollution happened on the morning of the Spring Equinox. The people remember and celebrate each person, in turn, for the next forty-six days.'

The girls reeled at the incomprehensible brutality of the history. By unspoken but common assent, they asked no more questions. They ate in contemplative silence before Natalie lifted their mood with some cheerful small talk.

Finishing a small sweet-rice-and-fruit dish, Kate blinked in her recall of Rick's introduction by JC when they'd first arrived. 'Rick, what the hell is a pongo?'

Mason howled with laughter and Rick blushed a little. Looking teasingly at his son, Mason said to Kate, 'Pongo is a nickname for a ground soldier.' For added effect, Mason was holding his nose as if exposed to a foul odour, saying in nasal tones, 'Anywhere the army goes, the pong goes.'

Rick growled in a sullen but clearly feigned manner, 'Nobody smells very sweet after four weeks in a dry field exercise with only just enough water to drink, even if they did fall out of a plane first.'

Back to his normal, cheerful self, Rick looked at Kate and the girls. 'Dear old Dad, along with Dom, Edison and JC, are paras. I should say were, but once a para, always a para. Paras are paratroopers, airborne commandos. The silly buggers who jump into enemy fire from a perfectly sound aircraft, saying things like, 'They have us surrounded, the poor bastards!'' The worst part is, they mean it!'

Mason added proudly, 'My son served his country's army well, if briefly. He would have been the army's

youngest full colonel.’ Father and son exchanged a look, recognising a topic best left alone.

Madison intervened, saying in tones of mock exasperation to the girls, ‘My men are chronic overachievers!’ Like a pressure release valve, everyone laughed.

Rick continued quietly, ‘I was asked to take a promotion and I said no. I have never once regretted that decision. It took a year of lodges and journeying to square those demons away.’ Seeing the questioning looks on the girls’ faces, he added, ‘Like Dad, I joined as an engineer, but went on to different duties.’

Natalie said to the amigas, ‘Ricky was in special operations. The guys that do the necessary and ugly shit that never makes it to the *History Channel*.’

Father and son looked gratefully to Natalie for her simplification of an otherwise hard to describe subject. Facing the girls, she continued, ‘You don’t have to worry though. Grandmother, Uncle and Dom are very good at their skills. You saw about as much flashback on the beach today as you ever will. PTSD does *not* live here.’

‘The wrestling and horseplay,’ Kate said.

Rick said, ‘Nat, you remain as wonderful as ever, thank you.’ He looked at Kate and said, ‘Yes, those games are a spill over of our common history. I did a few years – most of my seven years really – doing a lot of things that never officially happened. Things that left ghosts in every corner, and had me swinging between destructively angry, and darkly suicidal. Grandmother, Uncle and Dom, along with Dad, Natalie and Edison, sweated and journeyed me back. My memories are at peace now, as am I.’

When Carrie asked, 'And Dominique?' everyone looked at Rick.

'Dominique is Dominique. He was a special kind of paratrooper, so was Edison. The sort reserved for when the shit is really hitting the fan and failure is not an acceptable outcome. Dad was their commander,' he said, looking at his father with pride. 'Dom was wounded and discharged 18 years ago. Next time you see him shirtless, look carefully, just under his armpits on both sides. There is a through and through bullet hole that should have killed him. Truly a one-in-a-million kind of wound to survive. Especially with nothing more than a collapsed lung and some cracked ribs. Edison was injured in that same engagement, and he followed Dom into civilian-life.'

Dee whistled and said, 'No wonder they surprised the druggies. Not the sort of resistance they'd normally expect, I imagine.'

Mason answered, 'Dee, you are very right. Dom and Edison served with me. Their fathers served with my father. Dominique Senior and Edward met their wives on the same leave, and even had a double wedding. Edison was born first, Dom a few years later.'

Mason continued after a brief pause. 'Dom's dad was Dominique Senior. Edison is 'Eddy's son'. That's why Edison takes no nickname; his father was Ed, Ted and Eddy. It was poetic that they reprised their father's roles in the service. We lost all four of Dom's and Edison's parents in a plane crash the same week Dom and Edison were hurt. A student pilot flew straight up and into them from below.'

After a few moments of deep silence, Mason added quietly whilst looking at the middle of the table, 'They were good people. You can see that through their sons.'

‘Mason, by what I can see of the sons here, that goes for all of you,’ Carrie said, looking at Rick.

Mason said, ‘Thank you, Carrie. We are quite proud of the way our lads have turned out. We were worried about Ricardo for a while. He has his godfather’s lust for testing the limits of adventure and luck. JC is even worse.’

Rick said, ‘Do you know anyone luckier? If some of Dom’s luck rubbed off on me, I am richer for it. They didn’t die for running out of luck, Dad, none of them did. They died because an inexperienced pilot and his inattentive instructor did several things that they shouldn’t have. They paid with their lives as well. I am far more pragmatic than Dom. I’m my father’s son, Dad.’

Rick lightened the mood, adding with a smile, ‘And I’m the only one here who can put the Godfather on his back half the time.’

His father burst out laughing, releasing the tension from around the table. ‘Yes, you are the only one here who can claim that title. Edison comes next, JC, and then me. I tell you, even when they were young, they moved like-’

‘Smoke!’

The Myers blinked at Kate’s assertive description. Madison recovered first. ‘I normally say like cats, Kate, but smoke works well. Perfectly, in fact.’

‘Kate said that about JC the first time she saw him at the opera,’ Dee remembered aloud.

Carrie asked, ‘And the Godfather is?’

Rick answered, ‘Dominique is my godfather, and JC’s, and a good number of others around here. Hence, he is the Godfather.’

Kate looked at Rick, asking, 'I saw a good number of scars today. Are they from the military times?'

'Most of them, Kate,' answered Madison for her son.

'From what I saw, a few of those wounds must have been serious.'

'After Juanita's injuries, Dom's was the worst, Juan-Carlos was once very badly injured, but came out mostly unmarked on the outside. You will see where a few holes got made though.' After a moment of thought, Madison added, 'Rick was damn close once. See that little mark there?' she asked, pointing to a small scar on her son's neck. Kate nodded. 'That was the worst after Dom's and it nearly killed him. He got blood poisoning from it.'

'What happened?' Kate asked Rick.

'A tiny bit of shrapnel got me that I never even felt. We were bugging out after a heavy job and had to evade through dirty old swamps for nearly two days. Whatever was in the water got into me. I didn't even know about it until I was sick on the chopper the next day and the medics had me in a hospital a few hours later.'

Changing the subject, Natalie said to the three amigas, 'Okay, since we are playing getting-to-know-you, why don't we do occupations?' The Myers looked happy at the thought, so Natalie continued. 'I am a private practice psychiatrist, specialising in facial analysis and sexuality. No military service.'

Pointing to Mason, she continued in a teasing tone, 'Mason is a somewhat reformed version of indolent rich. After he got sick of jumping out of perfectly good aircraft, he became a praiseworthy entrepreneurial philanthropist, and he likes to play engineer at times. His official title is 'Earl of Cool', or something like that, and

he's possibly sixteenth in line for some throne or another.'

She flashed a cheeky and challenging grin at Mason. He answered with his pained-but-good-natured-suffering look, showing her that she'd have to do a lot better than that if she wanted a rise out of him tonight. Everyone laughed when it was clear that her bait wouldn't be taken.

With her cheeky grin still in place, she continued. 'Madison is the brains, and the looks, of the outfit. She won't tell you, but she is responsible for the lives of many, many people around the world. Pandemic Epidemiologist is the official title. You already know Ricky's story.'

'Nat, what the hell is it that Dom does?' Kate asked in a rush of frustration.

'What do you think he does?'

'Damn it, Nat. Edison said exactly the same thing to me.' It was obvious from the smiles around the table that she was not going to receive any clues. Kate started applying her analytical mind to the question. Thinking out aloud, and unconsciously counting on her fingers, she said, 'He has a huge variety of interests and influences. He knows a lot of people. He's very adept at managing large groups. It seems he is that-guy-who-always-knows-a-guy. He knows how to work people and he understands how people work. I would suspect some formal psychology training is likely?'

Natalie smiled and nodded, wanting Kate to continue. The Myers were smiling and leaning in too. 'You two met during or through your studies,' Kate challenged.

Natalie smiled encouragingly. 'Not quite in the way you're suggesting, but close enough not to matter. Go on...'

'I didn't even have a hint of Mason and Madison until their gig. There are rarely ever the same people at each event.' Kate thought hard for a moment and then blinked, looking at Mason and Madison. 'It was your gig, not Dom's! Okay, I think he is a middle-man... a facilitator of sorts,' Kate announced. 'I have seen how he helps-things-happen. The right people have the right introductions at the right time. I have no idea how one is paid for that, but it's the only thing that fits all of what I've seen.'

'Well done, Kate. You only missed his degree in business. What about Edison and Nita?'

'Equals here, but servants on the outside. Here is real, out there is not. Edison says 'we' and 'us' too often in private to be a casual slip. It's role-play. I am guessing that the servant can hear things and do things that the master can't.'

Mason said, 'You know first-hand how well that works, Kate. Other than Natalie, Dom is the best judge of character amongst us. We still have our reputation because Ashinkata said something in front of you that he would never have let himself say in front of us.'

'Kate, each personality falls into a slot,' Natalie said, taking over. 'Dom is a natural, imaginative and innovative leader. Edison is a natural second in command and is happily Dom's right hand. Juanita is a logistical genius, but is averse to actual leadership since losing so many people when her father's leadership passed to her.'

They all paused to consider what had just been said before Mason added, 'JC is the classic utilitarian, able to

fulfil any role he needs to, like a very able junior officer who is destined for greatness. I have yet to see him challenged by anything he didn't eventually overcome.' He looked at Natalie.

Natalie nodded in approval at their joint summary. She continued. 'Their combined strength – Dom's, Edison's and Nita's – is in their total recognition of their own strengths and weaknesses and their ego-less contentment within those roles. Edison is a methodical person who can delegate, read political winds and follow through. Decisive in his own right, he lacks the same brilliant, innovative flair and instinctual timing that Dom has. Edison's strengths compensate for Dom's lack of follow through and patience with minutiae. Add Nita, with her natural flair for logistics and organising people, and the three of them are highly effective at getting things done.'

Natalie let that sink in, and then brightly looked at the girls. 'So, I know Carrie is an atypically talented chef, and clearly revels in that role. Danielle is front of house and knows enough about wine to make Edison's eyebrows knit in the middle when he doesn't think we're watching; a sommelier?' Carrie's nodding affirmed Natalie's assessment so far. 'There's a degree in there, something to do with wine...'

'Very good, Nat. Organic chemistry,' said Dee.

Natalie turned to face Kate squarely, focused and interested. 'So, Kate, what is your vocation?'

'I work with Dee and Carrie in our catering business.'

Carrie cut in, her voice clear and determined. 'Kate is an engineer, Natalie. She is a gifted and brilliant engineer, just like her father. She is a star maître d', but she is an engineer in her DNA. She's our business



partner because she applies her ridiculously large mind to having every detail and contingency thought of, costed and solved before we even accept a job. That, and we love her to bits.'

Kate blinked at Carrie, as did the rest of those at the table. Carrie was still looking right at Kate. 'Katie-J, I am happier than I can say to have you back with us. You are our third half, we both love you, and you know it. But when I – we – see you with a big 'unsolvable' puzzle, we see you in your bliss. I love food, Dee loves schmoozing and giving as much cheek as she can get away with, as well as being a walking encyclopaedia of wine. You, Katie, are a great maître d', but you are a brilliant engineer.'

Carrie looked at the Meyers and said, 'Can you believe she got the second highest scores, ever, in all her degrees?' Anticipating the coming question, Carrie said, 'Three! She did a double in structural and material engineering, and then did another on advanced materials.' Carrie looked directly at Kate. 'You are good at anything you touch, Kate, but your head works differently when you have a nice juicy problem in front of you that nobody else can figure out.'

Dee continued as soon as Carrie stopped talking. 'We hate the thought of losing you one day, Katie, but we know we will. You are an engineer, toes-to-top. The sooner you realise how deeply we understand this, the better. We love you and want to see you happy, Katie. We love working together, you know we do, but you are too passionate and too good at cracking unsolvable puzzles to be satisfied with catering for the rest of your life, even as spectacularly as we do it!'

Kate stared at her friends, her eyes wide and filled with tears. After a respectful silence, Natalie said, 'Kate?

An old saying, paraphrased, says that to know a person, witness the loyalties they inspire and the qualities of the people that surround them. Intelligent, caring and beautiful friends clearly love you greatly. I feel I know you far better now.'

Everyone had a small chuckle, releasing the tension of the moment. 'Thank you, Nat,' Kate said for the three, her eyes glistening and her voice cracking. 'By that measure, every person I've met here shines brightly for every other person. Three days ago, I was a different person, I think we all were.' Kate looked at her friends, who nodded their affirmations. 'I can't believe how different everything feels already. Thank you, all of you.'

A comfortable and companionable silence descended over the table until a series of yawns prompted the evening's end, and everyone helped to clean up. When Rick and Kate were starting the awkward-glance-dance, Natalie stepped in and took Kate by the waist before saying, 'Too slow, Ricardo. Katie is mine tonight.'

Rick bowed deeply to Natalie and Kate, saying, 'I yield to my fair ladies. I bid you refreshing slumber, filled with enchanting dreams, and beauteous wonders.'

Natalie urged Madison to do something about her boy, and their laughter was a simple and happy end to the evening. Dee and Carrie walked with the Myers to the ring road, taking the western path to savour the clear, cool evening.

The night air was filled with the clean scents of the scrub. Whilst Alegria was blessedly free of biting insects, other creatures of the night filled the darkness with all manner of chirping, croaking and buzzing. Strolling along the path, Natalie said, 'Kate, you have

really got that lad's heart and mind, but let's put that to the side for now. How is Catherine Jones doing?'

'Oh God Natalie! I have absolutely no idea!' Kate cried out, much louder than she'd intended. In the muted light reflecting from the path, she looked into Natalie's empathetic eyes and continued. 'Today has been a day I will never forget. From first thing this morning to last thing tonight, I seem to hear more and more things I've never even considered until today. I... I...'

Seeing Kate taper off, Natalie caught both of Kate's flapping hands and held them, looking into her eyes. 'Kate, today you saw those men at play. Those are all men who are worthy of a worthy woman's attention. You've been exposed to ideas and histories that most people have a bit of a chance to work up to. You even had your first live sex show, and it was a little kinky at that.' Natalie's teeth shone white with a wicked smile before she went on.

'You've been exposed, without censor, to all of us, and our ways, which are a little less than orthodox. We live in gratitude and with a level of honesty and acceptance not often found in our modern world. Last, I doubt that there are many times in your life when you have felt like you were in a room of intellectual equals?'

'Facial Analysis is another way of saying lie-detector, isn't it?' Kate asked. Natalie shrugged a little with a smile. Kate took a breath and said, 'Yes, I am used to being the smartest person in a room, and I love talking with you guys. It's as if my brain has the room to speed up here. I hope that doesn't sound horrible, I don't mean it to be at all.'

'Relax, Kate. Your IQ is where? Hmmm, early 140s?'

Kate nodded. '143, nice 'guess'. Yours?'

Natalie said, ‘156. Amongst our transient population of Alegria, you are still in the upper-middle of the curve, three points ahead of Rick, by the way. Now, let’s talk about you. You have just found yourself interested in an intellectually, emotionally and physically compatible man, who is also interested in you. I am guessing that you are feeling scared witless of both falling in love, and of not falling in love with Ricky, and that you have absolutely no idea what to do about it. How am I doing?’

After a wicked giggle at Kate’s wide-eyed look of affirmation, Natalie continued. ‘You need to give yourself a chance to think about where your happiness lies. Kate, I know Ricky as well as anyone on this earth does. He will not push, but I have never seen him like he is with you. I would wager that you never expected this sort of connection either?’ Kate shook her head. ‘So give yourself a chance, Kate. Give yourself time to digest what you’ve seen and heard, and to think about what is on offer.’

‘Sorry?’ Kate asked.

‘Rick is a permanent part of Alegria. We are family in this place. Grandmother recognised you from her dreams. That wonderful old shaman did not name you her granddaughter lightly. Kate, granddaughter is not an honorific title here. She did not say welcome home as a quaint custom, she meant it. Dom and Rick are inviting you into our world, we all are. Maybe a little more has been shared than first intended, but maybe that’s a good thing too. In case you hadn’t noticed, I am a Band-Aid-off-fast kind of girl. This is a magical place and the bonds here are like none you are likely to find anywhere else.’

'This is a lot to take in, Nat.' Kate paused, taking a deep breath. 'If you had asked me before we came here if I was even considering the possibility of another relationship, the answer would have been a decisive 'No' or even 'Hell No'. Two-and-a-half days here and so much is different. I don't even know if Rick and I are compatible.'

Natalie's musical laugh took Kate off guard. 'Oh Katie! You are made for him, and he is made for you. Grandmother, Uncle, and every other person here saw it the moment you were both in the same space. We watch ourselves become background to both of you when you're near each other.'

Seeing the look on Kate's face, she added, 'Catherine, Ricardo Myers is an impeccably honest and honourable man who is utterly trust-worthy and very, very capable in all things. Don't overthink this. The only goal worth striving for is happiness, and when you two are together, I see happiness. It's not about what you think you feel, and it's not about what you think you should feel. Your head lies to your heart, and your heart lies to your head. Trust your chemistry. I see you light up when he is near, just as he does near you. The answer is clear... to me anyway. Sleep on it, Kate.'

They strolled on, enjoying the clear night air and each other's company. Kate asked, 'So are you and Dom...'

'We are lovers. Kind of like friends-with-benefits, but we are far closer than that bland term implies.'

'How does that work? I've never gotten my head around it.'

'I would describe it as neither of us wants to possess the other, but we love each other deeply. I love him enough to know that if he found someone else, I

would be the first to genuinely cheer for his happiness. I also know that if the reverse happened, he would be the first to genuinely cheer for my happiness too.'

'What about love?'

'The emotional kind? Some people are wired for it, and some are not. Neither Dom nor I seem to be. You have probably found yourself questioning whether love even exists after your recent experiences?' Kate nodded.

'That's because if you think past a certain point, you understand the fragility of such concepts as absolutes. I love Dom and he loves me. Not in a walking-down-the-aisle kind of way, but in a profoundly satisfying way that works for us. Since we've known each other, Dom and I have had three significant relationships between us, during which we ceased all intimate contact.'

'How do you not fall in love?'

'We do! Every single time. I am in deep love with everything about Dominique, Kate, and that love is fully reciprocated. We just have no desire to possess each other. We are both quite repelled by the idea of being possessed too. We are too similar. We're great lovers and excellent companions, but our joint track records suggests quite strongly that we are both totally crap at the actual relationship thing. We are very comfortable in who we are as individuals; and in who and what we are to each other.'

'I desire variety and experience. I love exploring different roles. I desire both men and women. Many of my desires are counter to the concepts of a contemporary romantic relationship. Dom is about as close as I've come. Apart from one woman, a long time ago now, I am also the closest he has had.'

'Could you ever see yourself with Dom... as a couple?'

'I can't say no, Kate. In some ways, we have been for some time. But for Dom and I to become a conventional couple? I don't know what would precipitate such a change in our dynamic. Nobody knows the future of course, but at this point, I can't see it.'

Kate realised they were at the entrance to her cabin. 'Nat, I really enjoy talking with you. You make things feel familiar when you talk about them, and that's a real gift. Thank you.' They said goodnight and Kate watched Natalie strolling up the ring road for a moment before heading inside, still smiling.

Kate made herself a cup of the bedtime tea and had a quick shower to freshen up. The tea worked quickly and she felt her body relaxing into nothingness under the warm covers as her mind replayed visions of Rick's muscles glistening in the sun, especially the way the muscles of his stomach narrowed into a 'V' over his hips. Kate was asleep for a few minutes before her smile finally faded.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

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The sun was well up by the time Kate opened her curtains. Looking out at the shimmering water beyond the trees, Kate realised just how much she needed some quality thinking time. She headed for the waterline and the swinging lounge with a steaming cup of coffee in her hand. Immersed in the natural beauty of Alegria, she sat in the dappled sunlight, letting the sounds of the lapping water massage her mind into a relaxed state where it functioned at its best. A balmy breeze washed around her, banishing the last cool air of the morning as she gazed out at the water, sipping her coffee and thinking.

Starting with her arrival on Alegria, Kate recalled and reflected on every conversation and interaction, examining her own actions, thoughts and feelings as objectively as she could. She considered the very direct and logical advice offered to her by Natalie and Dom. She thought about how everyone had accepted her and the girls as family, and spent a lot of time thinking about Rick and his history, as well as her own. Staring at the forested peaks beyond the lagoon and deep in thought, her second cup of coffee became a third. Finally, Kate smiled in decision, happy in the conclusions she had arrived at.

Walking back to her cabin, the bell from the maloca sounded to announce lunch and her stomach growled in response. As nice as it was, the coffee was no substitute for real food. Buoyed by her new perspective of the last two years in general, and her experiences of the last few days in particular, Kate almost danced into her shower to



freshen-up. The breeze was warm as Kate started up the eastern path to the maloca. Amongst the trees, she found herself surrounded by butterflies, their wings flashing iridescent blue in the sunlight. She heard the happy sounds of giggling and teasing from inside the maloca as she drew near.

‘Katie! Don’t you look rested and bright?’ Dee said as she walked in to join them. No men were in sight. Seeing Kate look around, Madison said, ‘Juanita and the men went to the Village. They all stand watch on the first day, dawn to dusk. We are the whole population of Big End until after sun-down.’

Natalie was looking at her intently. ‘Kate, you look like you have sorted through a lot of issues. Care to share where your thoughts are with Rick?’

Kate laughed. ‘You do get to the point, don’t you Nat?’

‘You and Rick have been the only topic none of us have discussed all morning, so naturally we are all burning with curiosity. By the look on your face, you have been asking yourself some better questions.’

‘Yes. Thank you Nat. I have.’

‘How are the answers going?’ Madison asked, her eyes flashing to Natalie for a moment before locking back onto Kate’s.

Turning to face Madison, Kate took a breath. ‘I find myself completely attracted to your son at pretty much every level I could imagine. I don’t know what potential there is between Rick and I, but I am open to whatever it is, if that’s okay?’ Without realising it, Kate exhaled loudly as she finished, causing everyone to laugh.

Madison answered by wrapping Kate in a warm embrace and, with a wet sparkle in her eyes, kissing her cheek. ‘I could not hope for more, for both of you.’

The afternoon passed with laughter, teasing, swimming in the warm waters of the Shelf, and lounging about with a few of bottles of wine. The shadows were lengthening by the time they returned to the maloca. A short time later, Natalie started a small fire in the central hearth. When Carrie questioned her about having a fire on such a warm and humid afternoon, Natalie sniffed the breeze and said, 'You can really smell it now.'

'Lightning,' Madison answered, sniffing the air herself. The storm's metallic ozone smell was increasingly distinct on the freshening breeze running before the storm. The girls nodded in recognition of what had been a vague background scent for the last hour or two.

In answer to the looks the three amigas were giving her, Natalie smiled. 'Did you see all the butterflies in the bush this morning? I don't know their zoological name, but they only ever come out like that before an electrical storm.'

'They were beautiful,' Kate declared. 'They swarmed me the whole way in.'

'You're wearing blue. They're very attracted to the colour,' Natalie said, 'but they are also said to be excited by electricity in... *other* forms.'

Cheeky grins flashed around the group, accompanied by chuckles. Kate felt her ears heating up as she giggled with her friends.

The afternoon light dimmed and the wind picked up just as the ladies finished rolling down and zippering the clear plastic side-panels to weather-proof the maloca. The far shore was already vanishing under the coming deluge. Thunder rumbled almost continuously as the wind and rain of the leading edge of the storm arrived in frantic pulses and wild flurries. The ladies watched and

cheered as the Big End's spire attracted one spectacular lightning hit after another, flashing bright against the dark clouds behind. The granite spires on either end of the island acted as natural lightning rods.

Thirty minutes later, the air was clear and calm again, but much colder. Blazing red in the sunset, the retreating thunderheads were still rumbling and flashing in the distance. The women chatted and laughed as twilight fell, their fire keeping them warm and cosy.

Carrie had just made a light supper of a warm white fish salad and a simple fried rice dish over the fire when Dom and the others walked into the light of the maloca. It was clear on their faces that their day had been an emotional one, and their conversation was quiet and sparse as they ate. The evening was still young when Mason rose and thanked Carrie for the meal before excusing himself. That acted as the catalyst for the group to break for an early night. Those who had stood Watch in the Village looked exhausted and ready for bed.

Madison gave Kate a wink and grabbed her son's arm, guiding him out to give Kate some time with Dee and Carrie. She smiled in response to Kate's nod of thanks. When they were alone, Carrie asked Kate, 'How are you doing, Katie-J?'

'Wonderful... and who knows? How do you even contextualise everything that has happened, I mean just this weekend?'

Dee said, 'This is a special bunch of people. Everything about Alegria is like a big, fat slice of "how-things-should-be". I can see the changes in you, Katie, we both can. Rick and his folks, and everyone here, are just the most genuine and unassuming people we've ever met. Natalie is amazing at every level, they all are. Catherine Jones! If you are not already a little in love, or

at least massively infatuated, you bloody well should be.'

Kate smiled shyly at her friends before allowing, 'A bit of both, I think.'

A group hug was the only response that would do. After a final cup of tea, Kate walked the girls back to their cabin and slowly strolled up the ring road to her own. The night was alive with the sounds of insects, frogs and night birds calling in celebration of the recent rain. She was sure she could hear a small waterfall in the distance, high up towards the Big End's spire. Stars sparkled overhead in a riotous display that seemed almost close enough to touch, and the air was as clean and fresh as any she had ever breathed. A few times, she actually skipped, giggling happily to herself. She even twirled once, feeling lighter in her soul than she could remember.

Two notes were under her door when she entered her cabin.

~

*"Catherine, my son has not shut up about how wonderful you are since meeting you. We both affirm his assessment without reserve and look forward to future developments with great interest, whatever they may be. Know you have our blessings and warmest of wishes and*

*M & M"*

~

The second note read:

~

*"Breakfast at my place? Anytime you are vertical is fine. I am generally up just a little after the sun. Sleep as long as you want. xx Natalie"*

~

Sleep was elusive that night as Kate's mind kept running over random thoughts of her past. *Don't overthink things. How many times have I heard that?* She finally fell into a restless doze, still debating with herself whether or not to make a cup of the sleeping tea.

The horrid dream that had haunted her sleep since that day in the courthouse still visited her once or twice a week, and it came again as soon as she fell asleep. Until tonight, the nightmare had always been the same. Kate was always immobile and powerless as Silvio planned and perpetrated his betrayal, right in front of her, laughing at her as he did so. Her recurrent nightmare was a horrific caricature of her divorce that always left her feeling crushed.

This time it was different. She wasn't an infuriatingly defenceless victim, slowly being tortured and dismembered by the malignant whims of Silvio and the faceless lawyers. This time she was a detached and almost bored observer, watching distant events that no longer had meaning in any part of her life. Even during the dream, she knew her nights of waking up gasping, covered in fear and sweat, were over. Her victory was complete when her dream extended past its normal conclusion and continued on to include the girls, their business, Alegria and Rick, developing into a happy and wonderful dream.

Feeling calm and detached, she was aware of waking up. The memory of her whole dream was vivid, but the nightmare part of it no longer held any impact or interest for her. Her joyful tears came quickly with her understanding. After a few paroxysms of emotional release, she felt a wave of peace flow over and through her. She recognised the shift within herself as her emotional weights fell away. She was free. Lying in the

pre-dawn darkness, Kate felt a rush of gratitude for her friends, for her renewed life, and for the exceptional group of people sharing themselves and their island with her. Still in her distant observer's role, she examined what she knew of Rick's past. It was unusual and dramatic, but it also felt familiar now.

Dom's words came back to her at that moment, and she realised that he was right. No matter how much time had passed, nothing would change a single important detail of any part of this weekend or anything leading up to it. She said a silent thank you to Natalie, Madison and Juanita, and to everyone on Alegria, for being so welcoming and beautiful, for being so non-judgemental and completely accepting. She already found herself thinking of them all as family.



Waking in a comfortable and warm fuzz, she met the early pre-dawn twilight with a giggle. Kate rarely went back to sleep once she'd woken up. Stretching and sighing indulgently under the covers, she celebrated how blissfully comfortable she felt. The sky was soon painted in garish colours as the eastern horizon grew brighter; a display that seemed to be celebrating her new life with her. Small patches of mist clung to the surface waters of the lagoon, flaring gold and pink against the still dark water as dawn broke.

Rising, she had a hot shower that complemented her mood perfectly. The morning was still a little cool, but held the promise of another warm day. Kate wore her swimming costume under her clothes and almost skipped along the ring road to Natalie's cabin. There was a note on Nat's open front door.

~

*“I’m out the back, make yourself a cuppa and come down. I’ll have what you’re having.”*

~

Kate made two double-shot mugs and walked out to find Natalie gazing into a tree. Without looking at her, she whispered, pointing. ‘Katie, look at it. Isn’t it beautiful?’ The brilliant emerald green of the bird’s breast shone as if charged with electricity in the low sun. With two shrill calls, it was gone. As she uncovered a platter of sliced fruits, Natalie asked, ‘Are you hungry?’

‘A little. That looks perfect.’

Natalie looked appraisingly at Kate for a moment before saying, ‘It’s the emotional detritus of your recent past that you’ve been navigating, Kate. By the looks of you, it seems that you have achieved a breakthrough.’

‘I won’t ask how you knew that,’ Kate said, nibbling on a sweet piece of pineapple. ‘I dreamt of Silvio – my ex – and the divorce and the hurts. It’s always been the same bad dream, well, nightmare really. It’s normally really horrible and shakes me up every time. Last night it was like a re-run on TV that I’ve seen too many times. It just bored me until I lost interest; then it changed to include everything wonderful that’s happened since, including you and Rick, and this place.’

Natalie smiled and said, ‘Congratulations, Kate. I know Dom told you of my interest in your ex-husband’s pathology. I can see that you have already recognised the importance of your dream progressing past the nightmare and into its happy conclusion. What a wonderful thing that is! Now shall we talk of the only monkey left in the room?’

Kate looked at Natalie, trying to work out what she meant. Natalie turned and loudly slapped her own backside, a wicked grin illuminating her face.

‘Crap, you don’t pull any punches, do you Nat?’

‘Goodness no! That wastes too much quality time. If you have something to say, come right out and say it. If the people you are talking to are worthy, they will accept it. If not, you just saved yourself a bad investment.’

Kate stopped and thought about Natalie’s words. Satisfied, she nodded. ‘You know, you are right. And, yes, the D-s thing worries me.’

‘And you have read some popular stories and think it is all about mind games, pain, subservience and dark, kinky fuckery?’

‘Something like that. Rick and I talked about it a bit. Actually, he talked me through a scenario... and yes, I loved it. I just don’t know if I can be everything Rick would want me to be.’

Laughing, Natalie said, ‘Kate, you already are! You got sexually aroused watching Dom and me, correct?’ Seeing Kate’s blushing nod, she continued, ‘When you trust the other person, you can let go and immerse yourself in your moment. The whole point of the experience is for *you* to find *your* authenticity, *your* space between past and future, *your* moment. That’s where you find real freedom. That’s where the magic is. Tell me, what do you know of Dominance and Submission, D-s play?’

‘Only what Rick has described and what we’ve talked about. The rest seems to be wildly inaccurate at every level.’

‘Kate, recognising that inaccuracy is a great place to start from. OK, let’s give you the fast version. There



is BDSM, which is bondage, domination, sadism and masochism. BDSM often involves complex scenarios and much deeper levels of control and torment, normally involving giving and receiving actual pain. That is why the label has sadism and masochism in it. BDSM is much further *out there* than D-s in general terms, but the distinctions between them overlap and are fuzzy at best. In D-s, each gets a kick out of giving and receiving total trust. The honesty of a healthy D-s session has to be total. For that matter, healthy BDSM requires total honesty as well. All relationships do.

‘In my case, I prefer to dominate. I have a long-time occasional lover, Jacinta. She is dominant to me and rocks my world every time we are together. Really good Dominants are very rare. Because of his utter trustworthiness, Dom is the only man I can completely let go with; his intent and his total generosity of spirit are impeccable. He also doesn't have a submissive cell in his entire body. In every other case in my sexual life, I am the Dominant. You see Kate, it's about being able to trust to the point of complete surrender. Receiving and channelling the intensity, transforming it into something else. You learn to lift yourself above it.

‘As far as D-s goes, forget about pain as you would define it. In BDSM, actual pain is a normal part of the landscape, but in D-s, it's not pain so much as just a stronger or more intense form of sensation. Everything is about intensity and connection. A good Dominant will hold you with just the right amount of intensity you need to stay in sub-space. It's a mental place, or space, where you feel like you are riding on the sensations, soaring above the clouds, and swimming in the deep. It's like dying and being reborn, all at the same time. What you saw on Saturday morning was completely therapeutic for

me. Last week, I just had a highly contentious paper accepted for publication – including the case review of Silvio’s pathology – and the stress of the peer review process, the edits, changes and proofs had all emotionally stacked up on me.’

Nodding to let Natalie know she understood, Kate sipped her coffee and listened.

‘I purged every bit of that stress and tension during that session. Dom gave me the space and the energy I needed to clean house – in my head – and get rid of everything I didn’t want.’

‘It did sound like it was a real release.’

‘Oh God, yes. He was edging me, holding me in the space right between ‘Oh’ and ‘God’. He actually had my body physically climaxing, holding me in that delicious pre-orgasmic state the whole time, but he wouldn’t let my full energetic orgasm happen. It just keeps building until there is nothing that can describe the energy of the release, nothing. It is like a rebirth when it lets go. It washes you clean of everything. You die and you are reborn; fresh, clean and new.’

‘I don’t know if it would be the same for me though, Natalie.’

‘Katie, here and now, you are aroused emotionally and physically by the thoughts of what we are talking about! Rick will never desire to take you anywhere you are not willing to go. That will also be a lot further than you might imagine right now. Everything is consensual. Think back to what you saw under the tree. Even though he knows me, and my responses, better than any other person on this planet, he was checking in with me all the time. A good Dominant will always think of the welfare and wishes of their submissive or their bottom first. That’s what makes a Dominant worthy of trust.’

‘Bottom? Is a bottom different to a submissive?’

‘Yes. For a submissive, the experience is far more about feeling safe enough to surrender themselves and every ounce of their control and will. Gifting themselves to their Dominant is an integral part of the submissive’s deep experience.’ Natalie paused for a moment, gathering her thoughts. ‘For a bottom, it’s a little different. They seek the same depth of experience, but more *lease* their control to a Dominant, rather than *gifting* themselves completely.’

‘That’s the essential differentiation between a sub and a bottom. A submissive’s kink is about surrendering everything of themselves in trust, and then experiencing the Dom’s attention and control. A bottom’s kink is about trusting enough to allow themselves to be taken by a Dom into a deep experience. Bottoms more desire to be conquered and taken, wanting their Dominant to take their control, but bottoms don’t gift themselves in the same way that a submissive does. Does that make sense?’

Kate nodded, thinking for a moment before asking, ‘How do I know what I am?’

Natalie laughed. ‘To Rick? I believe you are already a willing submissive. But seriously, don’t even worry about the labels. It is not a 24-7 thing in real-life Kate, although some submissives and Dominants try to make it that way. The desire for a 24-7 thing is more of an escapist issue, or even a pathology, than what we are talking about. In every other part of your lives, you will very much be equals, just as you already are.’

Every healthy relationship must essentially be between equals to work, kinky or otherwise. ‘But in private... when he looks at you in *that* way...’ Natalie smiled wickedly, ‘Well, you will just melt and need to

give yourself to him in every possible way. I can see by the expression on your face that you do already. So tell me, Katie, what is it that's bothering you?"

"I just worry I won't be enough for him. What if I say no to something."

"Honesty is critical. If you are uncomfortable, you tell him. If you are turned on, you tell him. Imagine you went to a buffet with a hundred different dishes available. Would you be disappointed if only ninety-seven were amazing, but you found three dishes that you didn't like so much? Kate, this is exactly the same thing. Your hundred-dish buffet is a completely new experience set. It's all about the trusting, the experience, the shedding of everything but the moment, and finding your moment.

"You see, a real Dom always takes your mind first. It is never about the physical acts, not with a real Dom. They hold a safe, non-judgemental space and offer unconditional acceptance of you – your authentic, primal, natural self. All of the men on this island resonate to the higher octaves of masculinity. Force, intimidation, aggression, manipulation, jealousy and demand are examples of lower-octave alpha-types who need to project themselves to feel a pale imitation of self-worth. No real Dominant uses those things, or ever comes close to needing to.

"Don't get me wrong, Kate. There are plenty of misogynists, abusers and sadists out there that call themselves Dominants; especially in the deeper end of BDSM and amongst the untrained. If a Dom is not completely focused on and governed by their submissive's welfare and desires first, they're not Doms, they're abusers. That is where the line is. The physical acts may even be the same, but it's the mutuality of

consent, intent, desire and absolute care that marks the difference.'

'Have you ever crossed that line?' Kate asked.

'I came close once, a long time ago. My training Domme wanted me to experience losing control to better understand myself, and she wanted me to learn where my line is. She was present as a safety valve for the scenario, but wasn't needed because I couldn't lose control. That ended up being her point. She needed me to learn to trust my own innate boundaries, and to stop fearing losing control. Many others play a lot further along the scales of pain, humiliation, sadism and masochism, but that end of the spectrum holds no personal desire for me at any level.'

Kate thought about it for half a minute and nodded.

'I can see that. Do you still go that far?'

'Occasionally. I still enjoy some deeper BDSM scenarios. In the right setting, it can be amazing. Dom and Jac are the only ones I trust to take me that far as a sub. Actually, they are the only two I have ever been genuinely submissive to, or even bottomed to. They teamed up on me once, and over that thirty-six hours, I went far beyond anything I thought I would ever experience. I was buzzing for days afterwards. We all were.'

She giggled, looking like a cheeky teenager for a moment. 'They've told me that the three of us are going away for my birthday this year.' Natalie sighed, looking into the distance for a moment before looking back to Kate with a far-away smile.

'How will I know?' Kate asked, her voice small.

Natalie's voice was strong and clear. 'Kate, do something for me. Stand up.'

Curious, Kate stood.

‘Close your eyes... thank you. Automatically and freely, raise your right hand to your chest... with your thumb and index finger; firmly pinch behind your right nipple and hold your grasp constant.’

In the face of her curiosity, and Natalie’s compelling instruction, Kate found herself doing as Natalie asked. Her face grimaced slightly as the sensation grew. It felt familiar, similar to the scenario Rick had talked her through.

‘Thank you. Hold fast and keep your hold constant. Without changing angle at all, lift your hand a little higher and squeeze just a little harder, until the sensation is running through you. Maintain your grip. Keep it constant.’ As Kate gasped, Natalie continued. ‘Catherine, breathe the sensation into the centre of your chest, always inwards, into your heart, as deeply as you can. Breathe the sensation in. Invite the sensation into you and feel it enter your chest, energising you. Let it lift you so you can ride it. A little harder and higher now, just lifting upwards, not out. Breathe in the feeling, not just the air.’

Kate felt the sensation change. On her next breath, she lost it again but felt the warm afterglow of touching the space that Natalie had described. She let go and looked at Natalie with amazement; surprised at what she’d just done in front of another woman, and the extra rush of sensation after releasing her nipple so suddenly. The thing that shocked Kate the most was that she was not embarrassed, but instead, felt calm and relaxed.

Natalie looked at Kate with deep conviction and said as she stood, ‘Kate, you and Ricky are made for each other. Trust me on this. We need another cup of coffee. Double-shot flat white?’ As soon as Kate

nodded, Nat grabbed their cups and strolled back to the cabin, leaving Kate alone to process her thoughts.

When the steaming mug was pressed into her hands, Kate looked up at Natalie. 'Thank you, Nat. I think I understand what you've been telling me. I assume that my doing what you asked was also part of the demonstration?'

Her answering smile was enough. Then Natalie said, 'Kate? Correct me if I am wrong, but you are completely straight, right? No real desire or experimentation but maybe a little fantasy now and then?'

The blush on Kate's face answered Natalie's question before she said, 'What I did just then is the closest I have ever come to an actual experience with another woman. I have seen some girl-girl porn that turned me all the way on, but no, I have no actual desires in that direction.'

'That level of self-honesty and self-observation is exactly where you need to be. There are huge differences between an occasional flirtatious thought, a sexy fantasy below desire, and pursuing an actual experience. Let yourself explore the many unknown flavours of your desires and possibilities, Kate. You have made some real break-throughs this weekend. I can see it and you know it. I can also tell you that Rick will not make a move on you whilst on the island, with or without your encouragement. He respects you too much, and he is too smart and too caring.'

Seeing the range of expressions fighting for room on Kate's face, she added, 'I can see there's another issue disturbing you. I can see it every time I say Ricky's name. Kate, I love Ricky with all my heart, as the 'son' of my five closest friends, and as a wonderful mix of

great friend, cheeky brother and honourable confidant, all in one. There have never been, nor are there now, romantic feelings or history in either direction.’

‘But what about when you and Dom taught him...’ Kate faltered, unable to articulate her thought the way she wanted to.

Natalie smiled and rested her hand on Kate’s. ‘Think about it like this; if Dom and I were champion salsa dancers, and Rick wanted to learn to salsa – which, by the way, he is very good at – wouldn’t our teaching him to salsa be a logical and natural thing?’

Kate nodded slightly, listening intently.

‘Don’t let religion’s demonization of pleasure and societal preconceptions of what is normal get in the way, Kate. D-s, and being a dominant in particular, is a very specific skill set. Any skill set is best learnt from those with expertise, just like salsa dancing. You didn’t learn engineering from expert farmers; you learned it from expert engineers.’

Kate nodded, thinking, and then she nodded again. Seeing the logic of Natalie’s clear and uninhibited comparison, she smiled at her simple and direct analysis.

‘I know the man, Kate. You will have to raise the flag to let him know you’re ‘available’. Mason and Madison are too smart to have mentioned one word of what we talked about yesterday to him. He is also too respectful to have questioned them. If you want him, you had better tell him. I, for one, enjoy your company and I don’t want him letting you get away. I don’t want to see you let him wither on the vine either!’

Raising her coffee, Kate smiled, saying, ‘You know, Nat, this is seriously good coffee.’ Natalie raised her mug in salute. Both women knew that the coffee was not the subject of the compliment.



'Hello?' called Dee from the rear door of the cabin.

'Down here,' Natalie answered back. To Kate, she added, 'I invited them here for breakfast too. You have wonderful friends.'

'I am lucky.'

'You are worthy. Only the unempowered believe in the randomness of luck.'

'I feel like I am lucky.'

'You are worthy, Kate, and the worthy always feel lucky. You have gratitude and gratitude encourages recognition of good fortune. The unworthy threaten, bluster, lie, cheat and steal. The unworthy belittle, compete, scheme and seek aggrandisement through titles, petty victories of aggression, manipulation and ego. The unworthy find little love and experience only a pale version of joy. The word, *unlucky* is the battle cry of the unworthy, just like the word, *but* is the battle cry of the mediocre. You are worthy, Kate.'

'You must be a hell of a pshrink.'

'I am the best I know.' It was such a simple declaration that they both laughed. Dee and Carrie reached them, adding their own steaming cups and a platter from Natalie's kitchen to the spread as they exchanged greetings. Natalie uncovered the platter and they shared their breakfast, chatting happily whilst enjoying the spectacular views over the water.

Shortly after the last of their food was gone, distant sounds interrupted the tranquillity of their morning. They heard breathless pulses of gasped conversation, punctuated by the rhythmic staccato of running feet.

'Oh ladies, you really don't want to miss this,' Nat said to the girls smiling wickedly. 'The stress of standing watch yesterday is finding release and many muscles will soon be shining brightly at the beach.'

The questioning looks prompted Natalie's further explanation as they followed her cue, quickly gathering up the remnants of their breakfast. 'They are blowing off steam in their own way, through competition and exertion. Juanita will be with them. Normally it is three times around the Big End to start. Let's get to the beach, that's where the fun will be. Grab your costumes on the way, the water will be great.'

Kate and Natalie were approaching the beach as the runners pounded past them on their second lap. JC was leading his mother and Rick by less than a body length. Dom and Edison were only a few steps behind them and Mason was bringing up the rear by only another step or two. Juanita had on a tight sports top and the men were shirtless. Their hard-working muscles looked spectacular in the mid-morning light. Their eyes were set dead ahead, each determined to prevail.

Carrie asked, 'Do they always go so hard?' as she and Dee met Nat and Kate at the top of the beach, watching the retreating backs pounding onwards along the ring road.

'Always. It's in their blood. It gets even more fun soon.' Natalie and the girls waved hello to Madison who was on the far side of the beach and walking up to them. She then pointed to a long metal bar set at three points over a concrete pad. 'Remember we hung the towels over that yesterday? It has room for them all to do chin-ups at the same time. They will keep doing sets of five chin-ups and ten push-ups until one of them gets a full set ahead. If I feel sadistic, and I do, I might even send them off for a swim as well.' She winked at the amigas. '400 is a nice distance, isn't it?'

'Has anyone ever told you that you have a bit of an evil streak, Nat?'

'All the time, Carrie. All the time.' Natalie laughed, dropping her towel and bag on the warming sand.

The runners stormed in only a few minutes later. Rick and JC came in neck and neck. They stopped under the bar and bent over double, fighting for air. Dom and Juanita raced in next, followed by Edison; Mason brought up the rear and he raised his hands in surrender, gasping, 'Go.'

As one, the competitors jumped to hang from the overhead bar. JC called a cruel cadence as they all pumped up and down, dropping to continue the same cadence for their push-ups. The only concession to Juanita was one less chin-up and two less push-ups per set. The women watched in fascination as muscles rippled and sweat poured.

Edison and Juanita both dropped during the fourth set, and Dom dropped two sets later when his last chin-up simply wouldn't happen. Now it was just Rick and JC, working like machines. Starting their eighth set, Rick started showing some humanity and slowed. JC still pumped his body up and down easily, looking as if he had just started. After another set, Rick was struggling to get up on the third chin-up of his set whilst JC started his push-ups. Rick battled to the last, straining to complete his fifth chin-up when Juan-Carlos leapt back onto the bar and flipped himself up in an easy motion to finish sitting on the bar, grinning down at Rick.

'Prick!' Rick gasped as he dropped from the bar, falling to his hands and knees, gulping for air.

Everyone clapped in appreciation as the competitors lay panting on the sand. After a few minutes of recovery time, Natalie walked out and in wicked tones said, 'Ready? Blue and back... GO!'

Dom, Rick and JC cursed as they sprang from the beach, hitting the water at a full sprint. Watching them go, Mason gasped with theatrical conviction, 'I am, seriously getting, too old, for this, shit.'

'We all are,' Edison replied in short breaths.

'Speak for yourselves boys,' Juanita said defiantly before her panting resumed.

'My money is on JC today,' Natalie said. 'He's still a part-machine cyborg freak!'

They watched the swimmers round the buoy and head back, all neck and neck. Almost halfway back to shore, Rick faltered first when he hit the three-hundred metre wall known to all four-hundred metre swimmers. It was that point where enthusiasm succumbs to fatigue and everything gets heavier as the water somehow seems to become thicker and less buoyant. The other two pulled away from him. Dom was stroking hard, but hit his wall with the beach still thirty metres away. JC had the edge and pulled clear, sprinting up the sand to claim a solid first place, slapping Natalie lightly on her backside before falling heavily beside Juanita and Mason, breathing hard. Dom did the same only five seconds later, with Rick bringing up the rear by a few more seconds.

'Good race bro', Rick gasped to JC as he landed exhausted on the sand. Affirming grunts came from Dom and the others.

Natalie looked at the three amigas and said for the benefit of all, 'If seeing all those delicious bodies prostrated and panting like that doesn't set your blood racing... you are probably dead.'

The amigas laughed aloud, nodding. 'Are you guys insured?' asked Dee, still smiling at the total commitment they'd shown to their competition.

'This is our insurance!' the five chorused automatically.

Edison looked over and asked, 'Are you okay, Mason?'

Mason was still breathing hard and he waved a thumbs-up in response. Rick's face darkened and he lifted his head to look at Mason. 'Dad, count it out.' Mason looked at his son and counted clearly from five to one and back. Rick relaxed, as did everyone there.

Madison looked at the girls and said, 'There is no point asking or telling him to take it slower.'

'What do you mean?' teased Edison, 'He was!' He ducked a slow backhand from Mason that ended in a theatrical flop back to the sand.

'Of course, part of that may be my fault,' Madison teased, looking at her husband with a meaningful smile. He returned her look with a slow scan of her body from her toes up, finishing with a smile and a wink before he flopped back and breathed deeply and slowly, allowing his body to recover.

The afternoon passed happily. Carrie and Dee slipped away at midday, only to reappear with a platter stacked high with huge and tasty salad sandwiches for everyone.

Kate looked at Juanita in a new light, understanding more of why she drove herself so hard now. She said to her, 'I can't believe how strong you are, Nita. You give the boys a real run for their money.'

'I can't compete with their brute strength, but for fitness, heaven help them if they're not on top of their game. I haven't beaten Juan-Carlos since he was twelve years old.'

Glowing in paternal pride, Edison said, 'JC was the first RC, that's Regimental Candidate, to make every

single one of the regiment's PT instructors throw in the towel. It's a tradition with each new intake of regimental candidates. The PT instructors and RC's start doing laps of the base on their first day. You have to understand that every candidate is already an elite soldier. The standard practice is for them to keep up the same crazy pace until only the instructors are still moving. Then, from that position of authority, they can go back and tell those already fit men to shape up. JC was still with them after close to three hours. The whole base was lining the fence and cheering, commanding officer to cooks... everyone.

'When JC started to pull ahead of them, they all stopped to put on full packs, full combat load, weapons, everything. They went until only Ironface and JC were moving. It was dark by then and both were literally crawling, still holding their rifles. Every time Ironface moved, JC would crawl twice as far. Well, when Juan-Carlos got to his feet again and started putting one foot in front of the other, the most feared PT instructor in the regiment rolled onto his back and dropped the magazine from his rifle.'

Rick said, 'Snowflakes are notorious for being too thick to know when they are beaten. They lack the intelligence to understand odds and they lack the imagination to lose. It comes with the mind-set that abandons a sound aircraft in mid-air.' JC smiled in response, acknowledging the backhanded compliments. The loving pride in Rick's voice was unmistakable.

'Snowflakes?' Carrie asked.

'Delicate little things that float down softly from the sky before melting.'

'Say that standing in front of an avalanche!' teased Mason, punching his son on his shoulder with a smile as they all laughed.

When the afternoon shadows began to draw over the beach, everyone headed back to their cabins to rinse off the salt and freshen up. Carrie had started a number of chickens roasting earlier in the day, along with plenty of vegetables. Madison had insisted on doing the stuffing for the birds. The ringing of the bell that announced the evening meal was a welcome sound to all. A fresh wilted salad and toasted corn bread rounded out the simple and delicious fare that was consumed with gusto and happy conversation.

Rick walked Kate out of the maloca at the evening's end. Their small talk was casual, strained, nerve-racking, and wonderful. Each was trying to say things that they feared saying, faltering and stuttering. When Rick made to kiss Kate's hand at her doorstep, she made her decision.

Standing on the step of her cabin for extra height, Kate grabbed Rick and kissed him as deeply as she could. She wanted to inhale him and to drown in him. He was hesitant for the first moment but then responded. Their passionate embrace grew increasingly urgent until the need to breathe took over, forcing them to reluctantly break apart.

'Kate... My God...Thank you. I feel I must say good night now. Thursday week, please come to my home and let me cook for you?'

*What? Goodnight? What?* Kate thought. Confused, she asked, 'Don't you want to come in?'

'Kate... Catherine,' he said carefully, 'to join you tonight is my penultimate desire. Alegria can be an overwhelming experience and I have to know that your

decisions and desires are the same off the island as they are here. Ultimately, I need to know that you have had time to consider fully your thoughts, feelings, and actions without pressure. I am going to walk, quite badly, back to my cabin and attempt to not picture you with far less clothing than you wore today. I expect to fail gloriously. You are by far the most intriguing and- '

Kate's thoughts raced. *Tell him, he will not make the first move.* Kate reached out and took Rick's hand, holding it to her breast, massaging herself with his fingers. 'A week from Thursday then, my lord.' A quick thought later, she added, 'I need to check to see if we are free, sorry Rick.'

There was a smile on Rick's face. 'Dee told me it's your next night off, I asked her this afternoon.'

They kissed again, needfully, passionately, and then gently. Kate kept trying to pull Rick into her cabin but Rick would not allow himself to go with her. Kissing the whole time, it ended up becoming a giggling game. After reluctantly removing his hands from her breast and bottom, Rick departed for his own cabin, exaggerating a wide, stiff-legged limp until she laughed happily. He turned and beamed a smile to her before he vanished into the night. Still chuckling, she opened her door and found a note. It was from Natalie.

~

*"It's about time! I am glad for both of you. xox Nat"*

~

*Alegria!* Kate's mind exulted as she shook her head in amusement, knowing that Natalie had to have slipped the note under her door earlier in the evening. She found sleep elusive as her mind raced around the central memory of Rick's hand on her breast. He had automatically squeezed her nipple a few times as she



held his fingers in place, encouraging him. It was still sensitive from the morning's activity with Natalie, and his attentions had sent waves of sensations through her body that were far out of proportion with the physical reality. She could still feel how good his other hand had felt massaging her bum as well.

Comfortable in bed, she found that imagining him imagining her was too much. She sought and found her pleasure's freedom, falling into a blissful sleep soon thereafter. She dreamt of Dom and Natalie's play under the tree, except in her dream it was her and Rick. For only her third time ever, she awoke still climaxing. She sunk back into a pleasant doze for a few hours more, still smiling when she awoke fully in the early dawn light, enjoying every last moment of her remaining time on the island.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Everyone met at the maloca to share a modest breakfast of fruit, coffee and fresh toast before leaving their island paradise. The goodbyes at the ferry ramp on the island were simple and warm. Mason, Madison and Rick were first in line for the trip back to shore on the barge. Kate and Rick kissed again, but in a far more chaste way, despite everyone looking in different directions, and all with smiles on their faces. His finger brushed the side of her breast as they broke from their embrace. ‘Thursday, next week. No expectations or pressure of any kind.’ It was the only thing he said to her after their kiss.



His words were still echoing in her mind as the amigas walked into their apartment. Sitting at their table, Carrie said, ‘Wow!’ It was the first word any of them had said since parking the van below their building. The three began to giggle.

‘Holy crap!’ added Dee, increasing their mirth.

‘Oh My GOD!’ Kate said, loudly and joyously. The friends laughed, looking at each other and shaking their heads.

Two of their staff in particular, Giselle and Suzette, were proving to be excellent at following through on details. A string of short text messages on Dee’s phone affirmed that their staff’s assigned to-do list for a small function, booked for that evening, was well in hand. The

following day, the new mayor's weekly lunch and dinner affair kept them busy. He had finished his many thank-you dinners following the elections. Now his regular Wednesday gigs were 'schmoozing' afternoons, with selected individuals invited to stay for a more intimate dinner for thirty. A good variety of interesting gigs kept them busy for the next week, including a wonderful engagement party for one of the mayor's nieces on the Saturday. That gig was one of those perfect days where everything went exactly according to plan, and the write up in the social pages the next day extolled the amigas' business in the most complimentary terms possible.

Dominique had 'suggested' before their second gig for him that they lift their rate to match what he was happy to pay, assuring them that those at his, and the mayor's functions, would happily pay for the perfection the amigas delivered. Dominique's assessment had proven accurate. Their business had nearly doubled in profit value since they'd followed Dom's advice, and they were already having difficulty accommodating short notice gigs around their existing bookings.



Dee thumped on Kate's door when it became clear to her that Kate was not going to be rising early on her own. 'Come on, Katie, it's Thursday. We have a date at the spa and you have a date tonight with Mr Tall, Smart and Heatsome. Let's go.' Through the door, muffled thanks and the sound of feet on the floor told her that Kate was up and moving.

At the spa, they started out with top to toe personal grooming, and ended with an extended pampering session. The spa's attendants were familiar with the

purpose of Kate's preparations, and they joined Dee and Carrie in their happy teasing of her. Carrie showed them a photo of Dom, Rick, Juanita, Edison and JC competing on the chin-up bar. The sun was at an ideal angle and cast clean shadows over their bodies, highlighting their muscles perfectly. The ladies stared at the image on Carrie's phone and remained quiet for a few long moments before the youngest attendant asked, with a tinge of hope in her voice, 'Does JC have a girlfriend?'

Kate's phone rang, displaying Juanita as the caller. Kate picked it up at once.

Nita said, 'Hi Kate, quick question; are you still intending to dine with Rick tonight?'

'Hi Nita. Absolutely. It's all I can do to wait.'

'Good. My teddy bear is driving you. He insists. Is seven good for you?'

'It's okay, Juanita. I can-'

'If you want to try and talk him out of it yourself, be my guest. Do you have his number?'

After a thoughtful pause and a giggle, Kate said, 'Seven will be perfect, thanks, Nita.'

'Bien. Ricky is... he's a son to us all. Maddie and Mason have been on cloud nine since you two met. We all have been. We all want the very best for both of you.'

'Thank you again, Nita. That does not even come close to covering what I want to say.'

'It is more than enough, Kate. Have a wonderful evening.'

Ending the call, Kate smiled. Dee and Carrie waited impatiently for her to fill them in.



Edison was as prompt as ever, knocking on their apartment door just as the clock turned to 7pm. He came in and hugged the girls warmly, accepting an offered chair to catch up on their latest news. Kate's impatience was making her fidget, and when she almost jumped from her chair at Edison's suggestion of departing, they all laughed, Kate included. Carrie told her to have fun and Dee reminded her not to overthink things as they hugged her goodbye. He poked fun at Kate and chatted happily for the whole drive, keeping her mood light.

Edison escorted Kate into Rick's building, wearing his stiff and professional public persona for a couple walking past with their dog. As soon as they had privacy inside the foyer, he touched the back of her shoulder. 'Kate?' His eyes were sparkling as he flashed his most dazzling grin at her. 'Have a truly wonderful time. You are each other's reward.'

Before she could even start to respond, he skipped away lightly to open the door for another lady. The woman smiled at his flirtatious flourish and mischievous expression as she walked in. Edison winked back to Kate and was gone.

*Bloody chameleon!* she thought with a smile.

A quiet tone sounded from the rear of the foyer as elevator doors opened. Kate turned, and there he was, looking relaxed and gorgeous. She was constantly amazed at how completely attractive he was to her. His confidence was palpable, yet he was without the slightest hint of bravado or arrogance. His smile warmed her instantly, and he gave her a polite kiss on the cheek and a chaste hug before ushering her into the elevator. She could feel that he was straining to be true to his word, and was doing his best not to exert any pressure or expectation on her. Naturally, it made her want him even

more. An older couple sharing their car smiled knowingly at the coy glances and happy tension flashing between the two. Getting out on sixteen, the man winked to Rick as he exited.

As soon as the doors closed again, they broke out giggling like schoolchildren. That was the catalyst. Kate grabbed Rick and kissed him for a short moment before he kissed her back.

‘I am so glad you wanted to come tonight, Kate.’

Feeling cheeky and invincible, Kate looked him square in the eye and said, ‘Aren’t you getting a little ahead of yourself, good sir?’

The shock on his face gave way to a deep chuckle as he recognised the double entendre.

Struggling to keep a straight face, he said with a slight bow, ‘My lady Catherine, I am ever so glad that you chose to accept my invitation and consented to dining with me this evening.’

Giving him her very best ‘bored’ act, she sighed. ‘Well, I had considered washing my hair tonight, and maybe watching TV, but there’s nothing good on. You know how it is... so here I am. I suppose we could kiss again, you know, to pass the time?’

Neither of them could keep a straight face and their ride to his apartment ended in an intimate and giggling kiss. The elevator doors opened and he led her into a small foyer not much larger than the elevator car itself. He held a key tag to a sensor and a heavy door hissed aside. With a sweep of his arm and a smile, he said, ‘Welcome to my home, Kate.’

The apartment was in low light, and the panorama of city lights sparkling in the early evening through the floor to ceiling windows was stunning.

‘Wow! Just... wow!’

'It's a view that never gets old,' he said.

The endless vista of the city was breathtaking. 'Wow!' she said again, following the view around. Every external wall she could see was glass from floor to ceiling.

A series of thunderstorms on the horizon flashed and strobed in an almost continuous display. 'At the risk of being repetitive, wow!' Kate said, gazing out at the natural light show over the distant hills.

After watching for a few moments himself, Rick said 'Don't worry. I still say wow on a daily basis. May I offer you a drink?'

After looking at her for a moment, he said, 'Champagne it is.' He left her gazing down at a ferry and a few small boats on the river with a contented smile on her lips, returning a few moments later with two glasses.

With a slightly more serious expression, he asked, 'Kate, I am so happy you are here. May I ask; have you had any second thoughts, or changes of heart or intent?'

The formal manner of his question told her that this was important to him. 'Rick, aside from a little natural fear of where things may or may not lead, no. Thoughts of you have dominated most of my waking hours.' With a cheeky smile, she added, 'And a few of my sleeping hours.'

The joyful relief in his smile was clearly visible. Kate found herself surprised at how much of his own vulnerability he was revealing to her. Raising his glass, he offered her a toast. 'To you, Catherine Jones. You are a most fascinating, talented, clever and beautiful woman. You have saved me, and my family, from personal and professional disgrace, reawakened my spirit, and gladdened my soul. In so many ways and on so many levels, I am profoundly grateful to have met you.'

Kate raised her glass in response. ‘Thank you, Rick. I feel very lucky to know you too, and I feel the same way about you.’ They sipped their sparkling wine and looked into each other’s eyes, their serious demeanour cracking when they began to giggle.

‘May I give you the grand tour?’

‘I’d like that.’

‘Excellent. The balcony circles the whole apartment and the glass balustrades go the whole way around to preserve the view. The floor plan is essentially a long rectangle. The elevator and a large media room form a small central rectangle, and all the other spaces are set out around that central structure. This is the lounge-living area; it occupies one end of the floor plan, and the master bedroom occupies the other. I am getting ahead of myself. The living space continues around the elevator foyer to the left a bit as well.’

Rick started panning his outstretched arm to his right, intending to give Kate an overview. ‘The dining area is here...’ He started laughing at himself. ‘That’s in case you couldn’t tell by the table and chairs... Moving on...’

Kate loved the bashful look on his face and appreciated how he could so easily make fun of himself.

‘Down this side, past the dining area,’ he winked, ‘we have the kitchen, then a combined bathroom and laundry and the master bedroom on the far end. Coming back along the other side is a guest bedroom with en suite, my study, and then a gym space as an extension of the lounge area. The building has one apartment per floor above fifteen, three per floor below. There are two more floors above us.’

‘For some reason, I had imagined you in the penthouse,’ Kate teased.



'The floor plans are identical, aside from a small roof garden and double height ceilings. Down here, I have no lift-house noise, nor much chance of water penetration from a roof failure. I also have the same views and amenities, but with much better water pressure.'

Recognising the practicality of his engineer's response, Kate giggled and grabbed his arm with both hands. It was exactly how she would have described the same decision matrix. Rick accurately interpreted her response and continued, guiding her past a lovely timber dining table with an inlaid strip of dark stone in the middle; it had eight places – two were set. Placing his hand on a door to his right as they passed it, he said, 'The media room is through there, and in here...' he ushered her into a well-lit space, 'is the food.'

Above the sink and bench space of the kitchen, the windows continued to the ceiling. Watching her walk in and look around, he said, 'The views are all just as amazing.'

'The views are great, but that smell's amazing.' A small joint of meat was in the oven, filling the kitchen with intoxicating aromas.

'Later, my lady. The meat is resting, and I promised you a tour.' He chuckled at her overacted pout towards the oven. Guiding her back past the dining table, he led her to the other side of the living room, revealing an area that was set up as a simple gymnasium.

Rick led Kate to the next doorway, offering her entry into a room lined with bookshelves. 'This is my study,' he said, inviting her to enter. A large chair and lamp sat at the opposite end of the room. Kate was looking at the darkly opaque glass when it suddenly became clear, offering the same spectacular views as the

rest of the apartment. She spun to see Rick turn a dial on the switch panel and the glass became opaque to her waist, but remained clear above. 'LCD reactive glass,' he said. 'It offers the best of privacy and views.' She smiled at his boyish delight and looked around the room. A work desk and a computer occupied the opposite corner.

Looking around, Kate saw group photos of uniformed men and many other photos of people, places and projects decorating the walls. The book titles on the well-stocked shelves showed that he shared Dominique's wide variety of reading interests. 'It's peaceful,' Kate said, walking slowly around the room.

Rick smiled broadly at her assessment before leading her out and offering her the next doorway. The guestroom bed had its blankets turned down on one corner, and a covered glass of water was on the bedside table. Kate looked at him and he said, 'I make no presumptions. Should you choose to stay here this evening, this room is exclusively yours.'

Kate felt slightly rocked. She looked at this man, a contradictory mix of action man, chivalrous knight and modern engineer. A man who demonstrated humility, humour and respect with everything he did.

She looked him in the eye and said, 'Let me be very clear here. I had no thought of entering into anything even close to a fling before hitting Alegria, much less anything even slightly resembling a potential relationship. Then you happened. Actually, you all did. I do want to stay the night, Rick, *with you*. I wanted you to stay the night with me on Alegria, and nothing, not one little thing, has changed since then.'

She held her finger to his lips before he had a chance to respond. When she was sure he would remain

silent, Kate quickly remade the blankets of the spare bed. She picked up the glass of water and turned to him. 'Where shall I put this?'

The smile she saw on his face sent deep spasms through her stomach and made her breath stop. Silently, still smiling, he led her to the massive master bedroom, inviting her in with a sweep of his arm.

The view of the city centre, and the distant horizon beyond, was breathtaking. A gas fireplace on one wall was set to a bare simmer and flickered softly. Subtle, indirect light filled the room. Kate took in the furnishings. A large Chesterfield style lounge and a huge bed suite occupied a substantial amount of the floor space. Walking forward, Kate deliberately put her glass of water on a bedside table before the view caught her eye again.

Gazing out at the panorama, she said, 'Have I said "wow" yet?'

'You may have,' he allowed, smiling. 'The en suite is through that door.'

Kate walked into a huge bathroom with tiled walls. A massive, two-headed shower space dominated one end. Heavy glass partitioning protected the rest of the room from splashes and a long wet-bench was fixed to the wall of the shower. A spa for two snuggled into the far corner, sharing the far wall with the shower. The full-height windows offered a magnificent view to the occupants of the spa.

Kate looked at Rick, computing the apartment's plan in her mind. 'This is an amazing place, Rick.'

Rick bowed his head slightly. 'Thank you Kate.' He looked at her and said, 'Aside from the bathroom-laundry, the only room you haven't seen is the media

room.’ The way he said it, and the look on his face, peaked her interest.

Rick led her to the doorway opposite the dining area and opened it for her. The windowless room in the centre of the apartment had a huge flat-screen television on one wall and six very comfortable-looking recliner lounges facing it. Kate looked at the room for a moment before she turned back to Rick, ‘There seems to be a substantial amount of space missing from this room, Rick.’

Smiling, Rick flicked a switch near the door. A concealed concertina wall silently retracted, revealing the missing ‘third’ of the room. The carpet stopped at the tracks of the wall, and the floor of the newly revealed space was beautifully polished timber.

Kate felt a little overwhelmed, but decided to start at the start like the engineer she was. A beautifully crafted and padded X shape nearly seven feet tall stood against the wall at one end. Next to it was what looked like a narrower and smaller version of a gymnastics vaulting horse, fitted with generously padded treads.

Between the popular novels she had read and a little recent research on Google, Kate knew the basic functions of both pieces. More interesting to her were her body’s positive reactions to them. She examined her own thoughts and realised that her comfort hinged on a single truth... she trusted Rick. She walked forward and inspected the newly revealed furniture silently.

A generous single seat Chesterfield chair was the last piece of furniture in the space. There was a shelf at the far end which held a small assortment of leather whips and floggers, plus other toys, still shrink-wrapped; the purpose of some more obvious than others. As

feelings of desire and anticipation filled her, she felt a now-familiar squeeze nearly becoming a cramp.

Kate turned to look at Rick, seeing expressions of fear and hope competing on his normally confident face. She walked to him and said, 'I trust you, Ricky. I have no experience in this stuff, but I trust you. I can tell you that parts of me are very excited by it all. I want you to show me, please?'

His kiss was almost overwhelming, sweeping Kate into a river of feelings. Breaking for breath, he looked at her. 'Kate, you surprise and delight me at every turn. I must confess, though; I have been so nervous about tonight that I have failed to eat today, and I am famished. Shall we?'

In his arms, Kate felt a sense of ease flow over her like a warm wave. There were no surprises, and they had all the time in the world. She relaxed and reminded herself to savour every moment. 'Rick, for the same reasons, today I've only eaten half a sandwich that Dee nearly pushed down my throat.'

On the way out, he flicked the switch to close the wall again. Kate looked at him questioningly. He responded with an enigmatic and slightly wicked smile that made her stomach clench again.

Following him into the kitchen, she watched him take the small joint of meat from the oven and expertly carve it. He started a wok burner and quickly assembled a crisp Asian style stir-fry. Kate smiled when she realised how much he reminded her of Carrie as he cooked. He sniffed everything, thinking carefully before throwing in the perfect amount of each ingredient.

The aromas leapt out; from the top-notes of chilli, ginger and lime to the deeper aroma of the sizzling vegetables and XO paste. Kate watched as the small

amount of meat went in; vegetables and noodles made up the bulk of the dish. With a flourish, he filled two bowls with steaming food from the wok. Adding a squeeze of lime, some chopped chillies, a dollop of Greek yogurt, and then a sprinkle of crisp fried noodles, he said, 'Dinner is ready, my lady.'

Rick showed her to the dining table. The far horizon was still flashing as the distant thunderstorms slowly rolled towards the water. After refilling her glass, he sat next to her, their knees brushing.

After finishing her first mouthful, Kate said, 'Rick, this is delicious!'

'Thank you. It's simple, I know, but it's my favourite style of food. I spent a lot of time eating food that had use-by dates calculated in decades, and quality measured by nutrient and energy levels alone. Food is supposed to feel alive and energising.'

'Well mission accomplished, I say.'

'Thank you, m'lady,' he said with a raised glass.

After a few more bites, Kate asked, 'When you were cooking, it looked like you were saying something to yourself now and then. Were you?'

'It is a chant of gratitude to the spirits of the earth, plants and animal that make up our meal. It helps keep my intent focused on the whole of what I am doing, not just my actions.'

Kate looked at him, weighing his words and feeling a new depth in her understanding of him. She nodded, not trusting herself to be able to speak at that moment. The meal passed both slowly and quickly. Kate's awareness contained only this amazing man, and the whirlwind of feelings he invoked in her.

He took the empty bowls into the kitchen and refilled their glasses. He looked at her for a moment

before saying, 'You have questions on your face but you are not asking them. Kate, ask me anything. I will answer you as honestly as I can. Please, Kate, ask me whatever you want or need to.'

'Rick, how many women have you had in that room?'

Rick looked at Kate and smiled. 'Three. Natalie, Larissa and Meghan. Natalie, you know. The purpose was to learn about D-s, watching Dom and Nat in some deeper scenarios, and some reasonably mid-level BDSM sessions. They go further than I desire to, but that's their dynamic.'

'Wasn't that strange, watching two people you knew being physically intimate?'

'Not in context. I understand how strange it might sound, though. It wasn't the sexual aspects I was seeing. It was how Dom and Nat met and connected with each other so totally and at so many different levels. You've seen them so you know what I mean. Have you ever watched two friends dance so beautifully that you forget about them being your friends and only see the dance?' Kate nodded in understanding.

'It was like that. I needed to learn who I was and how to positively express my innate nature. Dom and Nat were in the ideal position to train me. Dom is the best, and you know he's still a hero to me. Nat is a great Domme in her own right. Sometimes I think that the only time her crazy-big mind comes to rest is when she is in a scenario. The trust between all of us allowed things to flow easily and naturally.'

Natalie had already been very open about this with her, and for some reason, also hearing Rick talking about it this openly made everything feel okay. Kate nodded, encouraging him to go on.

‘Larissa was my first longer-term relationship. We went out for two years and were pretty much, but not quite, engaged. When I was posted overseas, she didn’t wait. Meghan, Meg, was my girlfriend when I got out of the service. We were destructively co-dependent and enabling. My apology for the descriptor, but it applies totally in this case. We were both fucked up, but for different reasons, and fucked up was all that either she or I could relate to or handle at that time. When Grandmother, Uncle and Dom started unravelling the mess I was in, she didn’t stick. It was an easy parting with no acrimony or recriminations. Natalie took her on as a psych client. She was doing well when we bumped into each other last year.’

‘How do you mean ‘fucked-up’ Rick? What happened?’ It just came out. Kate was horrified that she might have crossed a line, but he laid a hand on her arm in reassurance before answering.

‘It’s okay, Kate. I mean it when I invite you to ask me anything. In the service, we did a lot of stuff that never officially happened. More than a few times, what we were tasked to do never made written orders. In more than a few of those cases, we were disposable, meaning if we were caught, our existence would be officially denied. What we did was never nice or clean in the *Red Badge of Courage* or *Here to Eternity* kind of way. Warfare is no longer two sides in uniform slugging it out over a piece of real estate, and sharing your cigarettes with your prisoners once the fighting is over. Modern combat is chaotic, foul and loathsome. You never have a black and white scenario. When you realise that the guy who’d been doing a fair job of trying to kill you was a twelve-year-old with an AK47, everything becomes grey and dirty. The real tragics end up seeing life only in



terms of black-and-white, and us-and-them, losing their values and humanity along the way. To keep your mind together, you do your best to try to accept living as a grey being, doing grey things in a grey world. In the end, I was a haunted, self-hating ball of misery and guilt. I had a layer of anger a mile deep and huge resentment towards myself, and the service. They offered me a command promotion, but I resigned instead.'

Kate looked into his eyes and saw no concealment, nor did he try to hide his tears as he talked. Recognising how profoundly he was opening up to her, she asked, 'How the hell did you break out of that, Rick?'

'Dom and Edison were the only ones who could reach me. I had excluded everyone else, even JC to a degree. He was hurt and fighting his own demons in a hospital bed, also trying to come to terms with deprogramming from the machine he'd been made into. He was in a four-wheel-drive and took the full brunt of an IED blast. The shock wave knocked him around really badly and he took a heap of internal damage. He went from active combat to a peacetime hospital bed in a couple of hours. Kate, that's one of the problems. Nobody's mind can adjust from combat to peacetime rules that fast. Add serious injury and concussion to the mix, and you can see a big part of the challenge.'

'I visited him when he was hurt. I was out of the service for almost a year, and doing a great job of fooling myself that I was okay. Seeing JC with all the tubes and stuff keeping him alive, my indestructible little brother in every possible way – except for us having different mothers – it took me out... all the way out.'

'We were both falling apart, but I was mobile and I went on a bit of a bender. A month later, Dom and Edison kidnapped me and dragged me to Alegria.'

Seeing the questioning look on Kate's face, he reiterated, 'I mean literally. He and Edison tracked me down and physically overpowered me, stun gun and all. They dragged me, hogtied and helpless, into the sweat lodge on the Big End. Dom, Edison and Uncle took turns over nearly four full days, watching and sweating with me, never leaving my side the whole time. Then Edison and Dad went back to collect JC, who was just getting out of hospital and cracking up too.'

Kate's look of horror was clear. 'You have a little of the actual picture, Kate. I was literally hogtied on the sweat lodge bench for four days. They just smiled as I hurled every abuse I could at them. They knew all of it was actually aimed at myself. All my anger, self-loathing, and ultimately, my terror of feeling and seeing what the numbness was hiding. They didn't let me leave the bench for the entire time. The guys were feeding me and cleaning me... crap, piss, vomit, the works. That's what real love is, Kate. That is why I can say I trust and love them so much. I resisted with everything I had, but they got through to me in the true warrior's way, head on, with love and respect. The shell I had built up needed to be broken up and pulled away, and that's what they did. When they got rid of it, I was a gooey mess.

'Grandmother came into the programme at that point. We, JC and I, spent the best part of a year in the Village and at the Race, where she lives. She gave me jungle herbals and did her jungle magic. Dom, Edison and Uncle did heaps of shamanic journeying and sweat lodges with me. Dad, Nat and Grandmother worked with JC for a month or so before we were both whole enough to do the rest of what we had to do together. That was how screwed up I was. I couldn't even recognise that JC

was going through the same thing. Neither of us could at the time.'

'How come your father worked with JC and Edison with you?'

'They were too close to stay as objective as they needed to be, and they trust each other without reservation.' Rick reached out and wiped a tear from Kate's cheek away with his finger, and then he smiled, wiping away one of his own.

'Long story cut short? Two years later, we are both at peace. The memories are all without energy and resting quietly. We did a lot of lodges and medicine circles with all of the adults from Alegria involved. Everyone there had seen combat in one form or another. That made it easier for us all. We talked everything through, no reservations. Their stuff too, like a group therapy session, but way deeper and more intense, especially with Grandmother's journeying tea.

'The end result? I know we did a lot of important things that were necessary. I know a lot of good people are alive today because of what we did, but the reality of what we actually had to do remains repugnant all the same. The natural human reaction is to try to shelve that stuff, but it ends up piling up so heavily that it breaks the shelf. Then the personality snaps.'

'Did any of you snap?'

Shaking his head, he said, 'No. It was somewhat close on my part. Edison and Dom went way out over the edge of reason for a while, but no permanent damage as such. They both dropped the ball big time the year their folks died. They were on a bloody dicey job and the green slime – Intelligence – got it very badly wrong. It started with them getting dropped in front of hardened positions, right in the middle of a minefield that intel

strongly suspected was there, but forgot to mention. They lost two-thirds of their men in the first few minutes of that engagement. Especially in these units, the men are all as close as family. In many ways, they're closer. About ten minutes in, they were rallying their remaining men to leg it out of there when Edison was blinded by a blast at almost the same moment Dom took his bullet. They only got out of there with Dom shooting from Edison's back as Edison carried Dom out; Dom screaming out left, right, jump or duck as Edison's eyes. They were lying in hospital for less than a day when they're told, "Sorry guys, there was a plane crash and your folks are gone".'

Rick paused to make sure Kate was okay with his disclosure. She nodded, her mind reeling with the horror of what he was telling her.

'Eight weeks later, Dom still had bandages around the holes in his chest and Edison's sight was mostly returned. Both of them had also gotten a few extra holes on the way out that were still healing. Unfortunately, bodies heal far faster than minds. They checked themselves out of hospital, jumped on a plane, and began the kind of drunken rampage that Hollywood makes disaster movies about.

'You have to understand, Dom and Edison aren't just Dad's family, they were *his men*. He and two of the regiment's three senior NCOs – non-commissioned officers – went on leave to bring them back. They literally followed their damage trail to track them. Dad was settling all sorts of diplomatic and civil storms the dynamic duo were leaving in their wake. He was their commanding officer and he ordered them to Alegria, keeping them roaring drunk, singing songs and marching them all the way to Uncle's place. They loved him too

much to disobey. They had all jumped into the same fires together.'

Kate smiled, unable to form the mental picture of Dom or Edison drunk, or even slightly out of control.

'You have the picture, Kate. Dad and Uncle talked the pair of them into doing a sweat. All of the men of Alegria joined them, supporting them both in their recovery. Auntie was alive then, and she made some terrifyingly powerful herbal concoctions. She took Dom, Edison, and Juanita through her express jungle-enlightenment course. Natalie and Madison took care of them too. They had a few very rough and rugged months of healing, but the three of them emerged as the single unit you've seen in action ever since.'

'You are all very lucky to have had such help available.'

'You are so right. Many snap without the sort of help we had. Veteran suicides are a far bigger problem than any government acknowledges. Most countries report more than double the civilian rate, and in reality, it is way higher than that. That doesn't even start to account for those who have never worn a uniform, but have fought just the same. Often more so.'

'Like Juanita?'

'Yes. Exactly like Juanita.'

'She trains like you guys. She competes as if her life depends on it. She is not ex-military though, is she?' Kate asked.

'Nita went through a different story, but in many ways, it was far more intense for her. We could all lean on our training and conditioning. On Alegria, we discussed the broad strokes of what happened.' Seeing Kate nod, affirming her memory, he continued. 'She, JC and Maria, her cousin, are the only ones of her direct

blood who survived that bloody three weeks of fighting. Except for her dad and brothers, and the ones who died of the poisoning before the fighting started, everyone else died under her command, half her community and almost all of her family. She did far better than most civilian leaders ever could have; but with or without training, you never get used to losing people. She never even had a chance to see it coming. She is as hard as any soldier I've ever trained with, and by all accounts, she fought valiantly and very effectively. She had to go through the same deprogramming as the rest of us did, for the same reasons. Auntie's concoctions were brutal, but kept them in the right headspace to heal.'

'I have been trying to not ask but I need to. You've killed people, haven't you?'

'Kate, except for Nat, Mother and the three of you, every person who was on Alegria's Big End has been in active combat. We have all been in a situation where it was either us or someone else. It sounds cold, I know it does, but combat at the sharp end boils down to an absurdly simple binary solution – live or die.'

A long pause broke the conversation as Rick gave Kate time to absorb and process all that he'd said. Finally, she turned towards him, looking away from the vista beyond the window. In the soft light, and for a moment before taking a deep breath, she looked like a frightened little girl to him.

'My dad did four tours. He would never ever talk about it, except with his veteran buddies. I never understood why he couldn't just talk to me like you are doing now.'

'Don't hold that against his memory, Kate. To have shared any of it with you would have been him breaking every combat soldier's sacred oath, a promise to shield

their loved ones from the horror and ugliness they've seen. Even if they never said the actual words, or even consciously thought them, that vow is still universal. We end up fighting so that we can keep the ugliness away from our families... it's the only way a sane mind can rationalise doing what we have to do.'

Rick paused to give Kate time to process what she'd just learned about her father. When she was ready, he said, 'We – Dom, JC and the rest of us – had amazing assistance from others who had walked the same path. Like your dad, veterans don't talk about these things because nobody but other vets can understand. Between vets, no explanation is needed, and no explanation is possible to those who haven't seen it personally. We can't share that ugliness with people who haven't seen it for themselves. The term blood brothers has nothing to do with holding cut fingers together. It comes from sharing life and death. Especially when you have served together like Dom, Edison and Dad have. Very literally, each is only alive because they could depend absolutely on the others to cover their back, no matter what. That bond is beyond blood, beyond spiritual. There is no common point of reference to communicate about combat with those who haven't seen its horror in full colour.'

For a long time, Kate was silent. She went to speak a couple of times, stopping each time. Finally, she looked up at Rick and said, 'Yet here you are, talking honestly about this stuff with me. I think I understand a little of how much it takes for you to talk to me about it, and I am grateful that you trust me enough to be so open with me.'

'Kate, I want to hide nothing from you. I would like to say I am perfect, but nobody is, and I am far from it. I

am totally captivated and fascinated by you. I want us to get to know each other a lot better. A vital part of that intention is allowing you into me, without reserve, including the bits I don't really want to share, even with myself.'

The enormity of what Rick had just said hit Kate like an earthquake. 'How can you know, Rick? Why are you so sure?'

'I am not sure, but I am strongly optimistic. I have significant flaws. I typically get bored, normally before I finish saying hello. I find most people so immediately predictable and unsurprising that I've found no romantic interest at any meaningful level possible... until you. You no doubt noticed that most of those on Alegria are in the higher IQ bracket?'

Kate nodded.

'At the risk of sounding fickle, I have a physical type, and you are it. I have an intelligence type, and you are it. You tick all my boxes, Kate. You are the most attractive, intelligent, and intriguing woman I know. That your eyes actually sparkle when I say engineering, and that you can see beauty and art in clever design, is just a huge bonus.'

'Do you love Natalie?' The question had just slipped out, but now it was asked, Kate wanted to hear it from him. His smile felt warmly reassuring to her.

'Not like that. There has never been romantic love or attachment of any kind between Nat and myself, or between me and anyone else you met on Alegria. Do I love her with all my heart, just as I love my mother, Juanita and Maria? Yes! Emphatically and a hundred times over, yes.'

'What about physically?'



'Same. Nat trained me. Hers was a role of advisor and trainer.' Seeing the questions on Kate's face, he added, 'Natalie was training another lady and we learned together in the later stages. There was obviously physical intimacy between her and I, but we have talked about Larissa already.'

'Was she your teacher as well?'

'No. She was Nat's trainee, alongside me. She was exploring her submissive kink. We became emotionally involved and the rest you know. Two years, posted overseas, and all over.'

'Are you always going to answer me so honestly?'

'Ah, the impossible question. If I say no, I am being defensibly honest. If I say yes, I must be lying. Kate, how about I promise that I will do my utmost to trust you with a hurtful truth before a comforting lie, regardless of our relationship status, or the potential cost of that truth.'

She looked at the city lights, her mind swimming as she began to comprehend the magnitude of what he'd said and how much he had opened himself up to her. After she started to say something several times but faltered, Rick asked her a profound and simple question. 'Kate, are you ready for me to be talking to you like this?'

*Crap! Double damn and crap!* The tears started forming despite every part of her ordering them not to. There was the question. *Are you ready?* Nothing he had told her changed anything. He had a past, but so did she. Finally, she decided not to overthink things, and her answer became clear to her at that moment.

'Yes. Yes, Rick, I am very ready for you to be talking to me as you are. It is all I have ever wanted. You tick every box I've ever thought of.' Kate paused, a

challenging glint in her eye. ‘Now, if you don’t stop being a chivalrous throwback and take me into that bedroom, I am going to start overthinking things again. I-’



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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Kate had no idea how he'd lifted her so quickly, but in a single easy movement, she was over his shoulder and being carried down the hallway. Revelling in his strength, she felt herself melting into him. Her awareness was only of his clean masculine scent, and the effortless way he was carrying her. As he carried her into the bedroom, Rick flicked a switch and the cityscape vanished as the dark windows instantly became opaque to assure their privacy.

They were standing near his bed and kissing; Kate couldn't even remember him setting her down, but he must have. He stood up straight and looked deep into her eyes, cradling her face in his hands before slowly drawing her up onto her toes, lifting her lips to his as they kissed again. Her mind and body responded instantly. She found within herself a place of pure lust and desire, and a new freedom as she felt herself cede control to this magnificent man. Immersed deep underwater in a sea of Rick, she felt weightless, but able to breathe without drowning, and swim without effort.

Rick's eyes shone whilst he lifted her wrists above her head. 'Hold your arms up.' His hands slid down her arms, past her shoulders and gently to her waist before reversing, lifting her blouse upwards. His breath caught and he murmured, 'My God, you are so beautiful, Kate.' He lifted her blouse free and threw it onto a chair. Guiding her arms down, he held her wrists to her sides for a moment, his pressure accenting his desire for her stillness with a mischievous smile that made her feel

liquid inside. Painted clearly on his face, she could see his self-discipline was struggling to restrain his desire to devour her on the spot. Feeling his rigid but straining self-control was possibly the sexiest thing she had ever experienced, wrapping her in a sense of total trust and acceptance.

Cradling her face in his hands, he brushed her eyes closed with his thumbs, kissing one closed eyelid, then the other. Standing still, swaying and trying to hold her balance, she felt his breath playing over her skin as he circled her. She sensed the warmth of his body near her as he moved. Almost too gently to register at first, his hands were caressing her shoulders, back and neck. They ran over her scalp before closing her eyes again and breaking away. She heard him inhaling her, his subtle sounds creating an incendiary effect within her body. He blew a delicious stream of air from her hip to her stomach before his lips finally touched her for a moment, steadying her as her body swayed.

When she opened her eyes for a moment and looked down at him, his expression ran through her body like high-voltage electricity. Regaining her balance, she closed her eyes again, sighing through her smile as he lightly kissed her stomach again.

He continued to walk around her, his fingertips or lips barely contacting her skin, burning with every touch. His breathing! Kate had never found listening to a man's breath so completely sexual before. She heard when it caught, listened to his sighs and his appreciative sounds of pleasurable discovery every time he elicited a response from her.

Rick was behind her, still exploring her body and reactions. He was kissing her shoulder when Kate felt a pressure release from around her chest when he

unclasped her bra. Taking his time, his hands eased the straps over her shoulders, his fingers exploring her skin and her muscles underneath. The air felt wonderfully fresh on her breasts as he slid the straps down her arms. With his thumbs and fingers releasing the tension from her muscles, he caressed her shoulders and back, massaging where the straps had left faint lines on her skin. Feeling almost outside her body, she heard herself moan as her shoulder registered his lips. Unhurried, he kissed her up one side of her neck, and down the other. With her eyes still closed, she felt his lips and teeth as he worked his way across her shoulder blades, his hands steadying her as she swayed.

Opening her eyes, Kate gazed at their reflections in the blank darkness of the windows. She watched his hands and lips exploring her body from behind, his strong hands contrasting vividly against her pale skin in the low light. He followed her gaze and smiled at her in their reflected image. There she stood, naked from the waist up, seeing only appreciation and desire in his burning gaze. They both watched his hands moving over her, exploring her. She leaned back into him, his body warm and reassuring as her mind swam in waters that could not drown her, nurturing and safe.

Encouraged by her moans, he massaged one breast a little more firmly whilst lightly biting her shoulder. She felt her legs turning to jelly. *I am so glad he is holding me up*, Kate thought as his other arm held her fast against his body.

Rick circled around to face her. He draped her arms around his shoulders before wrapping his around her waist, lifting her to him as he bent forward to kiss her. Only when she became aware of her body's urgent need for air did Kate realise that she was still biting and

kissing his neck and shoulders, dragging him closer with all her strength. It felt like she had been holding her breath for a long time. His hands massaged her buttocks deeply, right to the wonderful fuzzy boundary between pleasure and pain, dragging her to him as they kissed again. They delighted in their explorations of each other's bodies and minds, savouring their discoveries and responses to every new sensation.

With a highly charged grin, Rick took a step back and stripped away his shirt. He held still, letting her explore his bare chest. With her fingers and eyes, she traced the contours of his muscles, his back and his face. When he postured to tense his chest and stomach muscles for her, Kate felt her body kick and buckle with the surge of hunger that he invoked deep within her.

Still feeling outside her body, she watched herself kissing her way down his chest. She pinched his nipple hard between her lips, nearly passing out when she felt his deep moan's resonant vibration through her lips and tongue. She watched herself reach out and unfasten his belt and pants, pushing them towards his ankles. Released, his cock bounced into view and Kate's breath caught in her throat.

He smiled at her gaze as he stepped out of his shoes and pants, stripping his socks in seconds. Kate could only stand there and drink in his nakedness, his total maleness. He wore no aftershave or artificial scents of any kind, yet the masculine scent of his clean skin filled her senses and intoxicated her. The flickering light of the fire created deep lines of shadows that brought his muscular definition into sharp relief. His desire clearly on display, he stood with quiet confidence, relishing the lustful appreciation in her eyes, and the attention of her hands and lips as she examined and explored him.

He stopped her when she reached back for the fastenings of her skirt. 'That's my treat, my lady,' he said with a smile that made her slightly dizzy. After stripping the covers from his bed in a single movement, to the accompaniment of her giggles, he scooped her up to cradle her in both arms, depositing her gently on his bed. Savouring the feel of him, Kate's hands ran over his shoulders and back. He was on his hands and knees and kissing her throat when she reached down and felt his heavy hardness filling her hand. She grasped him tight and her body responded with another molten, visceral clench when he moaned in appreciation. Everything about him inflamed her desire.

'I trust you, Rick. Whatever you want,' Kate heard herself say as she lay below him. He leaned forward and nuzzled his face against hers, turning her head so his lips were right next to her ear before he whispered, 'I want your pleasure.' Like sparks in a hot, dry forest, his words echoed through her, further igniting her mind as her body trembled in response.

A hand slid under her shoulders, lifting her to his mouth. She felt his lips on her shoulder, working his way across her collarbone, over her upper chest, kissing, nibbling and biting her lightly. The sensations continued over her neck, his lips caressing her jawline. Letting her head fall back to the bed, she felt his lips, tongue and teeth exploring her offered throat. Moaning appreciatively, loudly, free of the need to censor herself, Kate let go. She celebrated his attention and her pleasure, acutely aware of his very male hardness, still firmly in her grasp.

They rejoiced in each other as every sensation carried them further into their own private paradise. Her eyes were still closed when he finally offered his mouth

to hers, triggering something deep inside when his lips touched hers; she wanted to devour him and consume him. They kissed deeply and needfully, and they kissed gently and tenderly. When he let her shoulders back onto the bed, she giggled for a moment, having forgotten that he was still lifting her.

Kate felt him winding her hair around his hand before drawing her head gently but irresistibly sideways and back, arching her neck before his teeth and lips explored her exposed throat. With each sensation reverberating through her body, she heard herself growling and moaning in pleasure. He lifted her head, bringing her lips to his as they kissed again.

He sat up, smiling at her, clearly forming a mischievous idea in his mind's eye. His hands slid to her shoulders, brushing from her upper arms to her hands. Taking her by the wrists, he moved her arms, laying them directly out from her body and level with her shoulders.

‘Kate, I want you to hold your arms straight out, like this, and keep them there, no matter what.’

She felt the heat of his gaze and heard the potential in his voice. Most of all, she heard his challenge. Letting her arms rest comfortably on the bed, she smiled and said, ‘Mmmm, sounds like fun.’

Kneeling at her feet, he straightened and caressed her legs, drawing her ankles together. With a hand on either foot, he massaged her feet, working his way up her calves, squeezing and caressing. Through her skirt, his fingers brushed and massaged along her thighs. He rolled his hands effortlessly under her back, and she felt the waistband of her skirt come loose. ‘Keep your arms right there, my lady,’ he said with a clear, calm voice;



his words almost a hypnotic command that bypassed her will.

*Damn, they moved!* She watched her hands reach out, touching his beautiful smile and face before her arms returned to their outstretched position. Releasing her zipper from underneath her, she felt him take the top of her skirt and begin to peel it downwards, not allowing her to help at all. Feeling her skirt drawn from her body in such a slow, inexorable manner was a new and incendiary experience. She felt as if she was floating and watching her body from above when he repeated the same slow removal of her panties. She saw herself lying there, with him above her, experiencing the energy of their desire as a physical force, his merging with hers to surround them both.

Holding her feet between his knees, he kneaded and relaxed her calves. Straddling her shins, he stroked and squeezed her thighs. He reached underneath her and massaged her buttocks. With each new touch, she fell into the centre of a new vortex of sensation.

Rick moved again and straddled her upper legs, his hands caressing and stroking her stomach, the bottom of her chest, and lifting into the small of her back, always moving. Kate could feel his balls resting hot against her skin, and the muscular movements of his thighs as they pinned her to the bed, sending waves of delight through her. She felt her pelvis buckle and strain for his attention, but was unable to divert him from his chosen path. She could not remember ever feeling more alight, or more completely turned on.

His hands occasionally touched her breasts or brushed across her mound, but always teasingly and never for long. Kate heard herself growling in protest as he denied her his touch where she wanted it, but what he

was doing felt so good that each protest ended in a pleasure affirming moan.

Straddling her pelvis, she could feel him fully in contact with her body and pinning her hips to the bed, each twitch of his muscular legs triggering new waves of yearning. She looked up to see and feel his smooth balls against her mound, his smooth skin against hers. She watched entranced as his hard cock released a clear, viscous drop onto her stomach. Feeling like molten lava on her skin, it triggered a volcanic need from deep within her. Unwilling to stop herself, she reached down and wiped it with her fingertip, bringing it to her lips. He tasted clean and sweet, and his slipperiness lingered on her tongue as her mind swam in deep desire. She could feel his body trembling when he smiled and kissed her, his passion only barely contained.

Moving her arms closer to her sides, he rubbed and massaged her shoulders. He kneaded and squeezed her arms and hands, sending waves of profound relaxation through her body. She felt him massaging his way back to her shoulders before laying her arms back in their outstretched positions.

He continued to massage her shoulders, her upper chest, and finally down to her breasts. Kate's eyes were closed, savouring the sensations running through her body.

Without warning, his mouth found her nipple and she cried out, almost screaming as her back arched sharply. He kissed her breast just as he had kissed her lips, and the sensations sent lightning bolts through her body, fanning the primal flames already burning deep in her belly.

'You moved your arms,' he said, his voice muffled.

She held his face locked to her breast for a few moments more before she giggled. 'Mmmm, so I did.' Releasing her hands from his hair and neck, she returned them to their required positions, grabbing the sheet in her fists to keep them there. He kissed her breasts, working between them, under them, and all over her chest, neck and lips. His hands continued to work their own magic, his fingertips in her muscles from behind her shoulders and back, physically lifting her to his mouth. Awash in his lavish attention, Kate felt herself dissolving in a sea of pleasure.

Sitting up, he looked at her, and then at her hands, his truly wicked grin emphasising his challenge to her. Leaning forward, he started dragging his fingers and nails from her elbows to her shoulders and down her sides, excruciatingly slowly, intensely, timing the sensations with Kate's breaths, now ragged and rapid between her giggling squeals. Kate felt the almost unbearably intense sensations coming from his fingers over her ribs.

'Breathe it into your heart, invite it in, change it, and then you can use it,' he reminded her. He leaned in and kissed her breasts again before sitting back up and repeating the same slow fingertip drag. Starting again from her elbows, he coached her to draw the feelings into her chest with each breath. A wave of peace washed through her when she found her key, rising beyond the physical sensations cascading into her body. Her eyes opened to find her lover's smile. His eyes glowed with a gentle pride, and sparkled in anticipation of how much more she was soon to discover about herself.

They kissed deeply before he lay her back down and stretched her arms out again. Starting over, this time at her wrists, he dragged his fingers slowly, moving

inevitably, and ever so slowly, over the most sensitive parts of her arms and torso.

Kate found herself greedily breathing in and riding each wave of sensation. She was floating above herself, watching herself cry out and squirm under his pleasurable torment, her body far away. She found in herself a place beyond the physical, without boundaries or definitions. A place of nothing more than one single timeless moment; a place of pleasure and bliss beyond the mundane world and its constraints. Kate found her sub-space.

The air was almost cool on her skin. It took her a moment to realise he was kneeling at her feet again, watching her as she floated back to him. Smiling, he bent forward as she closed her eyes again. She could feel his warm breath playing over her shin long before his lips touched her. His hands and lips played over and explored each leg in turn. He kissed his way up the side of one thigh, across her hips and the bottom of her stomach, before kissing his way back down her other thigh.

He chuckled at her animalistic sounds of frustration and desire, ignoring her unspoken demands for him to touch her pussy. He bent forward and she heard herself cry out. He had done nothing more than blow a fine stream of air against her and she could feel her readiness flowing from her body. His fingertips brushed over her smooth mound, but did not linger. Kate was sure she felt her pussy try to capture his hand as it passed. Her needful craving was building beyond reason or thought.

Her head filled with bright explosions when he kissed her mound. Teasing her, his tongue fleetingly explored her sensitivity within, lingering only long

enough to elicit from her a loud moan before lifting away.

'Hold your arms still, m'lady,' he said with a little more gravity. Kate felt her arms move back to their starting place again as he straddled her shins, pinning her legs in place and together. Her eyes closed, she felt him leaning forward. Her legs strained against his weight as he alternated between gently pinching her nipples and playing his tongue upon her pleasure. She heard herself exult, crying out in greed and lust. She knew she was feeling the sensations far out of proportion with what he was doing, but they were more intense than any she could remember. When he started kissing his way up her stomach, her hands pulled him to her lips and she kissed him ravenously.

He smiled at her before wordlessly lifting her ankles to his shoulder and straightening her knees. He knelt against her legs, pressing his knees to her buttocks and laying her legs straight against his body. She looked up and saw his hard cock between her thighs, shiny and proud. She squeezed it with her legs as hard as she could, his eyes closed as his head lifted with a pleased groan. She watched another drop of clear liquid fall onto her tummy, Kate felt herself swoon. There was no way she was not lifting that drop to her lips and she squeezed him again. His responding moan flowed physically into her. Stroking her legs as they rested against his chest, he said, 'I think these had best stay still too. Fully locked at all times please, my lady.' With a wicked smile, he added, 'Or else.'

Kate watched her body nod in agreement as her mind floated in the sea of anticipation. She felt it washing through every part of her, surging through them both. His nails dragged down her leg and she bent her

knees, laughing at the intense tickle, she moved to grab his hands in pure reflex.

When his hand met the skin of her buttock with a loud spank, she found it was almost a release. 'Legs and arms straight and still, no matter what,' he ordered. He reminded her to breathe and she floated away in a sea of new sensations as he touched, kissed, and teased every part of her he could reach, her legs straight against him. He squeezed her buttocks firmly and she breathed each sensation in deeply, moaning without censor and celebrating her mind's new freedom.

Her body molten, Kate could feel her essence cascading from her body, running between her cheeks and cool against her hot skin. He let his finger briefly slide along her pussy and her legs folded, despite her mind's demand that they stay locked. She felt two firm spanks and she watched herself greedily breathing the sensations in, changing them. She grinned, looking him in the eye, not quite believing how much she enjoyed the simple intensity of the way he spanked her. With a wicked smile, Kate wiggled her legs on purpose, wanting more. Her reward was a deep intensity coming from a nipple between his fingers as another wave of sensations flowed into her. With her eyes closed, her mind swam in sub-space, an omnipresent mote filling her own universe.

He played his fingertips over her skin, changing pressure, speed and intensity. She experienced a moment of clarity when she saw in his face his pure and unhurried enjoyment of the moment. She relaxed into the sensuous pace he was setting, finding a deeper appreciation in every sensation he offered.

Her mind was still swimming when he lowered her legs. Her eyes remained blissfully closed, her skin

drinking in every contact and sensation. Even the contact of the sheets felt ridiculously wonderful. Only in an abstract way did she even register his gentle encouragement to move her legs and bend her knees.

Kate's universe imploded, contracting into a vortex focused on a single bright point as his tongue found her clitoris, pressing hard, moving quickly and intensely. He growled a warning to keep her arms straight and only reduced his relentless pace when her moans became continuous, letting her slow back down and catch her breath.

He started kissing and nibbling all around her pussy before working the tip of his tongue over her, brushing and pushing only against and beside the base of her clitoris in slow, insistent, tiny circles. It felt almost aggravating in one way, but completely pleasurable in another. As she felt herself letting go, the odd sensations resolved into a chord of deep pleasure. She felt him slowly sliding a finger into her, sending all kinds of waves of sensation through her. He withdrew until shallow before pressing against her with a gentle and constant down pressure at the rear of her pussy. Just holding and stretching her slightly, the pressure changed and intensified everything else he was doing to her.

Kate breathed these sensations in as well. She could feel he was still doing the same thing with his tongue and fingers as before, but no longer were the feelings distinct. She couldn't tell what he was doing to her, but it felt like nothing she'd experienced before. It was bigger and deeper, closer and further away, all at the same time. Her body melted into pure pleasure, becoming the waters of a wide and deep river running towards a narrow gorge, inexorably gaining speed and force. The

sensations were coming too fast now. She felt her body sliding beyond control.

His fingers gently slapped down onto her pussy, holding firm and still. The sensation was surprising, and almost sharp, but it didn't hurt. Far from it. More like a pat than a slap, it pushed her climax in a new direction. Her frustrated release echoed deep within her pelvis as he drew her back. Her building urgency had not weakened in any way, still echoing under his motionless hand as he controlled her point of release.

Realising how much further he might take her, Kate's eyes snapped open. He had a huge grin on his face as he said, 'Not yet, my lady. Not yet.'

Smiling indulgently, she let her head loll back onto the bed in surrender with a loud groan. He returned to running his tongue around her clitoris in the same tiny circles, but still not directly on it whilst stretching her gently rearwards with two fingers shallow inside her. His other hand rested on her stomach, just below her chest and guiding her breathing. Following his cues, Kate breathed in every sensation. Swimming in her pleasure, she was ready and anticipating the soft slap and following pressure as she felt her climax approaching. He told her to draw her diverted orgasm's energy deeply into her heart. His hand still guiding her breathing, her eyes snapped open when she followed his direction. It felt like her whole body was now energised with her orgasm; in some ways, it felt as though every part of her was already in climax. She groaned in deep bliss as she felt the energy of her denied climax pulsing throughout her entire body, yet held back and building at the same time. She breathed every sensation into her heart and felt it spreading in warm waves through her.



Kate learnt to trust his denial, allowing herself full anticipation of each climactic peak before he pushed it deeper again. Whilst her mind revelled in it, she heard her body snarling and protesting each denial. A large part of her felt as if she were already climaxing, her shaking body moving and writhing of its own accord. Her stomach muscles were burning and her legs trembling. Consciously remembering to breathe with his gentle coaching, Kate could feel her sweat cool against her burning skin. The flood of sensations felt heavenly, but there was no release of tension, just the deepening intensity of pleasure building upon pleasure. Rick controlled her every sensation, his tongue playing her while he denied her full release.

Never before had Kate been unaware of the point when her climax started, but every fibre of her body was in full contraction. She felt spasming pulses running deep through her body, yet there was still a massive wave of tension building within her. She felt herself picking up speed and energy, crying out loudly, growling and panting. This time he did not slap her but lightened his pressure and slowed, keeping to the same action and pace. He increased the stretch against her pussy with the fingers inside her and placed his other hand at the top of her mound, stretching her upwards slightly, changing every sensation again ...

*You have been screaming for a long time*, a part of her mind noted before another surge of releasing energy washed her thoughts away again. With every cell exploding in climactic seizure, her body celebrated its very existence. Kate was surfing a massive wave of pleasure, its power propelling her past herself, through and beyond herself. She became the wave, feeling as though she was about to disappear in a flash of pure

bliss. Her climax was finally overtaken by her body's need to breathe again. Slowly, the power of her release was spent and she floated back towards her body and her lover. Like water running back to the sea, her body felt liquid and without physical boundaries. She floated in herself, both sea and wave.

Rick's shining eyes drew her focus as she gradually drifted back into awareness. Kate knew there was only one thing that could possibly happen at this moment in her life. She sat up, grabbed Rick by his hard, muscular buttocks and dragged him towards her. Her urgency transferred into his body as she wrapped her shaking legs around him, her hands still dragging on his hips, urging him to enter her, wanting all of him.

He resisted her, holding himself controlled against her desire until her struggle slowed. Her legs and stomach trembled as she still tried to draw him in. Kate celebrated the power of his body as he easily resisted her best efforts. He yielded, slowly entering her, every increment of his penetration filling her with new sensations as time became meaningless again. His rigid control kept his progress excruciatingly slow and Kate heard herself howl like a wild animal when he started withdrawing at the same slow speed, not even having entered her body half way.

After withdrawing fully and pausing, he re-entered her at the same excruciatingly slow and controlled pace. Kate felt his hands wrap around her wrists and hold her arms above her head. Her body slipped away from her control again, willingly becoming his once more. She felt his slow movements igniting new fires as he allowed himself to re-enter her body, just a little deeper each time before withdrawing again. It felt like he was filling her to bursting every time, but there was more, always more.

Her mind floated as her body dissolved within a sea of pleasure and sensation. She heard her body begging him for more as her mind celebrated his control. His body lay lightly over her, gently pinning her against the bed as his lips found hers.

Kate felt a total awareness of them. Not him or her, but them; celebrating their pleasure, merged into a singular entity. Their tempo started to increase. He slid into her fully, retracting until barely in contact with her before entering her again. This time he allowed himself to grind for a moment into Kate's pleasure, pushing deeply, slowly, but with a building sense of urgency. Her hips met his movements, savouring each pressing thrust. As their heat approached the point of no return, he slowed and held still deep inside her. His breathing controlled, he gazed intently into her eyes and she felt him looking right into her soul. She found herself matching his breathing patterns and drawing her climax upwards once more, her whole body trembling.

When their control had returned, he was still fully within her and began to move. No longer thrusting, he stayed at full penetration but accented different angles, varying his pressure and contact. Her sensations started to build again, but from a new direction. He kept the same motion as she writhed against him, matching his breath. Her pleasure started radiating outwards along her whole spine from deep inside her, starting in her pelvis, right through her chest and up to the base of her skull. Until this moment, she had never dreamt that these sensations could exist in her, but now she felt them building, intensifying and swelling within her, consuming more of her with each new breath. With patience and care, he began slow full-length thrusts into

her, nurturing their pleasure, building it. His movements were controlled, constant and all consuming.

She felt the muscles of his back working under her hands, her fingers digging into their hardness, spurring him on as he began to vary the angles and pressures of his full penetrations. She felt his control seeping away as she urged him to give in to his own heat and their mutual need. Her shaking legs still locked around him, she pulled him into her, deeply, urgently. His every outbreath came sharp in primitive grunts that spoke to her own ancient needs. Their climaxes were merged and building.

His body responded as she felt her own heat, wetness, and lust projecting into him. She craved their combined release more than her next breath as their shared need reached its urgent crescendo.

‘Come for me, Rick, come with me.’ She knew that his moment of release would herald hers as well. She felt his body responding instantly to her nails raking at his flesh and the needful desire in her voice as she pulled herself violently into his thrusts, her legs still locked around him.

His first groaning spasm signalling his climax released hers. Contorting waves of pleasure washed between them, each giving impetus to the other as they rode their wave, finding the point of balance where their pleasure’s momentum washed between them. They were floating together in a sea of Rick and Kate, merged and experiencing each other’s pleasure as much as their own. Their release took on a life of its own as they breathed deeply with each spasm, falling deeper and deeper into their paradise until intent, like time, lost all meaning.

Their minds still sharing a deep union, their bodies eventually acceded to gravity again as the lovers’ drifted

back into their separate flesh. She looked up at Rick, still fully within her and floating in his bliss, almost weightless upon her body. She felt his shoulders and arms, powerful but trembling. She snaked her arms around his neck, drawing him onto her, encouraging more of his weight onto her and kissing him in a shared celebration of happiness and peace.



A brilliant flash of lightning and an almost simultaneous thunderclap woke them both. Searching her senses, Kate felt disoriented for a moment. Then she smelled him... a clean smell that was so intoxicatingly Rick. She inhaled and took in his masculine scent, their combined lust, and her own sweetness. She held still and revelled in her pleasures until she felt Rick's naked body stirring under her arm after another loud crash of thunder.

'Good morning,' she said to him, kissing his shoulder as he stirred to fully awake. 'That thunder is late. I'm pretty sure lightning hit me hours ago!' When he chuckled and rolled to face her, she sat up and looked at him in the flicker of the fireplace and white strobing flashes of the storm as it raged at the city. 'Rick, that was the most singularly intense thing I have ever experienced. I don't know what you were doing to me, but for a really long while there, I could not have told you my own name.'

'Any time, my beautiful Catherine, any time at all,' he said quietly, a contented smile on his face. He reached over to a panel and a moment later, the top two thirds of the bedroom windows became clear again, revealing a spectacular view of the storm while the

bottom remained opaque, maintaining their privacy. He propped himself up against the bed head with some pillows and she lay against him, his fingertips brushing her skin. They watched the storm's light show, comfortable and wordlessly celebrating being with each other.

'May I let you in on a secret?' she said after giggling. 'Mmmmm?' he hummed. 'I have never been fully waxed before, but I am so glad I was tonight.'

'As am I, Kate, as am I. I love the extra sensitivity and sensation of smooth too.' A look of theatrical horror crossed his face. 'I have given you dinner but I have failed to offer you dessert. What must you think of me as a host?'

'That wasn't dessert?' she said, rising. He smiled, watching her as she stumbled before spinning to grab the bed to steady herself. 'Oh shit, my legs aren't working,' she said as her legs threatened to collapse from underneath her. Straightening up, she giggled, 'Oh God, and my abs are totalled!'

'You were using them a lot a few hours earlier this evening, Katie,' Rick teased. 'Just move slowly. Towels are on the shelf if you wish.'

Emerging a few minutes later in a soft bathrobe, she found Rick in the dining area. He had also freshened up and was wearing a towel around his waist. The apartment was cool but comfortable. He set a small board on the table with an assortment of berries and some ramekins with interesting looking sauces, a knife and some toothpicks. He smiled and indicated that she should take a seat in front of him.

'Close your eyes again, Kate.' A soft piece of cloth fell over her eyes as Rick fastened a blindfold around her

head. Kate felt totally secure in this man's care and allowed herself to let go. 'Is that okay?'

She nodded in response, feeling her body reawakening. There were slight sounds as he cut some fruit.

'Open.'

The fragrance hit her before it made contact with her mouth. The intense aroma of perfectly ripe strawberry and melted chocolate was intoxicating. She felt a small piece of fruit enter between her lips and sucked it from the toothpick. A surprising bite of chilli lit up her tongue, intensifying the taste of the chocolate and the strawberry, raising the volume of every tone of the complex combination of flavours.

For the next hour, Rick fed her tiny pieces of fruit dipped in chocolate nuanced with different flavours, sips of sparkling wine, and an occasional lingering kiss. Without warning or consultation, he scooped her up in his arms and carried her back to the bedroom.

They intoxicated each other's mind, whilst exploring, caressing and celebrating each other's bodies. Rolling Rick onto his back, Kate sat up, holding him still with a hand on his chest. She let her fingers run all over his relaxed form, exploring his body. She traced her fingers over his skin, finding and feeling the little, and not-so-little scars, each telling a story of his past. Her hands caressed his semi-erect shaft before tracing over his smooth waxed balls. She loved how the bare skin below contrasted against his close-cropped hair above.

Kate's eyes drank in every contour, seeing him anew every time she looked. His hardening cock pulsing against his tummy was too much. She straddled his legs just above his knees and grabbed it firmly, moving her hands to elicit a response from him, savouring the

sensations as she felt him grow harder and heavier in her grasp. Gazing at his proudly erect cock, she giggled when a thought struck her.

‘Yes?’ he asked.

Kate felt slightly embarrassed for a moment before realising that there was no need to be embarrassed about anything with Rick. ‘I have a favourite dildo,’ she said, pausing.

‘And?’

‘Well, I only recently brought it out of retirement. After Alegria, if you must know. It has always been my favourite go-to toy; the one that just gets all the right spots and always satisfies. You know... Not-too-big and not-too-small, but just right?’ His face reflected his total attention. She continued. ‘You could have been the life model for my favourite dildo, Rick,’ she said, laughing. ‘Seriously, it could have been moulded from you, even your balls. I could look at you all day like this.’

Rick responded by sighing deeply and lying back with his hands under his head, offering her all the time in the world for her explorations. Her hands started moving, almost of their own accord. She let her hands slide all over his hardness, balls and thighs. When his stomach started to move in response to what she was doing, she felt her own need becoming urgent.

In one movement, she moved up to straddle his hips, letting herself over him, engulfing him until she felt like she would surely burst. She let her weight bear down, breathing deeply and relaxing, feeling a deep delicious ache as her body admitted him completely. Sitting on his hips, they held still, enjoying their complete physical union. Kate started moving over him with small pelvic circles, her full weight still pinning him fast to the bed. Each outbreath became a sound,



celebrating that every part of her was receiving just the right amount of pressure and sensation. Opening her eyes, his expression made it obvious that he shared her bliss. She leaned onto his chest with her hands, feeling his muscles carry her easily. Both cried out as Kate hooked her feet over his thighs and rolled her pelvis forward. He looked at her in delighted surprise and moaned before letting his head roll back in bliss.

Kate felt her desire growing into an all-consuming demand as she quickened her pace, only to have him slow her again. With his hands guiding her hips, his smile told her that they had all the time in the world. She pushed against his chest and they started moving against each other, pleasurable tension flowing between them. Kate felt her climax coming from a long way away. She also felt within her his growing need. He smiled as their bodies began to tremble, their breathing ragged.

Kate pushed down over him as hard as she could, feeling him pulsing deep inside her. Just as he started regaining his control, she smiled wickedly at him, unhooked her feet from his thighs and broke her hips free from his hands. She moved hard and fast, thrusting down and back savagely, taking her pleasure upon him right to the delicious edge of pain. She took his control away from him, her body demanding that his orgasm meet hers. With his every groan of pleasure, vibrations passed into her body and had an incendiary effect within her. With her first deep wave building already, their pace became a rutting abandon as they writhed towards their release. Kate's orgasm surged through her in deep, almost painfully urgent spasms that started in her chest and moved through her body and into him, his every groaning contraction triggering her own.



At some point, when the dawn was starting to temper the dark sky, Kate felt herself aware of his arm resting comfortably on her buttock, his breathing regular. She floated in a warm sea of sheets, blankets and Rick, drifting back to sleep, not having fully awoken.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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The aroma of freshly ground coffee penetrated her bliss, waking her just in time to see Rick walk in wearing only his jeans. When he saw her eyes open, he smiled. 'Good morning, my beautiful lady. Coffee and a light breakfast will be ready in ten minutes.'

Kate walked into the bright sunlit kitchen, her hair wrapped in a towel and deliberately wearing only her bra and panties. Seeing Rick leaning on the counter and gazing out of the window, she felt her breath catch.

With as much innuendo as she could, Kate said, 'I see the view is just as spectacular during the day.' She was gratified when he immediately caught on to her compliment.

Openly drinking her in with his eyes from her toes up, he said, 'It's a view that's very easy to get used to.' Kate felt her legs weakening and her body warming in response to the intent behind his gaze. He smiled, and she was sure her knees actually gave a little.

They ate in near silence, enjoying each other's presence, the view and their breakfast. The coffee was delicious, the fruit flawless, and the fresh croissants rounded their meal out perfectly. When only the crumbs of their breakfast remained, Kate smiled and stretched in her chair. 'I feel thoroughly spoiled Rick. What a perfect breakfast, Thank you.' She giggled before adding, 'Actually, what a perfect everything.'

Rick's smile became mischievous. 'You are most welcome, my lady. By the way, you have mail.' As he passed his phone to her, she could see that he was

enjoying her confusion. She looked at his phone, and then at him again, before re-reading the message open on the screen. It was from Dee and Carrie.

~

*“Hi Kate, we are covered today and tomorrow, but need you Sunday late/Monday early (Mayor). You better be keeping notes because we want every single damn detail girl! Have fun and have fun! Love, 2/3”*

~

Kate re-read the message a third time and looked questioningly at Rick.

‘Two-thirds? I assume you are the other third?’ he asked.

With a dramatically overacted flourish, she said, ‘We are... *the three amigas*,’ ending with a defiant stare into the distance. Smiling she continued. ‘You and your parents are M<sup>3</sup>, and we are the three amigas. Now, would you please tell me why there’s a message on your phone from the girls, telling me that I am not required for today and tomorrow?’

‘We didn’t want to wake you, so Dee sent it to my phone. Kate, I – my parents and I – hope that you will consent to becoming an engineer again for two days. Those solar distillery plans based on the sham that Ashinkata tried to pull; the ones we looked at on Alegria?’ Kate nodded in recall. ‘The more I look at them, the more I think elements of the design have real merit. Not all of it, but there is a diamond in there somewhere.’

Kate asked, ‘What ever happened to Ashinkata and his lot?’

‘Their side assigned the intellectual property over to us in exchange for not prosecuting them.’

‘You mean they got away with it?’

'Only for a given value of got-away-with-it. Between our family's and Dom's connections, their faces are well known, and their individual reputations are such that if they are incredibly lucky, one day they may be offered a chance to sweep up at an abattoir. They're not in prison, but they will never have the opportunity to do what they did again. People like that require an eye to be kept on them, and my uncle is in an excellent position to do that.'

Kate looked at Rick. There was something about how he said it.

'Your uncle?' Kate's mind made some intuitive leaps before she said, 'On Alegria, Natalie teased that Mason was sixteenth in line for a throne...' She went pale as her eyes widened. 'That wasn't a figure of speech, was it?'

'No, Kate, it wasn't. Except he is more like nineteenth now. I am thirty-fourth, I think. Mum does the Christmas and birthday cards. She could tell you for sure.'

Seeing the obvious question on Kate's face, he pointed to a clustered display of photographs on a wall. She rose to have a closer look, still not seeing what he was pointing at. A part of Kate's mind yelled, *Next to photos of his parents*. In the centre of the cluster, there was a group photo in front of a castle with flags flying on the ramparts. He had many similar group photos around his apartment. Her mind screamed at her, *Look again Katie. See what's in front of you!*

It took a long moment before comprehension hit her. Leaning in closer, she picked Mason, Madison and Rick out from the group in the image. She felt the blood draining from her face as she looked at the flags again, and carefully read the engraved captions. Feeling dizzy,

and more than a little overwhelmed, her mouth was silently opening and closing. Then she remembered how to make sounds again.

‘Rick?... Oh my God!... Holy shit Rick!... Rick?...’

‘Are you okay, Kate?’

Half laughing at her own reactions, Kate cried out, ‘Really? That’s your question... am I okay?’ She wordlessly flapped her arms at the photo, looking back at him, and then to the photo again. He silently nodded, trusting her intellect and smiling patiently as he let the shock of his revelation take its course.

She finally took a deep breath. ‘Yes... but no, but... holy shit Rick!’ She paused, shaking her head. In obvious parody, she talked to her empty chair at the table beside him. ‘You know, *“Oh yeah, by the way, I’m a prince, no, I really am a prince, the uncle’s a king, big castle and all that,”* and then he asks me, *“Are you okay, Kate?”* Bloody hell, Rick! Is there anything else I should know?’ Kate paused, breathing and thinking hard instead of reacting. Rick was confident in her and remained quiet, letting her mind process his disclosure.

In only a few moments, Kate looked at him with a wicked smile on her lips. ‘Oh crap! I just got the whole idea of how much Ashinkata and the rest of them didn’t get away with it.’ Seeing Rick nodding, she added, ‘Ouch for them.’ Kate’s laugh was slightly brittle, but they both laughed, releasing the tension that had built up.

When he felt she was ready, he walked over and wrapped his arms around her. ‘Kate, the family stuff rarely ever comes up. Once, or maybe twice a year, there is something to do, but otherwise, it never comes up. Dad is the earl, and I don’t want to inherit that title for a very, very long time. I am no prince – I’m just Rick.’

'You will never be *just* Rick to me.'

After they broke from their kiss, Kate grabbed his face and looked hard into his eyes. 'Ricardo Myers, is there anything else I should know about you or your family?'

'Well, dad snores if he's had too much red wine...' Seeing the look on her face, he laughed. 'No, as far as major revelations go, that one was it... More or less.'

She searched his grinning face for a moment. 'More or less?'

Clearly baiting her, he shrugged non-committedly before breaking into a chuckle. 'More or less,' he said again, grabbing her arms as she went to pound on his chest, and drawing her into a playful nibbling kiss on her neck that had her squealing and giggling.

Sitting back at the table and sipping on a fresh mug of coffee, Kate looked blankly into the distance for a minute before turning to him. 'Do you really think there is more to get out of the design?'

'I do. In essence, the cracker-splitter concept isn't efficient enough to work as is. It's niggling at me though, there's something there. There's a workable idea in it, and the numbers work to a point. I've had the team back on it since Alegria, when you suggested the modifications on the heat exchanger. Those got our energy budget a lot closer, but it isn't there yet. There's more to be gained, I just know it. I – we – would love to have some fresh eyes – your eyes – on the whole thing. Please?'

For Kate, there was no decision to make. 'Of course, yes, Rick. I would love to.'

Because he was so confident in every other part of his life, the relief she saw on his face surprised her. *He*

*isn't confident of you yet, Katie. So just how confident of Katie is Katie? Time to ante up.*

Her face softened with her new insight. 'Rick, nothing has changed for me since meeting you on Alegria, unless you count blowing my mind and sexually ruining me for anyone else.' She giggled. 'I find myself totally preoccupied with every aspect of you. I am not going to say more than that because I don't want to scare you, or myself, any more than I am right now.' Pausing, Kate saw him listening with quiet intensity. 'You know I love engineering, and those ideas have genuine merit. Yes, yes, yes. Let's go be engineers, Ricky.'

When they stopped kissing, Kate felt hot and flustered again. A console lit up and played a short tone on a nearby counter top, its message clearly visible:

~  
"45 minutes to pick-up?"  
~

He looked at Kate, and she smiled, nodding in response. Smiling back at her, he touched a green icon on the display and it blacked out.

'To be continued?' she said, gulping the last of her coffee.

'Bugger that!' he declared, scooping her up and carrying her into the huge shower space of the en suite.

Harold waited patiently below the building for fifteen minutes before the couple walked out, hand in hand. He smiled discreetly to himself, understanding why Rick was running uncharacteristically behind schedule.

Harold drove them into the sunlight and traffic as Kate asked Rick, 'So where are we going?'

'My lab. I set up a temporary digital and physical lab just north of town. We had started the digital



prototype mapping and the team was working backwards through the data packs Ashinkata and Rissi were trying to sell us when you caught wind of their scam. I feel like an old-time prospector when I hear myself say that there is something there, I just can't see it yet.'

Rick picked a small satchel up from beside his seat and passed it to Kate. Opening it, she found a computer tablet and a spiral bound notebook, along with some pens and pencils. She also found an identity tag with her name on it tucked in an inside pocket, her ID photo lifted from the amiga's business website.

'The tablet is unlocked by your tag. We have some great programmers and physical modellers ready to test anything that looks like it might work. Our intent, if we can get it to work, is to license region-based production and installation on a charity and sponsorship model, and in such a way that third world and developing communities can afford them and have access to them.'

'Motivated by what happened to the people of Alegria and the gold mine's waste?'

'Not only that, Kate. Most of us have served in some pretty abused areas, and the people in those spots, simple everyday people, are stuck with no choices. It is not penance or anything like that. It's just something that needs fixing, and we are in a position to help. We know how things would have turned out for our people if my father, Dominique Sr. and Edward did not have the contacts and leverage that they had. International relocation of an entire village is not a solution that will work too many times. Folks have to be able to access clean water where they are, and clean water supplies are failing everywhere around the world.' Kate lifted his hand to her lips and kissed him, loving the passion with

which he spoke. For the duration of their commute, they discussed the engineering challenges of the venture.

During her introductions, Kate recognised some of the team member's names from her professional life, and many of the others by reputation. One man had been a favourite lecturer and mentor in her post-grad degree and she gave him a warm hug. Rick smiled privately as he watched his entire staff fall under her spell. The ID tag around her neck gave her full rights in the lab; all doors opened for her and every computer switched on when she hit their enter key.

In the centre of the lab's floor was an open space with two huge touchscreen displays. Rick touched one and called up the current plans of the design. He showed Kate how to operate the software for a few minutes and stepped back.

Spreading the plans over the two displays, Kate started analysing the project, familiarising herself with the general structures before spending half an hour examining the flow of energy within them from start to finish. Her father had always said, 'To keep energy in a system, identify everywhere it's lost and fix the biggest numbers first.' She looked at the schematics, highlighting everywhere she suspected of wasting or losing energy. This was pure engineering and she loved it. She loved the feeling of unleashing her brain at a problem.

Her father, and his most trusted men, had nurtured the analytical skills she was now applying. She found herself thinking more and more of two in particular. *Tyson and Eric would love this. It is so right up their alley.* She remembered the two men who had helped raise her. They had been both Kate's, and her father's, principal advisors and problem-solvers. A thought was

now screaming in her mind, trying to get her attention as she dropped another red circle onto a section of the schematics in front of her.

'It's about time you saw that one, missy,' she heard from behind her.

Kate's blood stopped, frozen. The part of her mind that had been trying to get her attention smugly reminded her that she had been thinking of those two because they were standing right behind her. Squealing, she spun and wrapped herself around both of them, unleashing an emotional flood containing the last ten months' worth of feelings and experiences since she'd said goodbye to them.

After everyone in the lab had taken a few deep breaths, Rick asked, 'I assume you remember these two gentlemen?'

Kate introduced the two men to Rick as her uncles. Their loving pride in Kate was clear as they teased her, telling Rick how much she used to pester them with brilliant ideas when she was growing up; adding that they also ended up using a few of her ideas as well.

Kate looked from her friends to Rick, her questions obvious on her face.

'Knowing the challenges, I asked some colleagues for a list of names. Yours was at the top of those lists as well, Kate. Eric and Tyson unanimously came up as two men to call. That they can share some more information on my most cherished prize,' he smiled broadly at Kate, 'is, as Dom would say, merely a value-added bonus.' Given the smiles on her old friends' faces, Kate realised that her relationship with Rick was already in the open and accepted.

Eric, ever the practical one, grabbed Rick and Tyson's shoulders and said to Kate with a wink, 'Shall we solve this "crip" and make the world a better place?'

Rick looked over to a man at a nearby workstation. 'Would you overlay our four maps please?' Then he looked at Kate and asked, 'Crip?'

'Challenge Requiring Intelligent Persistence,' she said to him.

Kate saw three more interpretations of the problem merged with her own, revealing only a few minor variations in their assessments. Coffee and food was consumed over the next twelve hours as, one at a time, the engineers addressed each challenge in turn. When the next shift of computer modellers had come in to relieve those still hard at work, nobody wanted to leave. These were not the sort of people to go home when problems were being solved. They all worked to model the ideas and thoughts flowing from the floor. One by one, the problems gave way until everyone conceded that there was no more for them to do until running a full scale digital simulation.

Rick said, 'It will take six or seven hours for the computer whizzes to give us our first values. The floor above is all dormitory rooms. Can I suggest some shut-eye?' Kate and her old friends nodded in agreement, reluctant to leave the dynamic of the room and the challenges it contained. Rick ordered more food to fuel the overnight effort of the programmers before showing the three friends upstairs.



A discreet knock woke them. 'Yes?' Rick called out.

From behind the door, a voice said, 'The models are set up and ready to run, sir. The others are waking up too. Fresh coffees will be here in ten minutes.'

'Thank you,' Rick called back. They looked at each other for a moment before they started giggling. Overtaken by the efforts of the previous day, they had fallen straight to sleep after kissing and snuggling for a few moments.

Kissing Kate on the top of each breast, then along her neck to finish on her giggling lips, Rick declared, 'To be continued.' He rolled from the bed, collected two towels from a shelf and offered her his hand. Kate nodded and rose to join him.

Freshened by their shower and walking onto the main floor of the lab, the lovers saw Eric and Tyson standing with the leaders of the computer team. The old friends exchanged warm smiles in greeting, but the engineer in all of them was impatient to see how their efforts stacked up when they ran the model.

'Sir?' asked the man at the computer desk.

Rick looked at the faces around the room as Kate squeezed his hand. He turned back to the man. 'Hit it.'

Ceremoniously pressing the 'Enter' key of his keyboard, the young man said with all the gravitas he could, 'Running.'

Nearly twenty people gathered around the huge touch displays as they showed each sequence of the modelling simulation in turn. Numbers whirled across columns as different lines of text lit up and went dark. Everyone in the room held their collective breath, willing the model to work. The computer techs leaned in

close, watching their screens closely as the numbers rolled to a stop, double-checking the run sequence.

‘It’s not a Not!’ the lead technician shouted. Quiet cheers and back-slaps went around the room in a chain reaction. An odd term, it meant that the design had not failed in a conservative general model. The judgement that it would actually work was a different thing altogether. This first test was to see if they could fail the design. If it passed this point, the time and effort to construct the far more precise models required to prove the design in full would be justified. Nobody was disappointed. Only the best designs achieved a positive at this stage, and happy chatter filled the room.

The celebrations began to falter as those closest to the large displays found a common focus. Kate and Tyson had brought up the schematics and both stood motionless and silent, each looking at different areas of the design. When Rick stepped behind them and held up his hand, silence fell over the room. Familiar with the process, every person there pulled back to allow whatever idea was blossoming to reveal itself. Kate and Tyson took a screen each and pulled up different parts of the schematic diagrams, the two friends sharing a single train of thought.

Rick watched something magical happening. They all did. Not a sound was made as the two minds worked in perfect synchronicity, each recognising the problem, and knowing the solution was just there, working their way to the same goal from opposite ends. Twenty minutes after the room first fell silent, Kate and Tyson both jabbed at the same points on the screen, their fingers touching and their words matching exactly. Discharging the tension that had built up in the room, everyone laughed for a moment before the room fell

quiet again. Following Kate and Tyson's directions, the computer techs quickly stripped the now redundant parts of the design away, allowing the pair to begin to reveal the basis of what they had seen over the next thirty minutes as the rest of the room sat still and watched.

'Shiiiiit!' declared Eric in quiet admiration. A moment later, Rick saw it too. He stood, silently pointing and miming to assign tasks. Each person nodded as they understood their instructions, and within moments, barely audible murmurs were rolling around the room as the computer modellers sprang back into life with a new challenge before them. Kate and Tyson rode their wave of inspiration, designing a new technology in real time, their soft voices the only ones audible in the quiet room.

Hours passed with nobody daring to speak above the most discreet whisper, lest they interrupt the flow of innovation. Kate and Tyson just had to motion, point or speak. Two computer techs stood, one to the side of each, mapping the changes and ideas as they were decided upon. Rick saw tears of pride in Eric's eyes as he watched the pair working at the main displays. He and Rick, with two others, were already working on the next steps and prioritising tasks to make the new ideas real.

Stillness fell over the room. A quiet cheer of respectful admiration rolled around the room when Kate and Tyson looked at each other and flew into a laughing hug.

Tyson said to her, 'Still pretty sharp there, Missy!' She could only hug him all the tighter. After they disengaged, Kate saw Rick and Eric leaving the computer-modelling people with huge smiles.

Rick said, 'Let's get some air. It will be a few hours before we can see what that brain-storm achieved.'

Stepping outside, the warm air and overhead sun surprised the four as they realised it was almost lunchtime. 'Food is that way,' Rick said, pointing up the laneway, whilst dialling a nearby pizza shop to order lunch for his staff. Glowing in their achievements, they walked in silence. By unspoken agreement and superstition, they didn't discuss the solution currently being modelled. It was only when Eric broke at the café and told Kate how much he'd missed her that she lost it. After the tears had almost passed, Eric said to her, 'Hey Missy, how are those tears going to solve any problem?'

Tyson leant over to fill Rick in, explaining that Eric had said that to Kate any time she let a problem overwhelm her when she was growing up. Looking to Kate, he said, 'Katie, I am so glad you have found this young man. You need to listen to me now. You have to stop carrying all that guilt. There was something missing in that prick. We never liked him, but we never saw that in him either. None of us did.'

Kate leapt into Tyson's lap, hugging him tight. Holding discreetly back, Rick wordlessly passed table napkins to the pair, his eyes soft. The tears eventually ran out and their conversation renewed.

After a three-hour lunch and too many coffees, a text appeared on Rick's phone, announcing that the computer simulation was nearing readiness. He discreetly paid for lunch and walked the three back to the lab.

Looking like he wished it was a large red button; a young man had his finger hovering over his keyboard. The assembled men and women were silent and waiting with wide smiles. Many were officially off duty, but not



one of them was prepared to leave. There were some things you just had to *be there* for, and this was one of them. Kate took Rick's and Tyson's hands in hers. Rick looked to her and squeezed her hand before nodding to the technician. On the large screens, everyone watched as the numbers started rolling, barely breathing. When the wide border of the main results window switched its display from red to white, excited whispers of 'Break-even' shot around the room. The computer simulation had passed failure already, and was only just past the two-thirds point of the run.

A restrained murmur revealed the tension in the room when the final numbers started rolling in and the display switched colours again, this time to green. The head computer technicians looked at their screens, double-checking the sequence before nodding to each other. The senior technician almost screamed. 'It's a Yes! It's a Yes!'

Loud cheers erupted around the room as the staff swamped Kate and Tyson, all chatting excitedly and congratulating them. Kate looked up from the celebrations to see Rick standing next to an open laptop. Madison and Mason were on its screen, laughing and hugging. Kate realised the link was live when Madison waved her over from the monitor.

'Congratulations, Kate. Sheer brilliance!' Mason said over the link after she joined Rick in front of the laptop, with the rest of the team forming up to stand behind them.

'It was a team effort, Mason,' she said.

From behind her, Eric's proud voice corrected her. 'It was Kate and Tyson, sir, ma'am. You should have seen them! She's a better bloody problem-solver than her old man by a good margin, and he was genius.' Kate

looked at him with a smile that melted his heart. 'It's true, Katie. You are the brightest I've ever worked with. Your dad would be proud.'

As Kate heaved again into Eric's chest, wrapped in his bear hug, Madison wiped her eyes, having witnessed the exchange. Rick said to Kate with a smile, 'They have been watching live all day.'

Still beaming, Mason said to his son, 'Rick, let's get the physical model happening as soon as you can configure the material data packs and specs; and make sure the lads can get hold of those materials? We'll see you tonight.' Rick nodded to the monitor, holding Kate around her waist. Mason said via the monitor, 'Kate, we are sorry to have to take Rick away from you so soon. We will have him back as soon as we can.'

Seeing the questioning look on Kate's face, he went on quickly, 'Well done everyone. Well done and thank you.' During the cheers, Rick and Kate waved before the computer screen went blank as Rick's parents signed off.

Rick looked at Kate and said, 'We have to go to Central America tonight.' He added quickly, 'We hope to be back in two weeks, Kate, three and a bit at the most if things go really well. I hope you know how hard the thought of leaving you is to me already, even if only for a short time?'

Kate broke protocol and kissed him in response, accompanied by subdued cheers and chuckles from everyone whilst they were doing their best not to look. Rick felt a surge of deepening emotion for her when she hadn't made it about her, but understood and accepted that he had other demands on his time. Her mind excited and intrigued him.

After a few hours more, everyone was sure that they'd squeezed every significant and practical

possibility from the new design for now. Rick had his own brain wave earlier in the day, taking his cue from Eric's doodling, just as Kate and her father had on many occasions. Eric's doodles were his way of thinking. Together they'd worked out a way to make the entire design scalable and modular. Fatigue started to fall upon the whole team shortly after that. It was time to send everyone home and let the physical modellers have their fun for the next few weeks building a prototype.

Rick said goodbye to Eric and Tyson before standing to one side to let Kate say goodbye to her friends. When she'd stopped looking at the empty street in the direction their cars had driven, he asked, 'Kate, may I ask how you are feeling?'

She looked at Rick, not wanting to disappoint him but feeling the need for some distance. She knew that she needed some time to think over everything that had happened since dinner on Thursday evening. *Honesty wins, every time.*

'Rick, I am tired to the insides of my bones. I feel exhilarated too, but mostly I want to sleep.'

'I mean how are you feeling about us?'

She kissed him hard, and held him even harder in response. He only let his embrace around her release when they had both run out of breath.

Rick smiled. 'Harold will take you home, Kate.' He pointed to the waiting town car. 'May I call you Tuesday? We are in deep bush until then and connectivity is likely to be patchy at best.'

'You better, or else!' Kate smiled, her mock fierceness giving way as he drew her head back by her hair, kissing her throat and making her moan loudly.

As Harold pulled the car over to stop outside her building, Kate thought that she'd almost fallen asleep at

one point during the drive home. In fact, she'd been asleep before they'd left the driveway of the lab. Harold had made sure that the ride was extra-smooth as he drove her through the deep twilight of the spring evening before seeing her safely to the door of her apartment.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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After saying goodbye to Harold and closing the door, Kate took a moment to work out that it was Saturday evening. She spotted a note on the table that Dee and Carrie had left, reminding her that they were at a gig. She had a shower before warming a cup of clear vegetable broth, always a faithful standby in the refrigerator of any professional chef. It was fast, light and offered better nutrition than most other sixty-second options. As soon as she had snuggled in under her covers, Kate fell into a deep dreamless sleep, barely moving until sunshine filled her room in the morning.

Awake, relaxed and comfortable in her bed, Kate let her mind sort through her thoughts. She found that her marriage and divorce felt more like a movie she'd seen too many times, rather than something that belonged to her life; a movie that no longer interested her at any level. A man named Ricardo Myers now dominated many of her thoughts. Thinking as hard and objectively as she could, she analysed her motives and reasons for finding him so compelling and attractive.

He hadn't tried to rescue her or take over any part of her life. He hadn't flouted his family history or wealth, swamped her in generosity, or tried to impress her in any way. He didn't attempt to flatter her or offer her empty compliments, but demonstrated respect and appreciation in everything he did. He was generous, but not extravagant. He could have tried to wow her with exotic food, but had made her a simple and wonderful stir-fry, sharing his life without any kind of pretence.

He treated her as an equal, with complete honesty, courtesy and humour at every level. He was a proud and confident man, but he had demonstrated a consistent level of chivalrous consideration, never once showing the slightest hint of arrogance or condescension. Replaying his behaviours towards others, she recognised that his respectful chivalry was natural to him, and not a part of any front he might be presenting. Then she thought about how her friends had embraced and accepted him without reservation. Her happy conclusion was that he simply complemented everything that she held true and dear in her life.

She felt her belly clench at the very thought of him when her mind drifted to their night in Rick's apartment. With him, she had experienced an intensity of sensations and pleasures unlike anything she'd even dreamt could be possible. She felt tingly just thinking about it.

The emotions and memories of working with Tyson, Rick and Eric rose in her thoughts. The magical satisfaction of the moment when she and Tyson had seen the answer within the puzzle was almost indescribable to those who didn't share her passion; and at the moment, she realised that Rick understood and shared that same passion. As they often did, Carrie's words from Alegria came back to her, and she finally felt and acknowledged their intrinsic truth. '*Kate is an engineer.*'

After examining everything as objectively as she could, her conclusions were that wonderful loving people surrounded her and that she was profoundly grateful for every part of her new life. Kate lay still and listened to the distant sounds of the neighbourhood, not wanting to break the spell. Her body was comfortable and her mind silent. Well, almost silent, aside from her recurrent desire to reach out and touch him.

'Time!' she said aloud to the empty room. Throwing her covers off, Kate headed for the bliss of a hot shower. Dee was typically the first of the three of them to get up, but this morning, Dee rose to a breakfast table set with three steaming cups of coffee and a platter of cut and arranged fruits, nuts, a few small pieces of cold meat.

'Don't you look bright and bubbly, my love,' Dee commented as Kate put a small stack of toast on the table for them.

A groan from behind Dee announced that Carrie was also making her way to the table, lured by her curiosity and the aroma of fresh coffee. Kate's radiant smile offered the two who knew her so well a fast summary of the last three days.

'That good, eh?' Carrie asked, finding Kate's smile contagious, despite the early hour.

'Amazing, wonderful and... wow,' Kate said brightly. 'How did Giselle do?'

Dee answered, 'Everything went perfectly. Now don't think for one moment we're going to talk about something else, Katie-J!'

For the next hour, they grilled her mercilessly, extracting from her almost every possible detail, from the moment she'd arrived at Rick's to saying goodbye to everyone yesterday evening before coming home. In her normal forthright fashion, Dee lost patience with her obscure references and asked, 'Kate, how was the sex?'

Silent for a moment, Kate shook her head slightly, her eyes wide. 'Amazing.' To the girls' silent urges, she added, 'He took me places I never even knew existed. I had no idea what he was doing but oh my God! At first, he took over completely and I just let him. After that, it was a whole new world.' Kate threw her head

backwards, hands covering her face, moaning loudly. Snapping her head back, she said, 'It was totally mind-blowing.'

'What's next?' Carrie asked.

'He's overseas on family business for a few weeks with his folks. Mason and Madison promised to have him back by Dom's next gig after this Saturday, so four weeks, max. I'm afraid you guys are stuck with me.'

'We'll manage,' Dee quipped.

'Just,' Carrie teased, adding, 'We are so happy for you, Katie. Now tell us the bit you've been holding back. I know you too well, and there's something else you're busting to tell us.'

With a wicked smile, Kate picked up Carrie's tablet and did a Google image search. She found the same photo that was in the frame on Rick's wall before passing the tablet to the girls, enlarging the image after a few moments so the three Myers became clearly recognisable. At first, they frowned as their minds resisted the information in front of them. Kate watched Dee and Carrie give her a replay of the astonished reaction she had given Rick. Demanding more information, they'd almost finished another cup of coffee before they were over their shock. Shortly after that, the natural rhythm of the three amigas reasserted itself, and their conversation turned to their planning for the mayor's gig later that day.

The mayor had taken them aside before his gig on the previous Wednesday afternoon and permanently booked the amigas for his weekly mid-week events. He'd also booked permanent Sunday afternoon-evening and Monday breakfast-lunch gigs to run every three weeks on the weekends before Dom's functions. He thanked them for offering him their old rate, but insisted



on booking at their new rate to avoid any chance of negative press.

The mayor had also asked if they would be willing to overstaff his events, just as they did for Dom, and keep an eye out for anything he should be aware of. Dom had already asked Dee if he could discuss their arrangement with the mayor, adding his vote of absolute confidence in the man's integrity. The mayor had offered them a minute alone to discuss things, but with a momentary glance between them, they made their decision and agreed without reservation.

The amigas had previously discussed the similarity with which Dominique and the mayor worked their guests. It always seemed unusual to them that he and Dom had never seemed to display any common affiliations. Kate thought back to Dom's comments at the opera and had a sudden insight into the real power structures of the city.



The mayor's Sunday afternoon and evening function was busy, but presented no significant hurdles. The next morning started with an early power breakfast for sixty, and then became an early lunch for a smaller, select group of twenty-five individuals. With their working day already over, the amigas found a café overlooking the water and sat down for a late lunch.

Dee gave Carrie a smiling glance before saying to Kate, 'We need to bring our fab five on full-time, and find some more casuals.'

'Won't that make us too top-heavy?' Kate asked.

Carrie placed her tablet on the table in front of Kate, showing her their bookings for the next month. As

Kate read the numbers, her mouth fell open slightly. She paged into the following months and gasped. ‘When did this happen?’

Their business was now fully booked out many months ahead. The spaces in their calendar that had been available when she’d gone to Rick’s place on Thursday were filled. As she re-examined the numbers, Kate noted that all of the new bookings were for very solid events. She looked forward and back through the months, not seeing a small job anywhere. Randomly opening the notes on different bookings, Kate recognised many of the city’s genuine power players as either the booking party, or high on the lists of attending VIPs. The girls just sat there, grinning, watching Kate catch up with what they already knew.

Dee said, ‘They started coming in on Saturday from mid-morning. I went through two phone charges just taking the bookings. When I called Juanita to ask if it was them, she just said that we deserve every success we get. She never said yes or no, but I know it had to be them. Girls, I believe we have been Dominiqued.’

After a few moments of thought, Kate said, ‘We have to find the right kind of chef for you, Carrie. Your kitchen and your call, but we can’t split into two teams until we have a second kitchen team running to your satisfaction.’

Carrie nodded and said, ‘We’ve thought the same thing. Kate, how about you train Giselle to understudy you? It would be good to have someone else backing up all of our roles. Dee can do the same with Suzette. They work well together, and at events like Dom’s and the mayor’s, where we’re overstaffed anyway, you can let them take the lead. You two are paid to watch anyway.’

Clinking their glasses of fruit juice in celebration, Kate felt the distinct awareness that their little enterprise was rapidly growing up. 'Alberto's?' Kate asked, voicing a single thought shared by the three.

'Perfect,' said Dee and Carrie at the same time.

Dee picked up her phone and called Alberto, excitedly telling him how special the celebration was, and why. Alberto was as close to them as family and he rejoiced in their good fortune as if it was his own. Whilst Dee talked to Alberto, Carrie and Kate called their five staff, all part-time until tonight. Everyone affirmed their attendance at once. A night at Alberto's was always fun, loud and happy, and a teaser hinting at some positive announcements just made things more interesting.



Alberto consistently received rave restaurant reviews for the standard of his food. The starters he served tonight were of exceptional quality and had their whole table talking excitedly. When the last of the platters was emptied, Dee stood and rung a spoon on her glass to get the table's attention. 'Ladies, and gentleman, of our little enterprise, and significant others,' she started, grinning at the staff's partners sitting amongst them, 'we want to let you all in on some changes. Our business has recently experienced a significant growth spurt and we are now officially booked out months ahead. This means regular hours for everyone.' Pausing for effect, she let that first wave of good news wash around before she went on.

'Promotions!' Dee announced, watching everyone become very attentive. 'Suzette, Giselle, we would like you both to come on board full-time. Your tasks will be

to understudy our roles. Giselle with Kate, and Suzette with me. In our overstaffed events, Corey learns under Suzette and Latisha under Giselle. Of course, that means you two will need to be full-time as well.' Dee smiled, watching the grins around the table growing wider.

'Paula, you have only been with us for a few weeks, but you are the first assistant Carrie hasn't thrown out of her kitchen in forever.' Chuckles around the table affirmed Dee's statement. 'We want to offer you full-time too, with view to an apprenticeship if things continue to go well. Full-time for everyone is base salary plus profit share bonuses each month. What do you say ladies, and Corey, of course?'

All affirmed loudly amid shoulder-pats, hugs and congratulations. Alberto and his wife congratulated everyone on their promotions before signalling his staff to bring out the main courses in a couple of minutes.

Returning to her seat, Dee nodded to Kate as she stood. 'Some of the functions we have coming up are over two-hundred seats, others are as small as thirty. This means that we all need to be able to adapt and scale our roles. The focus of our full-time staff, after flawless gigs of course, is to cross train everyone for every role. Learn and teach. On that note, we are now looking for at least another four part-timers. You know the roles and you know how we work. If you know of someone reliable, fast and discreet who might fit into our little family, please introduce us. Remember that you have to work with them, so recommend wisely.' Kate looked at Carrie and resumed her seat.

Carrie stood and said to the table, 'We have some intense gigs coming up. Especially during service, we are going to have to move fast and communication will sometimes be shorter than normal. We need to ensure

that we leave our personal days at home and stay focused on what we need to do without distractions. Most of all, we need to remember to say please and thank you when tensions are high and the pressure is on. Our collective aim is to be around for a long time. We can only achieve this if we are all working towards the same goals, we stay professional, and we keep communicating with respect. We need to keep it fun as well.' Cheers affirmed everyone's agreement. 'Enough talk. Let's enjoy this amazing food. Thank you, Alberto.'

More happy chatter affirmed that their staff were very much on board with everything that was happening. The thought of permanent employment and profit share – at a time when well-paid full-time work was scarce – ensured that the smiles around the table were broad. Kate found herself wishing that Rick could share the moment with her until the joyous mood of the table once again distracted her.

Alberto's food was above spectacular tonight and the whole table was chatting animatedly about it and sharing tastes from each other's plates. Alberto invited Carrie into the kitchen when she'd finished her meal, and she jumped at the chance. He only ever asked her into his kitchen when he had something wonderful for her to see or try.

Alberto held the door open for Carrie, and she walked in to find two new faces in the kitchen. He followed her in and said with intense pride, 'Miss Carrie, this is my nephew, Luka, and this is Melissa. They cooked for you this evening.' Luka was wearing the full whites of an experienced chef and Melissa wore apprentice's checks with a chef's jacket.

It was not often that Carrie was speechless. She had thought that Alberto was having a great night for a great

chef. From the food she had tasted that evening, she knew Luka cooked with pride and intent. He clearly had an exceptional palate, and considering the variety and quantity of food that had come out of the kitchen tonight, Carrie knew that he and Melissa worked well together. *Especially for someone who must only be in his early to mid-twenties*, she thought.

Luka extended his hand and said, 'It is a great pleasure to meet you, Miss Carrie.'

'Luka, your food is exceptional!' she said, shaking his hand before turning to Alberto. 'He's even a shade better than you on some of the contemporary flavours and his Calabrese flavours are right up there with yours. Where have you been hiding this lad?' Looking back at Luka, she continued. 'That is not praise given lightly, Luka. I am very impressed.' When both Luka and Melissa acknowledged her praise, Carrie looked back at Melissa, intrigued.

Alberto said, 'Miss Carrie, Miss Danielle told me this morning that you were seeking a chef. I was hoping that you might consider Luka?' Alberto might have only mentioned Luka's name, but his gestures showed that he was asking on behalf of both. Carrie shifted mental gears, nodding slightly to acknowledge what Alberto had asked before she looked at the young man.

'Why are you unemployed, Luka?'

'Miss Carrie, the last man we worked for, he was not a good man. He said for me to serve what I could not. It was bad, spoiled, Miss. He insisted, but I refused. He said to Melissa to serve it. She said no, and he pushed her, and, well... well then I hit him. We could not serve the food he was trying to make us serve, Miss Carrie. It was not right that I hit him, but it was not right he pushed Melissa or told us to serve bad food. It would

have made people sick Miss...' When Luka's arm had protectively gone over Melissa's shoulder, Carrie quickly understood the full picture. She looked to Melissa. 'And you?'

'Ma'am, I was three months off completing my apprenticeship and he fired me because I said no, and because Luka hit him. He told everyone that I stole from him, but I didn't, I swear.'

Alberto added quickly, 'Luka is a good boy. I know this man he talks of. A saint would hit him and the Father Himself would cheer. He is a worthless... *person!*'

Carrie heard the way Alberto spat the word "person" and knew by the contempt on his face that he wanted to use a very different word. She looked back at Luka and Melissa. 'And now he's spread the word and you're both persona-non-grata in the city's kitchens?'

The three nodded, Alberto included, and Carrie made her decision.

'Alberto, will you and your good lady join our table? Luka, I know what you can do already. For this course, would you switch roles please? Melissa, would you please prepare a degustation dessert for us? The kitchen and menu are yours, and yours only. Luka, are you able to step back enough to let Melissa run the kitchen and the pass and act just as her assistant?' The smiles of pure joy from the nodding young couple dazzled her.

Their eyes told Carrie that dessert would be spectacular, and it was far more than she expected. Carrie had intended that the dessert be for their table only, but the couple took the initiative to demonstrate to her that that they could produce excellent food in quantity by cooking for all of Alberto's guests. Melissa

and Luka demonstrated exceptional understanding and talent by preparing both sweet and savoury desserts that set the whole restaurant abuzz.

After the tables were cleared, Carrie asked Alberto to bring Luka and Melissa out. She announced their chefs for the evening to cheers of their highly impressed party. The looks on Dee's and Kate's faces showed their agreement the moment they caught on. Dee smiled and Katie nodded subtly before Carrie said, 'They are also working with us from now on.'

After the cheers and introductions, Alberto brought bottles of grappa out and poured an overly generous number of marginally dangerous measures into everyone's glasses, offering many toasts and gushing happily. Recognising the skills that the pair had demonstrated, their staff readily accepted Luka and Melissa. Carrie sent Melissa back into the kitchen a few times to make different sauces requiring experienced timing and a deft touch to get right. Carrie smiled to herself when she saw Melissa's delight every time she threw a new challenge to her.

While Melissa was tidying up in the kitchen, Carrie joined her. 'I would like to continue your apprenticeship and training. That means you're with me and not Luka for the next while, especially early on. Are you okay with that?'

The tears in the girl's relieved face were all Carrie needed in response. 'Don't worry about your reputation. By the time you've cooked for our client list, that idiot's lies will be an irrelevant and distant memory. You just focus on producing great food and the rest will sort itself out.'

Carrie still had tears of happiness in her eyes as she rejoined her friends. The three amigas shared a moment,



raising their glasses in a private toast. Their enterprise and family had just expanded again.



Later that evening, Carrie filled them in on Luka's and Melissa's circumstances. She had already decided to take on Melissa's apprenticeship, despite the paperwork. They all agreed that anyone who was that capable and passionate about food was welcome. Kate was too excited to sleep and before going to bed that evening, she had completed a new spreadsheet, balancing rosters, training and roles with their bookings.



Rick called late on Tuesday evening over a very poor connection. Calling her back after the third dropout, he said the moment she answered, 'Kate, I miss you more than I ever thought I could miss anyone and...'

'Me too, Rick. I... hello?.. Rick?' Her phone was silent again. Just as her face started to prickle, a text message appeared.

~

*"I am suffering a wonderful and enthralling new addiction... You! Hope you remember me ;- ) Back for Dom's next gathering at the latest. Missing everything about you. Xox Rick"*

~

Kate laughed and stabbed at her phone to type out and send her reply.

~

*"Who is this? Do I know you?"*

~

She waited for fifteen seconds before typing out and sending,

~  
“Rick, everything you said x 2”  
~



The rest of the week passed quickly, and Rick had managed to get text messages and a few patchy calls through. Kate simply melted each time she read his words, his voice replaying in her memory.

Their staff were taking to their new roles with enthusiasm. Each function offered some form of training opportunity and Kate made sure that everyone cross-trained in every role. There were few secrets in their tight crew and they all celebrated Kate’s newfound happiness. Dominique’s gig that Saturday was another beautifully smooth event, catering to nearly eighty VIP guests and fifty or so plus-ones.

Their staff handled their duties with calm efficiency, each person working with the next in line to teach their roles whilst learning the roles of those above them. The cross-training had added another dimension to their work and made it even more interesting for them all.

When one of Dominique’s guests had a minor mishap, Corey smoothly managed the situation. He was already cross-training with Suzette and managing the food service. Watching her staff performing exactly as she’d trained them to, Dee smiled. Edison nodded approvingly to her when he caught her eye.

The Sundays following Dom’s gigs were now a full day-off for everyone, and a Spa Day finishing with

dinner at Alberto's for the amigas. Alberto closed his restaurant to the public for his Sunday evening session, only offering seats to those he considered family. He'd known Dee and Kate for much of his life and had taken over the restaurant from his father when the girls were in their first year of college. His Sunday evenings had no menus and were essentially a Southern Italian Sunday meal for his extended family. The dining tables were all lined up to form three long communal benches instead of the normal layout of his restaurant.

In bed, and a little tipsy from Alberto's irresistible hospitality, Kate started receiving a series of long text messages just as she was about to go to sleep. Each message was an instruction, and after nearly an hour, she felt as if he had once again ravished her mind and body. Frustration at the poor communications competed with happiness as she re-read his words. He and his parents were due to return on the Saturday of Dom's next gig. Kate wrote five long messages, deleting each one in turn to start again. Finally, she simply wrote from her heart.

~

*"Missing you like crazy. Wanting you even more. I really want you to do that to me, and I am so going to do that to you! Until Saturday. Kisses all over. Kate xoxo"*

~

His text in reply made her smile broadly.



The next few weeks flew by in a distracting blur of events. When their company's bank balance crossed a significant goal that they had set when Kate had first joined them, the amigas opened a bottle of sparkling wine and celebrated. They were now debt free, had a

solid three-month running reserve, and a rainy-day fund to cover most contingencies. Their bookings were solid for nearly fifteen months in advance and many of their clients were already booking the following year's holidays to avoid disappointment. Their seven full-time and new part-time staff had become a solid and effective team, all working very well together.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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Carrie noticed that Kate had stalled whilst buttering her toast, completely lost in her thoughts and gazing blankly into middle distance. Watching Kate with an impish grin, Carrie gently took the butter knife from her hand, saying, 'Hey Dee? Aren't the Myers back in town tonight?'

'Is that today? I thought it was next weekend, or the one after.'

Kate poked her tongue out at them, laughing, and thanking Carrie for her now buttered piece of toast. At Dominique's request, Kate was on the VIP list for tonight's gig.

Dee's phone made a noise and she glanced at it, typed out an answer and sent her response, never missing a beat in the conversation. 'So what do we know about who is attending tonight?'

Kate answered, 'Not a thing, other than it's wall-to-wall with serious VIPs. When I was talking to Edison last Wednesday, he said it should be a run-of-the-mill kind of affair.'

With strong tones of irony, Dee said, 'So stay on our toes then.'

'Always,' Kate smiled.

Talk moved to the mundane things that needed discussing and coordinating before they broke for their respective duties. Kate and Dee double-checked every logistical detail they could to ensure no avoidable surprises came up during the afternoon or evening. Paula was now apprenticed to Carrie, and they spent their

morning in 'mise en plus', preparing everything that could be prepared ahead of time. They took time to mine through their ingredients, making sure that everything was as completely ready as it could be. Luka and Melissa were already in Dominique's kitchen and going through their own preparations. Tonight, they were serving nearly two-hundred and twenty guests, including two heads of state, ambassadors, consular officials, current and retired government officials, the mayor, and many of the state's wealthiest power brokers.

At midday, Harold arrived to collect Kate and take her to the spa. Dee and Carrie took the to-do list out of her hands before shooing her out of the apartment with big, self-satisfied grins. Dee, of course, had briefed the girls at the spa on the purpose of Kate's visit, and they primed and polished Kate to perfection. Aside from a few broken calls and his text messages, Rick and his parents might as well have fallen off the back of the planet. Kate ached to see and touch him again.

Harold delivered Kate to Dominique's estate a little after four o'clock in the afternoon. Dom opened her door and offered his hand, greeting her with a warm hug. Seeing her eyes darting about, he leaned in with a mischievous glint in his eye. 'They're not due in until roughly quarter after five. You will have to remember to breathe until then, Catherine.'

'Katie!' Natalie called out as she walked towards them. Kate was unprepared for the strength of her reaction to Natalie, realising at that moment just how much feeling had developed between them. 'I just heard from Madison. Apparently, her son has been dwelling on a single, central topic for their entire time away. Can you guess *who* that topic might be?' Seeing the question forming, Nat added after they'd hugged, 'She called me

as they were boarding for their last leg back a couple of hours ago. Edison should be picking them up soon. Judging from the look on your face when I mentioned him, he has been a recurrent theme in your mind too. Come on, Nita's inside.'

Natalie winked at Dom before taking Kate's arm and guiding her to a side entrance. Dom smiled, turning to greet his next group of guests as they pulled up.

Nat said, 'So, Katie, I've heard you've been a very clever girl since we last spoke. I don't pretend to understand the finer nuances of what you and your men did, but the overall impression is that some brilliant innovation and problem solving took place. How big would a one-third array be, do you think?'

Kate kicked her brain up a gear. She had to around Natalie. 'About two-and-a-half by four metres in total footprint I guess, why?'

'I couldn't help but notice that there is a group of slightly awkward looking guys working around a curtained-off area in the back paddock that would comfortably contain what you described,' Natalie said, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

Kate's eyes lit up. 'Where? Show me. Please, Nat.'

In response to Kate's enthusiasm, Natalie let her musical laugh free. Calling past Kate's shoulder, she said, 'Engineers! Nita, do you think we should bother Katie with that contraption out back?'

'Kate, you look beautiful as always. Well done. Really well done. Edison says everyone is blown away by the work you all did. It takes a lot to get them to say the sort of things they've been saying about you guys.'

'Thanks Nita,' she said as they hugged.

Juanita continued. 'They brought the prototype over yesterday afternoon. The silly buggers blacked out the

whole neighbourhood last night with all their lights.’ Rolling her eyes, she said, ‘It’s okay though, Dom just charmed the neighbours until they thanked him for the chance to light their candles.’

Natalie snorted. ‘One of these days, we’ll have to pay someone to resist him, just to teach him a lesson.’

‘They’d have to be deaf and blind to stand any chance of that! Short odds that he charms them anyway,’ Juanita said with mock anger.

‘I have missed you both so much.’ Kate laughed. ‘Now, you have my baby sitting in a field without me. Please?’

Natalie and Juanita giggled as they took an arm each, leading Kate through the house and rear garden. As they walked towards a large curtained object in the middle of a turfed field, Kate recognised the engineers who had been present at Rick’s lab, and called out greetings to each of them in turn. They responded to her with a stammering deference that bordered on worship.

Natalie whispered to her with a giggle, ‘Catherine, remember you are not an engineer right now. In their eyes, you’ve proven yourself to be more expert than they are in their own fields, you’re the guest of honour, and you are, at the very least, the boss’ girlfriend. You’re standing here in a spectacular evening dress with everything about you, from your hair and make-up down, diabolically crafted to captivate and seduce all who see you. You’re confusing them.’

Kate smiled at Natalie and modulated herself, acting more ‘the kind boss’ and less a ‘bull-pen-colleague’. She barely contained a giggle as the men in front of her responded with almost palpable relief, and Nat winked to her a few moments later.



Seeing the head computer whiz, Kate walked over and asked him how the prototype had been running. He apologised, explaining that he was under instructions not to tell anyone until tonight. His face said almost everything Kate needed to know, but feeling a little wicked at using her feminine wiles in such an obvious manner, Kate pouted slightly.

He picked up a ruler and smiled as his finger tapped on a specific part of the numeric scale. 'This unit ran today with only  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the final surface area and pulled our full surface target at 55% humidity, with a bad dew point and a solid overcast for most of the day.'

Kate computed the implications of what the man told her, unaware of Natalie and Juanita watching her intently. She blinked as she arrived at the answers she was calculating. 'Fifty plus litres with three-quarters of the array? That makes one hundred and twenty plus under ideal conditions and seventy-five baseline ... Four-hundred and eighty to five-fifty for a full scale? That's almost fifteen percent over projections!'

The man cleared his throat noisily as he nodded theatrically.

Winking mischievously, Natalie leaned in and said to him, 'Don't worry, we all saw you never say a thing.' The poor fellow, dazed by Nat's smile, almost simpered in place before catching up with reality. Still grinning, Natalie looked to Kate. 'Is that good?'

Kate said, 'It means it works. The design is already viable to install in the field. Forty-six litres for this scale and these conditions was the minimum required to make it effective in the field. In good conditions, the enhanced production should regularly be close to double today's output, if not slightly more.'

The young computer whiz nodded, gazing at Kate as if she were a goddess. He knew that he would have stammered for half an hour, and still not come close to summarising the project's details so neatly.

The phone in Juanita's hand buzzed. She looked at it and said, 'We had best get our Katie back to the house. Edison just let me know that he is about ten minutes out with a special delivery on board for Katie.'

The women giggled at Kate's excited response. 'Nope,' Natalie said to Juanita, 'I don't think she's thought about him once the whole time. Probably can't even remember what he looks like.' Receiving a huge smile from Kate, Natalie said, 'Go to him. You deserve each other. Be as foolish as you want to be.'

Juanita asked, 'Do you remember where the library is? Rick is heading that way, probably even before Edison manages to stop the car. Go on, get out of here!' she urged. Kate smiled at her friends, turned, and walked back to the house as fast as decorum and high heels allowed.

Natalie and Juanita watched her hurrying back to the house, along with many of the men there, all admiring the way she wore and filled her dress. They bade the engineers and technicians farewell and strolled back to the house, enjoying the comfortable breeze as the late-afternoon sun broke out from behind the clouds.



Kate burst through the heavy doors of the library to find the room vacant. On the first table in that octagonal room was a small makeup case sitting on a piece of paper with the single line, 'Catherine' on it. Opening the case, she saw makeup in all the same tones she was

wearing, right down to the name of her spa on their own branded products. With a smile, she thought *Thanks, Nita*.

Only a few moments later, arms snaked around her waist from behind. She had sensed him approaching but had refused to turn around. His lips kissed the side of her neck as he pulled her against him. Her legs failed and she let herself swoon into his body, leaning back into her lover, feeling him engulf her.

'I am expecting someone so we'll have to be quick. What's your name? No, never mind, there's no time for introductions,' she teased breathlessly. He spanked her bottom loudly in response. 'Hmmm, I think I remember...' she said, wiggling her bum towards him. His next playful spank ended in a deep massage that made the room suddenly very hot. She spun and kissed him as hard and as deeply as she could. She wanted her kiss to let him know how much she wanted him. He had the same idea.

Every time they went to break apart, their kiss just kept going. The emotion running between them was a physical force. Until this moment, Kate had not realised just how profoundly she had come to care for Rick. Her longing and her need shook her, making her feel vulnerable and invincible at the same time.

He just kept murmuring, 'My beautiful Catherine,' between his kisses. The total need and longing in his voice bypassed her brain, dodging her doubt circuits and giving her libido an explosive kick on the way past, and spoke directly to her soul. At that moment, Kate knew beyond doubt that she had fallen for him.

Their bodies pressing together, Kate felt his male response to her, its insistent pressure against her hip igniting every fibre of her being. A wicked smile came

to her lips. Wordlessly, she broke away from him to close and lock the doors. A look of happy curiosity was on Rick's face. Her responding smile came from deep within her, a primal, predatory place of need and wanting. His smile widened.

Wordlessly, slowly, working her hips and with her eyes blazing, she walked to him. With a hand on his chest, she pushed him back against the end of a solid side table and held him there, looking into his eyes whilst her other hand found his zipper, lowering it in one movement. Snaking her hand under his briefs, she found his hardness, heavy and hot to her touch. Nothing could have stopped her now except maybe a dozen strong horses. She lifted his cock clear and it stood proudly to attention, projecting from his pinstriped suit trousers.

Kate grabbed a small box of tissues from the side table, lifted her dress above her knees and knelt directly in front of him. Gazing up at her lover, she gestured with her finger to stay quiet. Looking back at his pulsing cock in her hand, she felt herself spasm as a clear drop of glistening sweetness appeared. Her mouth engulfed him and he moaned loudly. She looked up at him, pinching his bum cheek firmly and repeating her signal to be quiet. His grin showed that he was totally on board with her game.

His cock filled her hands and burned hot in her mouth. Kate's need to feel him buckle in ecstasy became overwhelming as his climax became her urgent and consuming need. She worked his shaft with her hands, grasping him hard, not pacing herself at all. She wanted his release, and time became meaningless as she pushed him mercilessly towards her desire. Feeling him begin to shudder as the sensations she was giving him took control, she held him as deep as she could, her tongue

massaging his hardness, her hands working mercilessly. Kate could feel his breathing becoming increasingly ragged as his legs began to tremble. Right here and right now, she was in charge, and savouring the delicious feeling of possessing his control.

Her hands massaged him and she drew him into her mouth as deeply as she could before retreating to give her hands full access as she caught her breath. She built his heat without pause or mercy, and in just a few minutes, his breathing was deep and rapid. Feeling his whole body tense, she felt a responding urgency surge through her body.

He exploded, his hot sweetness filling her mouth. Beyond wanting, she needed to feel, taste and consume every delicious wave and spasm of his release. She kept him inside her mouth, her hands still working the base of his shaft as she extended his pleasure.

Her world contained only her desire to devour him. To Kate's satisfaction, his legs were shaking and barely supporting him. She wanted to keep him coming forever. Each time he moaned, she felt it vibrating through his body and onto her lips and tongue. Kate could feel her own body in some form of climactic release; not a full orgasm, but definitely a release. Eventually, she was sure he was spent for the moment, and with not one more twitch left in him.

Grabbing some tissues, she cleaned around her mouth, wiped her watering eyes and then had a careful check over both of them for any evidence. Satisfied that their clothing remained presentable, she kissed his cock goodbye, draining it with her mouth and hand one last time, causing him to moan loudly. With an evil delight, she tucked his still half-erect member back into his

briefs, closed his fly and then looked up at her lover's eyes.

The burning look on his face made her glad she was still kneeling, because the rest of her body just melted. He lifted her back to her feet, held her against him and kissed her deeply, needfully.

Kate started to giggle in emotional release.

'Mmmm?'

'You are the first man I've wanted to swallow.' Seeing the look on his face, she added reassuringly, 'With you, it is beyond wanting, Rick. I needed to. With every cell of my body, I needed to, and I loved it. I like giving head, but it has never, not ever, been like it is with you. You do things to me, Ricky. You make me want to do things. I have wanted to do that to you again since we left your apartment. I love the way you taste. Everything about you turns me on.'

'Well it would hardly be fair if it was only you having that effect on me now, would it?'

The only response to his declaration that she could manage was to kiss him again. *Oh my God, he's ready again!* Kate thought. Feeling her own body matching his arousal, she mentally added, *and so am I.*

A discreet knock on the door and they heard Juanita's voice telling them that things were in full swing outside, and that Mason was itching to show off the new humidity-trap. Rick called out quietly, 'Thanks Nita.' Then he said, 'Kate! Oh crap, your makeup. I'm sorry.'

'It's okay, Rick. There just happened to be this case of makeup sitting in here, coincidentally in all the colours I am wearing today, courtesy of our Aztec angel; and with Harold's collusion as well.'

'Thanks again, Nita,' Rick said quietly in the direction of the door. He looked at Kate. 'Can you come to my place tonight?'

A wicked grin flashed over her face. 'I think I could probably come several times before we even get close to your place!' Kate took a wicked delight in his jet-lag delayed uptake of her innuendo. They both giggled.

As Kate fixed her makeup, she was aware of Rick's eyes on her the whole time. At one point, she turned and asked, 'What?' He smiled. 'Nothing, I just love watching you.'



Looking like the epitome of elegance, they took a moment in the hallway to prepare themselves before joining the gathering. Natalie squeezed Dom's elbow, noticing the way they brushed against each other at hip and shoulder as they floated in, arm in arm.

Natalie saw that others of their extended family had registered some of the same signs. Dom smiled back to her before turning to place a hand on the arm of a man in a group. 'Ladies and gentleman, may I steal David away? David, can I introduce you to Senator McMahan? Laurel, you wanted to meet Natalie...'

Dee watched Giselle carefully timing her visits to each group just as Kate had taught her. Edison winked to her across the floor, recognising the efficiency with which Giselle had picked up Kate's role, and Dee nodded back to Edison. He nodded to her again in Kate and Rick's direction. Dee looked and smiled widely.

When Mason saw his son standing with Kate on the wide entry step, he tapped his glass and called the room to silence. 'My friends, may I present to you two people

I am incredibly proud of? That handsome young man over there is my son, Ricardo Myers. The beautiful lady on his arm is Ms Catherine Jones, someone we already love for many, many reasons. She and Ricardo, along with two other gentlemen, are significantly responsible for the reason we shall now move to the back garden before we lose the afternoon's light.'

Surprised by the warmth of Mason's introduction, the heartfelt smile that Kate shone at him melted everyone who saw it. A strobe flashed rapidly as a camera captured Kate at her most radiant, framed by her beaming beau. Looking across, she recognised the first paparazzi photographer from the evening of the opera. 'Hello David, It's nice to see you again.'

The paparazzi's eyes showed his captivated surprise at Kate's recognition. As his face turned bright red, all he could do was nod and stammer out that he was here at Dom's request.

Rick took his cue, walking with Kate into the centre of the throng, shaking hands and greeting people. The trick was simple; all they had to do was keep moving. With Edison's and Dom's subtle help in creating space for them, they just kept walking on, leading the crowd into the rear garden.

When everyone had congregated in front of the curtained device, Mason and Dominique stood in front of the gathering with Madison and Tyson. Kate had not seen Tyson until now and her heart skipped a beat before Rick leaned to her ear and said, 'Yes, Eric is supposed to be here as well.' Her hand squeezed on his arm in response.

Mason spoke to the assembled gathering, his voice clear and deep. 'A few months ago, we were approached by some scammers trying to sell us a piece of bogus



technology that was proposed to purify badly contaminated water, using only solar energy. This was until a very clever person caught them out and exposed them for the con-men they were.' A murmur ran through the crowd. They had not heard this story before, and in these circles, anything new was interesting.

'Like most convincing scams, their basic sets of ideas were not without some elements of merit. My clever son saw that immediately. Our beautiful lady, Catherine,' he said, indicating Kate, 'is a gifted engineer. Between her and Eric; where is Eric?' he said looking around. Spying him, he pointed, 'Eric!' The crowd gave Eric a polite clap as he nodded and waved shyly. 'Between Catherine, Tyson here, Eric and Ricardo, they identified the elements that had merit; found inspiration from those ideas, and applied some brilliant innovation. The end result is this.'

The curtains opened, revealing a metal box that looked curiously like a shipping container with the top two-thirds of its long sides opened upwards along hinges running along their top edges, and supported on both sides by heavy struts. Vertical sheets of rigid, curiously rippled material and small pieces of machinery filled its internal space. The crowd gave some nervous applause, not quite knowing what it was that they were looking at.

'To explain the details would take a very long time,' Mason said to the crowd. 'Instead, let us fast forward to the executive summary.' He whipped a cloth off a large table, revealing 160 glasses filled with water, arranged into a long 8 x 20 rectangle.

'What you are looking at was captured directly from the air, today. Each glass holds 325 millilitres of pure drinking water, making fifty-two litres in all. This is a humidity-trap. It effectively harvests clean water from

atmospheric humidity. It will be effective in many areas that typically receive little useful rainfall. Fresh, drinkable water is becoming increasingly hard to source for many people. Climate change means that air will get wetter, but that useful rain will become rarer. This is the first viable and sustainable water technology that takes the leap into that future. Our future.

‘These humidity-traps are modular and scalable. Each full-scale unit, three times longer than this one, will produce enough water to sustain 50 to 60 individuals plus some domestic stock. Despite their size, they are robust and very economical in installation. They have minimal running costs and require only basic and essentially unskilled maintenance.

‘Many communities have copious amounts of heavily polluted water, but no drinkable water, often due to illegal mining or unscrupulous farming practices. These people might live beside a river, but they might as well live in a desert. As long as these humidity-traps receive four hours of good sunlight, they will produce at an enhanced rate, doubling the efficiency seen today. Even on the cloudiest day, they will produce about half of their full potential output.

‘As soon as we’ve made sure every last efficiency we can find has been wrung out of the design, we will be sponsoring the emplacement of these where they are needed most. We need to promote this program at community and government levels.’

Before the crowd became too unfocused, Dom took over. ‘This is where you all come in. Of all the people Mason and I know, you are the ones who can do the most to make this happen quickly. We need direct sponsorship of production, and we need political leverage to cut through red tape to see these units

delivered to the communities that need them most. Between us, we can change the quality of life for many people and offer them a future.

‘Let’s make our way back to the house and enjoy our blessings? Well done to the entire team for what they have achieved in just one month. Please, let’s all do everything we can to make this happen. Mason and I will talk to all of you over the course of the evening.’

Enthusiastic applause broke out. The idea was painless to everyone, attractive to some, and worthy of close attention to most. A number of people turned to congratulate Rick and Kate. Eventually the whole gaggle drifted back to the house, encouraged by some heavenly aromas that were wafting to them from the kitchen.

When the evening was over, Kate could not remember what she’d eaten or what had been in her glass. The excited congratulations and words from dozens of strangers meant nothing to her beyond her abstract awareness that people were being nice to her. Her mind was afire and acutely aware of how much more she wanted of Rick, not just physically, but in every possible way. Dom saw the pair to their car when Melissa’s desserts were distracting the crowd, knowing that the company of others was not on either of their minds. Before he closed the door, he said, ‘Truly well done. I love you both. Good night.’ Dom closed the door and tapped on the roof twice to let Harold know that he was clear to go.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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In the car, Rick looked at Kate and said, ‘I can’t describe how much I have missed you, Kate.’ No further words were needed or said. He drew her to him and wrapped his arms around her, holding her, feeling her and being with her as she melted into him.

Harold delivered them to Rick’s building, understanding the brevity of the farewell they offered him. Driving off, he dialled Mason’s number and after exchanging greetings, they talked. Answering Mason, he said, ‘Yes sir, I’ve never seen him like it either... There’s a hard-wired connection there. They didn’t even kiss on the drive... No, that’s exactly what I mean, They just held each other... I do too, sir... No doubt in my mind... Perfect. Goodnight, sir.’

The lovers stood arm in arm for their ascent to Rick’s apartment. An older resident shared their elevator car and left them only two floors before theirs. Rick bade her goodnight with warmth after asking about her recently ill spaniel on the way up, and Kate watched the woman blush at Rick’s attention. Feeling a pang of empathy for her, a line from a popular science fiction series came to her mind. ‘*Resistance is futile.*’

Breaking from their kiss as the elevator doors opened, Kate gazed at her lover as he swept her up, cradling her in his arms and kissing her. He carried her through the apartment, pausing for a moment to reach into the media room and flick the switch to expose the play area, before carrying her into the bedroom. His eyes reflecting the urgent, physical need she was feeling.

He set her down, facing away from him. She felt her dress release its grip from her body as he drew the zipper right to the base of her spine. He slipped the dress from her shoulders and dragged it from her arms and down her body with his fingertips, collecting her panties in the same movement; stripping her naked in a single motion before kissing the small of her back as he pushed the straps of her shoes over her heels.

His arms dragged her into his body as his hands cradled her breasts, barely touching them. He bit her shoulder blade gently, sending electric spasms coursing through her body. She turned and worked on his belt and trousers as he quickly released the buttons of his shirt and sleeves before stripping it away. Stepping on each shoe and then foot in turn, he threw the last of his clothing from his ankles. Naked, he leaned forward and hoisted his giggling prize over his shoulder, carrying her from the bedroom with purpose.

Entering the media room with the play area exposed, Kate felt her internal heat kick up another gear. She could feel his controlled desire in every movement. Still over his shoulder, Kate grabbed his bum, feeling his muscles working under her fingers. He turned her in space and draped her smoothly over the low, padded horse.

Kate found that she was in a comfortable, supported position with her body, knees and elbows, perfectly at rest on the horse. Her thighs and shins rested against luxuriously padded stops and she felt almost weightless. He raked his fingers down her back and took her hips in his hands. With her forearms resting on the padded shelf under her elbows, she relaxed her shoulders. Kate found and grasped some perfectly positioned handles just as she felt him slowly slide his hardness into her body in

tiny pulsing movements, giving her time to feel every sensation offered to her. Inexorably, he moved ever deeper into her with the same tiny oscillations, her body accepting him eagerly.

When Rick was fully at depth and pushing into her, Kate felt exactly how the bondage-horse worked. Fully relaxed, yet held firm and motionless by the pads, she allowed her body to float free of effort or tension. 'God, Rick, I need this so badly. Don't hold back, baby,' she heard her voice urging him.

His response was sudden and electric. She felt his hands pressing her hips to the horse as he withdrew from her body completely. He started taking her with controlled, full-length strokes. Each time, he withdrew quickly and he withheld himself for a moment before slowly re-entering her body again. Even as his pace quickened, he continued the same pattern of slow entry and fast withdrawal, pushing deep into her at the bottom of every stroke.

Sensations of overflowing fullness and hunger began to build in her belly and pelvis, a feeling of absolute wanting. Kate felt as if she was having a full body cramp that only he could relieve. She pushed back with her arms and shoulders, her cries meeting his every stroke.

Still pinning her hips to the horse, he was biting the skin over her shoulder blades. Kate's mind flew as every place he touched competed for her attention and she rejoiced in every sensation. He kept his pattern and pace consistent, and Kate heard herself begging for more, even as she revelled in his self-control.

He wrapped her hair in his hand and pulled her back onto him as she moaned in indulgent pleasure. He increased his pace slightly and Kate felt the first echoes

of her climax deep inside and rising quickly. Rick felt it too. He held his pace and forced her climax to come to him, delaying her release and building upon her bliss. She shuddered in breathless contraction for a long moment, her face contorted in intensity.

Only when her pleasure was arriving in waves did he quicken his pace to meet each clenching. Pinning her hips down, he changed his angle to lift higher over her with each thrust. His raised angle made his cock stretch her pussy rearwards slightly whilst also massaging against her g-spot, changing the nature of her climax completely. Already coming, Kate's awareness flashed into blinding white for a long, ecstatic, formless, endless moment. Her body was acting on its own, writhing in her intense release, pushing back onto her lover.

Their shared orgasm felt boundless as Rick's climactic thrusts met her spasms of pleasure. With his hands on her back, he encouraged her to breathe out as he entered her, while he breathed in, exchanging their surges between them. She could feel what he was doing and found how to respond, lifting and rolling her pelvis and stomach, holding their orgasm at the top of their peak with ease. They rode the waves of orgasmic bliss coursing through them. Like the waves of a receding tide, long after the initial rush of release had passed, their shared pleasure still washed between them. Once again aware of the horse underneath her, it felt to Kate as though gravity was finally able to get her body's attention as their climax faded away.

'I sooooo needed that!' Kate declared into the padding of the horse. She felt his gentle laugh reverberate deep within her body, neither wanting to break apart yet. He was stroking her back and massaging her bum and legs, still inside her.

‘You stoked a fire this afternoon that has been raging since I last saw you,’ he said. She squeezed her pelvic muscles in response and took total delight in his shuddering groan.

With her still mounted on the horse, he ran his fingertips over every bit of her skin he could access, reducing Kate to a quivering ball of sensual enjoyment and purring like a big, happy kitten. ‘Hey, I love this thing!’ she said, still fully supported, slapping the padding of the horse. He pushed into her one more time. ‘Ohhh, you get all the right spots. You can do that to me anytime you want.’

Kate was sure she felt a surge of hardness return before he withdrew.

Nibbling over the back of her chest, his hands slid under her shoulders and lifted her into an upright kneeling position. He drew her further back to lean against him, rubbing her back with his body. His hands found her breasts as his mouth found the side of her neck and whispered between nibbles and kisses, ‘I have missed you so much, Kate.’

She teased, ‘Why? Were you gone? I’m sorry, I hadn’t noti... ooaaahh!’ A delicious pinch of a nipple was his response. They both laughed as her last teasing words turned into a need-filled moan as the sensation coursed through her body.

‘Shall we tidy up a little, my lady?’

‘I don’t know that my legs will work just yet,’ Kate said, baiting him. To her approving giggle, he scooped her up and carried her back through the bedroom and into the huge shower space of the en suite. It was blissful. Rick lay her on the lightly padded bench in the shower space, soaping, massaging and rinsing her from top to toes. He carefully washed her everywhere, causing



her to squirm several times in response to his attentive thoroughness.

She stood and took his hands, moving him to the centre of the space, drinking him in with her eyes. She took up the soap and went to work on her lover, sighing without reserve as she found new parts and combinations of his body to admire and feel. He had obviously not eaten well in the last few weeks. The extra definition of his muscles reminded her of statues representing the warrior-gods of ancient Rome. Seeing how much the travel had taken out of him, she made him lie back on the wide wet bench and gave him a deep soapy massage, relaxing his muscles and mind. She felt the scars on his arms and waist, and found more on his lower legs. She explored each with her fingers, feeling the depth and texture of each. She drank the fresh water running from his back as she rinsed him, kissing and nibbling her way all over him.



The lovers savoured the balmy air and fragrant scents of the summer night as he led her to a table on the balcony. Fussing to ensure Kate was warm in her bathrobe, his hand cupped a breast for a moment before his fingertips slid up her chest and throat to muss her hair in slow, luxuriant movements, kissing her neck when her eyes fell closed. He went inside and returned a few moments later carrying two linen wrapped glasses of hot tea. Kate could smell the chamomile and peppermint, but other scents defied her identification. It was different and delicious.

A siren's wail in the city below broke both of them out of their silent stupor. They had stalled, lost in each

other's eyes. Neither had the slightest clue how long they had been like that, and they laughed happily at the cliché of the moment.

Rick brought out some sweet, ripe pineapple pieces and a clear, dark dipping sauce of lime, balsamic vinegar and honey, with a touch of soy and chilli. Kate looked at him in amazement, tasting a hint of mint as well, each flavour balanced by something else.

‘Where did you get fresh fruit from?’ she asked.

‘Harold came by earlier with a care package of fruit and milk, those kinds of things. Just the essentials.’

‘Well thank you Harold,’ she said. ‘The pineapple is delicious.’ Rick smiled, nodding his affirmation as they browsed on the fruit.

Suddenly serious again and looking at her intently, Rick said, ‘Kate, I want to take you to my bed and make love to you.’ Kate held her arms up. He smiled and scooped her up. As she snuggled, purring into his chest, she said, ‘You know, Rick, every time you carry me like this, I just melt inside and go all gooey.’ His smile and chuckle told her that he knew exactly what effect he was having on her.

Kate and Rick shared themselves, experiencing and exploring each other. Their lovemaking was unhurried, playful, joyous, sensuous and wonderful. Sleep eventually found them in the small hours of the morning.



Feeling refreshed from her shower, Kate walked back into the sunlit bedroom. She found a pair of jeans, a shirt and some underwear on their bed, with a pair of sneakers on the floor.

Rick emerged from the bathroom a few moments later, wearing just a towel as she finished getting dressed.

'Thank you for these, Rick. I don't know how you do it, they fit beautifully.'

'That is actually via Dom's couturier's assistant. She does personal shopping for Dom. I think she has a crush on him, but that's also about par for the course,' he said, rolling his eyes. 'She already knows your size and preferences. Dom loves his family to feel cared for. They most likely slipped a case to Harold while we were at dinner.'

'I can buy my own clothes you know.'

'Of course I know that, but you could not have conveniently bought them in a timely fashion on this very morning. Juanita acted upon a first-approximation assumption that they may be required. If they were not, you'd never have known. We are a close family, Kate. I could easily imagine you doing the same thing, given the opportunity.'

Kate considered what he had said and smiled. 'Has anyone ever told you that you have a silver tongue? Yes, I could only hope that I would be so thoughtful.'



Strolling the few blocks from Rick's apartment to the Sunday markets overlooking the water, the lovers soaked up the warmth of the morning. Instead of breakfast, they browsed on tasty morsels at half a dozen different stalls. Enjoying everything about each other and their morning, basking in each other's company, and delighting in discovering how many food preferences they shared. Their topics of conversation varied wildly

as they unleashed their intellects with each other. Their in-depth discussions and rapid changes of topic excited their minds, and their bodies followed willingly into that state of arousal, their shared anticipation tantalising them.

After being served by an old woman that Rick clearly knew, they sat on upturned crates and shared lunch behind a market stall, eating a fisherman's stew over wilted greens from well-used bowls. With her first spoonful, Kate knew this meal would have Carrie in gastronomic heaven. Rubbed with olive oil and lemon, the home baked sourdough bread complemented the stew perfectly. When Kate requested a small second helping, the old woman poked fun at Rick. Missing a substantial number of teeth and with a floral scarf around her head, she laughed with ribald abandon when, wiggling his eyebrows, Rick asked for a little more as well. Kate guessed that there were aphrodisiac properties associated with the stew and winked to her with outrageous innuendo as she passed Rick his second helping, causing the woman to burst out laughing again.

Wandering along the rows of stalls set up next to the boardwalk, they came across a shallow amphitheatre, its circular space ringed by fixed tables and seats. Each table held a chessboard and a pair of combatants concentrating on their chequered battlefields, moving their pieces at a rapid pace. After watching a few games to assess the opposition, Rick sat in the place of a recently vanquished player. He quickly won, his victim protesting that Rick got lucky, but with a well-worn smile on his face. That he called Rick by name offered context to the light-hearted trash-talk flying back and forth. When Kate sat opposite Rick with a wicked smile

on her face, whispers and nudges flashed around a few of the onlookers.

Street rules applied and the battle was fast and bloody. With matching knights and kings, the stalemate they ended up in was a poetic result. Those who had watched their game applauded appreciatively when they ritualistically shook hands.

A man in a coat a few sizes too big for him slapped Rick on the shoulder, saying in a familiar and teasing manner, 'Man, R'doh, you be lucky she be lookin' at your pretty face and not be takin' that lonely rook. She be handin' you your arse if you not keep smiling at her, charmin' t' poor girl, sure as man!'

Rick looked up into a white, toothy grin and haphazardly shaven face. Kate saw respect flash between them. Replaying the game in her mind, she realised he was also right about not taking Rick's rook. Still chuckling, Rick said, 'Uncle Benny, this is Catherine Jones.'

'The humidity-trap girl?'

'The very same,' Rick said with pride in his voice. 'Kate, this man is in disguise. In his more lucid moments, he is a moderately brilliant physicist.' Benny grinned at Rick's taunt. 'In his more common and less lucid moments, Uncle Benny's a pretty good part-time philosopher. Most of the time, he is happy in his own parallel reality and is chess coach and mentor to some of the most talented young players you'll meet in the city.'

Kate looked at Uncle Benny. He was laughing generously at Rick's introduction. She noted that his clothes were chaotic and un-pressed, but that they were also well laundered. Although his shoes showed wear, they were well cared for and of high quality. His eyebrows were overgrown, yet his eyes were clear and

bore the tell-tale refractions of laser surgery. Kate decided that Uncle Benny was a contradiction, and suspected that he was an interesting person. Everything in his stance dared her to take him on.

She winked at Rick before saying to Uncle Benny, ‘All I hear is talk and they say talk is cheap. I reckon you better take a seat, Uncle Benny.’

The onlookers cheered her attempted trash-talk and Benny replied loudly, ‘Oh my, oh my, little girl, it be on now. Ohhh, MY! Don’t you be t’inkin’ you be getin’ an easy just cause you be’n a cute little girl. Ehh, you be way too cute f’ ‘im an’ all. He can’t be t’inkin’ clear wi’out all his blood!’ With his hip, he pushed Rick, who was still chuckling, from his seat and grabbed the pieces to reset the board.

Kate heard the moan as she slammed her bishop down, taking Benny’s queen. She looked at the board again and saw it. Uncle Benny blew her a kiss as he started retrieving pieces to reset the board. Kate’s loss was unavoidable, making it effectively game-over with checkmate the inevitable result, despite being four moves ahead. *Street Rules – make it fast, make it interesting, and don’t draw it out.*

‘Still got’ be fas’ to beat Uncle Benny. Maybe she no’ got all her blood neither, eh? You too good for him, m’sus. R’doh’s ugly and shit at chess.’ Rick laughed as Kate slammed a knight out to start their next game. Uncle Benny threw his arms out and theatrically hitched his sleeves. Pieces started slamming again as their battle commenced anew.

Kate pushed her pawn delicately forward on the tip of her finger with delight, smiling at Uncle Benny and blowing him a little kiss. Puzzled, his eyebrows knit as

he looked again at the board. His eyes went wide when he recognised Kate's trap, already closed.

'Shiiiiit! You smilin' an' witch-mama hex Uncle Benny? Damn! You must a caught me w'out all me blood, eh?' The crowd caught up with what the combatants were seeing and cheered again. Kate spun the board, giving Benny the white pieces and the first move.

The cheers and chuckles from the crowd recognised her spirit as one of their own. Benny laughed aloud before looking at her, his face suddenly very serious and fierce except for his smiling eyes. He slammed a pawn out to start their third game in five minutes. Their tempo slowed well below the normal frantic pace of street-chess.

Each player carefully feinted, attacked and countered. Benny had even stopped talking and straightened from his normal, casually indifferent posture to concentrate. The other games had ceased and all eyes were on Kate and Benny's contest. Murmurs rose and fell as pieces advanced in aborted attacks and feints, only to be pulled back before serious loss. Slowly the board started clearing.

Kate and Benny were locked in their own private duel. Kate saw it in the same moment that Benny did. She would take his pawn and it would become an inevitable stalemate. Across the board, she extended her hand and, with a twinkle of deep respect, he grinned and took it. When Kate recognised that his nails were manicured, his grin grew even wider. He winked before slouching to become Uncle Benny again, laughing as the crowd murmured and teasing them as they searched the board for the reason the game was a draw.

He raised his eyebrow to Kate, nodding at the board. She smiled and took the pawn. In rapid succession, each forced move denuded the board of all but two matched pairs of pieces, revealing the draw. Noise erupted in admiration from everyone there.

Benny looked up at Rick and said to him, 'You damn full o' lucky you no' be takin' her t' rematch, boyo.'

Rick responded, looking Kate square in the eyes, 'A rematch is exactly what I am thinking about right now.'

The crowd heard the innuendo clearly and cheered all the louder for it. Rick offered his hand to Kate and they bade Benny and the crowd goodbye. Strolling arm in arm, they listened to the games already in progress behind them and the staccato sounds of pieces slamming down in rapid succession. Benny's voice was still clear in the distance as he loudly and rapidly finished off all challengers.

At another market stall, Rick ordered them both a pot of green tea and some vegetarian dumplings. As soon as they'd finished, a young boy invited them through the kitchen and into a wide semi-enclosed space behind the stall. A group of men were playing dominoes on a wooden table, and they grunted in recognition when they saw Rick. When Kate came into view, they sat up straight, sucked in their stomachs, and suddenly became knights of the old world.

Kate found dominoes less than captivating but having Rick there made up for it. After half an hour of play, one of the boys started strumming a guitar. She picked up a large upturned plastic bucket, sat next to the young guitarist, and started drumming, surprising everyone there with her skill. Someone quickly produced an African djembe drum and passed it to Kate. Rick



watched her hands and listened to her play, entranced. One of the older youths disappeared for a few minutes before returning with his own guitar, and they quickly started duelling. As other stallholders closed up for the day and joined in, a fiddle and more instruments materialised. A party developed organically, and Rick and Kate had their first dance, their afternoon passing in a haze of singing, laughing and joy.



Sitting on Rick's balcony, they watched the last of the day's colour fade into hues of blue and grey as the city slid into the evening. The air was warm and comfortable. After their day's grazing, a little fruit was all they wanted to eat. Each delighted in the other's knowledge of their shared areas of specialist expertise. Their conversation was natural and unrestrained. Kate found herself simply enjoying everything about Ricardo Myers.

He is waiting patiently for an answer. Earth to Katie? a part of her mind prompted her.

'Sorry Rick, I was thinking of the many pleasures you give me and completely zoned out. What were you saying?'

'I think I nearly forgot myself just then, Kate.' He smiled. His fingers dug back into her shoulder muscles.

'That's what made me lose the power of thought last time, Ricky,' she said as her head lolled off to one side again in bliss.

He kissed her neck once and said, 'Sunday, dinner with the folks?'

She let her head fall back and dragged his face to hers by his hair with both hands, kissing him upside

down in response. ‘Yes, I would love to, Rick. Now, would you please take me away and have your wicked way with me, my lord?’

‘As you wish,’ he replied, kissing her exposed throat. Again, they explored and enjoyed each other, looking over the lights of the cityscape from the comfortable warmth of the spa bath.



The shrill call of the alarm woke them both with a start. ‘Sorry baby, I forgot that I set that one when we were away,’ Rick said, fumbling his phone to silence in the pale golden glow of the early dawn.

Sleep proved elusive for them as they lay snuggling under the warm covers, aware that today was the start of a very busy week for them both. The sun was well up by the time the lovers started moving, neither wanting to break the spell.

Still aglow from her hot shower, Kate walked out in a robe, enticed by the aroma of fresh brewing coffee. Taking her seat, a warm and cared-for feeling wrapped itself around her. Rick had arranged a fruit platter with toast and juice on the table. He reached past her and placed two steaming cups on the table before kissing her forehead from behind, letting his fingertips caress her throat as she purred.

‘I don’t want it to end!’ Kate said petulantly, sticking her bottom lip out and stamping her feet.

‘In the short term, we both have busy lives. I don’t want this to end either, Kate.’ He paused. Kate looked at his face, which was suddenly tense. Staying silent, she let him process whatever thought he was having. Finally, he looked at her. ‘Kate, I don’t want to scare you off. I

don't want to do anything to scare you but I have to tell you that I know beyond any possible doubt that I am falling for you. Catherine Jones, I am falling for you in a way I have never felt before. I never thought I could find an equal who ticked all my boxes until you came into my life.'

The look of vulnerable honesty on his face instantly brought tears to Kate's eyes. She leapt, spinning into his arms, and kissed him deeply. 'I feel exactly the same, Rick. I love you.'

It just slipped out. Her tension was short lived when she felt an instant heave as his breath shuddered from him. 'And I love you, Kate. I've wanted to say that all weekend. I wanted to say it on Alegria. I knew it then.' Their embrace was fierce and their kisses, needful and passionate.

Breaking, she looked at him whilst giggling. 'Wow. Do you know how many times I told myself I wouldn't tell you I loved you in case I scared you off?'

'Yes, Kate, I think I do.' He smiled back. For the next twenty minutes, they ate in silence. Every time they caught each other's eye, they started giggling. A tone playing on his phone caught their attention and broke their reverie. Rick answered.

Kate heard him say, 'Can you push that back an hour, please?... Damn... Okay, forty-five minutes it is.' Seeing the look on his face, she understood that their morning together was at an end. 'Harold will be here in fifteen minutes. I'm sorry, Kate.'

'Rick, It's completely alright. We both have a lot on today.' Kate gulped the last of her coffee, waving Rick in the direction of the bathroom. She said, 'Go, I'm showered.' He smiled and vanished as Kate tidied their breakfast things away. As she finished dressing, Rick

emerged from the bathroom, looking the epitome of a senior executive. Looking at him in his tailored suit, Kate felt her stomach spasm a little.



Harold was pulling up as they exited the building. Rick waved to him to stay in the car and opened the door for Kate, climbing in after her. ‘Uptown first, sir?’

‘Thank you, Harold. Then wherever Ms Catherine wants to go.’

Kate moved close to Rick’s ear. ‘Ms Catherine wants to go with her sir.’ The sexuality with which she hissed the sir was not lost on him. His answering grin said exactly what Kate needed to hear.

Too soon, the car ride was over and Rick kissed her goodbye. ‘Until Sunday, my lady. I love and lust you.’ He was out and gone too quickly for her to respond, but she did manage to rake her nails from his knee to groin as he exited. The smile she shot out of the back window caused him to walk into a parking meter, and nearly trip over. He was smiling back sheepishly and rubbing his hip when she lost sight of him.

‘To your apartment, ma’am?’

‘Yes please, Harold. Thank you.’

After a few moments, Kate looked forward and said, ‘Harold? Thank you so much for the make-up, and clothes, and everything. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate everything you do.’

He replied, ‘It is truly my pleasure Miss Catherine.’

‘Please, call me Kate.’

‘Thank you Miss Catherine,’ he said with a cheeky smile.

Welcome to Alegria: Catherine's Story

Kate was sure no time had passed at all when Harold opened her door and walked her to the door of her building, making sure she was safely inside before driving off with a respectful wave.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Walking into the apartment, Kate found Dee and Carrie with their seven permanent staff crowded around the dining table for a Monday morning briefing. Dee read her smile as she entered. ‘Good for you, my love. Good for you.’

Giselle piped up. ‘Did you finally realise you love him, Kate?’ Seeing Kate’s smile widening, she added, ‘You guys said it? Wow! And?’

Kate just giggled where she stood for a moment, grinning like the Cheshire Cat. Excited questions flew at her in rapid-fire; mostly revolving around who said what, who said it first, how it was said, and many other variations of the same theme. Her mood was contagious, and their tight group shared in her joy. Carrie pressed a hot cup of tea into her hands once the initial flurry had settled, and everyone insisted on Kate giving them an abridged recap of her weekend before their talk returned to business.

Kate’s cheeks were already hurting from smiling so much when Dee told her, ‘Giselle and Suzette had the lead in full at Dom’s, and they’re going to stay in the lead all week.’ Carrie chipped in, ‘Same for Luka in the kitchen too. It looks like we’ll be ready to start splitting teams for smaller gigs soon.’



The three amigas had already formed a tag-team process with their staff. For the rest of the week, they

had Suzette, Giselle and Luka take on much more active roles in the morning briefings, learning to plan the functions from start to finish. For every gig that week, Suzette took the lead with the service and Giselle ran the floor whilst Kate and Dee circulated, watching everything that was happening.

Carrie had told Luka that the kitchen was his for the entire week. She pointedly held herself back from offering them a single clue or direction, just staying out of their way and observing them in action. When two boxes of crabs turned out to be suspect, Luka simply closed the boxes and called Melissa and Paula over. They calmly inventoried what was available, brainstormed their options, and executed a flawless and imaginative plan to save breakfast. Nobody missed the crab and Carrie's confidence in her kitchen team was now solid. Luka was not only a brilliant chef, he was also an excellent technical teacher for Melissa and Paula, explaining exactly what to do, and more importantly, why and how to do it. Not once did he look to Carrie for her approval. In short, they were ready.

During the mayor's dinner on Wednesday evening, Giselle discreetly and professionally resolved a situation when an intoxicated guest had become inappropriately touchy-feely with her. A few minutes after she had returned the guest to the function with a strong cup of coffee in his hands, Dee took Giselle aside. She explained that she and the mayor had witnessed the whole incident from the next room, and that he was very grateful for her discretion in what could have been an embarrassing situation. At the end of that evening, the mayor handed Giselle an envelope with a hand-written apology from the man in question, and early the next day she received from him a large bunch of flowers, along

with a receipt, in her name, for a very substantial gift to Médecins Sans Frontières, a charity for which she actively campaigned.

The amigas were especially pleased when they learned that Giselle had settled the matter by sending notes to both men, accepting the apology of one and thanking both. Suzette and Giselle decided to give the lead roles for the Friday and Saturday gigs to their own understudies, Corey and Latisha, who both performed faultlessly. The week proved to the girls that their adaptable and happy team was ready to take on multiple bookings.



Driving through the light Sunday afternoon traffic to collect Kate, Harold grinned at Rick's building excitement and anticipation. Watching everything become background to the lovers as soon as they were together, he smiled again.

'Where are we headed?' she asked Rick.

Holding his finger dramatically to his lips, he said in hushed tones, 'Shhhh, it's a secret.'

'Hmmm.' Kate tried to sound disapproving but ended up giggling. During the drive, each caught up on the other's week as the late-afternoon faded into evening. Stopping at a set of lights, Kate glanced out of the window before her eyes snapped back to Rick. 'We're nearly back at my place?'

Rick just smiled as Harold drove past her building, and a couple of blocks further on, before parking at Alberto's.

'I wanted to have you to myself for a while. Is that selfish of me?'



Kate looked at him with questions all over her face, and Rick's smile was one of cheeky delight. She knew nothing was wrong, but she also knew that something was definitely going on. Climbing out of the car, Rick said to Harold as he held their door open, 'Thanks H, much appreciated.' It was then that she realised that Harold had swapped his familiar business attire for a simple polo shirt and jeans.

Kate was curious now, about Harold's nick-name, and the fact that Alberto's normal Sunday guests were crowded in much more tightly than normal. Those that saw them as they entered the small reception area were grinning at her and Rick. Although she knew every one of the Sunday regulars by name, this was most unusual. They entered the dining room and she saw their extended family of staff sitting around a long table on the far side of the restaurant, currently entranced by Madison as she finished telling a story to the general merriment of all there. By the blush of Mason's ears, Kate could guess who was on the receiving end of the anecdote she'd just finished telling. Dom's deep laugh came through, along with Edison's and Juanita's happy chuckles. Seeing the rest of her friends from Alegria there, as well as their full staff, Kate understood why Alberto's was so crowded.

'Katie!' Suzette called out, setting off a raucous chorus of greetings from everyone there.

Beaming at the table, Kate said, 'Everyone, this is Ricardo Myers, and this is Harold. Rick, Harold, this is everyone.'

JC leaned over to Giselle and said in a loud faux whisper, 'See? I told you he's butt ugly!' Giselle shook her head, smiling back at Juan-Carlos.

Kate pointed – for Rick's benefit – to Giselle first, and then the rest of those unknown to him, saying each

person's name in turn. She smiled when she heard Rick mnemonically repeating each name three times at a low mumble, just as she did. She also noticed that Harold had already shaken hands with JC in a very familiar manner before Edison and Dom both stood to greet him warmly. Kate logged that observation away for further exploration at another time.

Madison and Mason walked over and hugged them both, their eyes sparkling brightly. Madison said, 'Kate, I can't tell you how happy I am tonight. We have a special surprise for you.' The room was suddenly silent; not just their table, but the whole restaurant, all with their eyes on Kate. With his family and staff, Alberto was standing in front of his servery and grinning at her.

'Gentlemen?' Madison called out. Alberto leaned across and opened the kitchen door, cueing Tyson and Eric as they led another five men from her old engineering firm. Kate squealed and ran to hug them all. The emotion of the moment had tears threatening in everybody's eyes, although in some cases, they were already running freely. Standing with his parents and watching the reunion, Rick beamed at his lover.

A few minutes later, Alberto brought sizzling platters of appetisers to their table whilst his daughters and Luka distributed similar platters around the restaurant. The intoxicating aromas reminded everyone how hungry they were, and they set upon the food with gusto.

Waiting until everyone had finished with their appetisers, Mason's personal presence commanded attention as he stood. Their table, and then the restaurant, fell quiet. He explained to everyone there how clever Kate was, describing how she and Tyson had brainstormed a new water source technology, quite

literally out of clear air. He added in how Rick and Eric had made the whole system modular and scalable. Even if they did not understand the nuances, everyone there understood that Kate had been brilliant.

Madison stood and put her hand on Mason's back in support as he looked at Kate. 'Catherine, we must confess to doing some things without your knowledge.'

Kate felt off balance, wondering where this was going. Seeing her frown, Mason said, 'We have been talking with Dee and Carrie. We have also been talking to many, many other people. Kate, we know first-hand, how good you are at running your functions...but...'

'Kate is an engineer!' chorused the whole restaurant, even Alberto, before everyone laughed.

Kate was feeling seriously lost, as if she had missed something in translation. Dee stood up with a huge smile. 'Katie, I am really happy and really sorry to say this, but I think that you are fired!'

Kate felt completely off balance now, everyone in Alberto's was giggling and smiling, and nothing was making sense to her. Kate asked, 'What's going on, Dee?' knowing her friend would cut to the chase. Dee winked at her in a very satisfied way and sat back down, looking back to Mason.

Mason said, 'Kate, you and Rick are two of the most capable people and talented engineers I know. We have formed a new company, Ironwood Engineering Solutions, to deal with the increased project load that your combined efforts and brilliance have created. We have made some hires already, but one role is, as yet, unfilled. Since you seem to be available,' he winked at Dee, 'we want you to be the COO of Ironwood, to balance out Rick's role as CEO.' Kate was holding her

breath now. Her world was shifting, but so far she was keeping her feet... just.

‘May I introduce you to some of the new Ironwood Engineering Solutions team? I think you know Eric and Tyson?’ Mason paused, watching with glee as Kate worked out the rest. In shock, and feeling like she would fall if Rick let go of her, Kate realised the enormity of Mason’s offer.

‘Rick?’

‘I am sure, Kate.’

Madison looked at her and took over. ‘Kate, the boys have had their fun. We’ve asked Carrie and Dee if we could take you away from them without injuring the business, knowing that everyone will miss you like crazy, of course. You were a different person when you were working with Tyson that day. You were your whole self. You are an engineer, Kate, and I think you know it. We all do.’

Kate looked around the table and her eyes settled on Natalie, standing behind Dee and Carrie with her hands on their shoulders. Nat said, ‘Catherine, do what is in your heart to do. Yes or No, we’re with you either way.’

‘Alegria,’ Kate stammered out before her tears came fully.

Everyone in the restaurant were calling out their congratulations to her as Kate let Rick sit her down, still in shock and shaking her head. She noticed Eric’s son, also a gifted computer modeller, looking at her shyly from the rear of the room. She looked at Mason and he said quietly, ‘All who want to come back, Kate.’

‘Everyone?’

Tyson answered for him. ‘Kate, Mason gave those who were too close to retirement to come back a redundancy level payout. They’re taken care of... we all

are. Kate, we have almost half of the old team back together, and Mason and Rick have recruited an all-star team. What do you say, Missy? Are we going to make things again?’

‘Yes. Okay... YES!’

Everyone cheered as Rick lifted her to her feet before sweeping her up and kissing her.

When the room was quieting down again, Kate noticed Mason slip a small box to his son with a wink. The room was silent again, anticipating whatever was going to happen next. Rick turned to her, the box in his hand. ‘Kate?’

She was unable to answer, staring at the box and completely off balance again. Rick looked down. Realising what the scene might have meant, he started laughing. ‘Oh shit, sorry Kate. Relax, it’s not that.’ With a mischievous wink, he opened the box and lifted up a set of two keys on a keychain. ‘This one is for the lab, and this one is for my place.’

‘Rick?’ Kate looked at him, overwhelmed. He pointed to the key fob before passing it to her. The front showed a logo that read ‘*Ironwood Engineering Solutions*’, and on its reverse side was engraved,

~

*“Catherine Jones: Director & C.O.O.”*

~

Her face changed and she pounded his chest, ‘You knew about this and didn’t tell me! That’s so cruel!’

Laughing with the whole restaurant, Rick protested that he’d only found out three days ago himself.

‘Hang on, how did you organise everything if you didn’t know?’ Following his eyes, she found the trio of Juanita, Edison and Natalie, all grinning and looking very self-satisfied. ‘Thank you guys,’ Kate said,

glancing over to Mason and Madison as well. Even though her mind was still catching up with events, Kate felt a surge of excitement at the thought of being an engineer with Rick and her men again. ‘Thank you, all.’

Madison said, ‘Kate, it is you who deserves thanks. You should also know that every one of your old team set your co-leadership as a precondition of their employment, every single one. I greatly suspect one or two of your old crew might have had something to do with that,’ she said looking at Tyson with an affectionate grin.

‘That’s enough of the ‘old’, Maddie, even if it is true,’ said Tyson from across the table, setting everyone chuckling again.

The joyous mood of the evening swept Alberto up, along with the whole restaurant, and as the grappa and wine flowed freely, the atmosphere became truly festive. In his enthusiasm, Alberto simply cooked anything and everything he could think of.

Dee came over to Kate just as she was about to start eating and asked, ‘You okay with this direction, love? You just need to say the word and it never happened. Mason has been extremely generous and we are more than okay, but only if you are?’

‘I am happy and sad at the same time. It really does feel right though, Dee.’

‘Exactly how we all feel, babe. Hey, was that a key to Rick’s place too?’

Kate nodded and they shared a look that held the promise of at least a few hours of giggles and bubbly wine.

‘Danielle! Here, for Nikki’s table.’ Alberto said, passing Dee a steaming platter of delicacies and delights. She laughed, taking the platter from Alberto and setting

it down on the table of another family of regulars, chatting briefly before returning to her seat. Anyone could be conscripted to serving duty during Alberto's Sunday evenings. It was a family thing, and everyone there loved it.

Kate watched with amusement as the rest of the restaurant fell under the hypnotic charm of Dominique and her friends from Alegria. She almost pitied those hit with these amazing people en masse for the first time. Towards the time for dessert, she had to smile when she noticed Giselle's eyes consistently locked onto JC. Kate understood JC well enough to know that he would be completely oblivious to any effect he was having on her.

After everyone had finished their desserts, Dom stood and thanked Alberto's guests for so graciously making room for them and playing along with them. A few minutes earlier, he had quietly arranged with Alberto to settle the bill for the restaurant that evening as a thank you to the regulars for their willingness to play along. Recognising Dom's honourable demonstration of old-world respect, Alberto had to embrace him and kiss him on both cheeks.

As everyone stood to leave, Kate felt intoxicated, despite only drinking part of a single glass of wine. Rick saw the look in her eyes and said to her when Dee and Carrie had joined them, 'Kate, you need the girls tonight, and you need a chance to discuss what's happening. How about I call you tomorrow afternoon so we can get our heads around what needs to happen next with Ironwood.' The gratitude in the amigas' eyes told Rick that once again he had judged the situation perfectly.

After they had said goodbye to everyone and politely declined their friends' offers to drive them

home, it was just Kate, Dee and Carrie. A stroll in the warm air was exactly what they needed.

In bed that evening, Kate took stock of how her life had changed again. She fell asleep with tears of gratitude still damp on her cheeks, but feeling a little numb and lost at the same time.



The girls rose early and shared a long breakfast. Dee and Carrie filled Kate in on the financial arrangements that the Myers had made with them. They had bought out Kate's partnership in a deal that was generous to the point of near absurdity. Next, they discussed strategies and ideas for the expansion of their business. As always, Kate identified some potential issues, and working into the mid-afternoon, they planned around them until the amigas were happy with their strategies for expanding their business without Kate's active participation. Once their plans were finalised and their notebooks closed and put away, the reality of the situation struck them and a few tears followed, not in remorse or loss, but in simple release.

Dee's phone chirped. Giselle's SMS let the girls know that tonight's small gig was well under control and that all of the preparations and setup were complete. This was the first time the amigas had left a gig completely up to their staff. The client was a friend of Dom's, and the event was a casual birthday celebration. It was a good, low-pressure run for the new team to prove themselves on.

Kate looked at her friends, went to the refrigerator, and withdrew a bottle of sparkling wine. "We need to celebrate."



Carrie agreed, springing away to find a bowl of strawberries and some dipping chocolate. When Rick called a little later, he quickly gauged that the girls were having an evening, and offered to bring croissants in the morning. All three melted a little at his respect and thoughtfulness. As afternoon turned to evening, the girls laughed and cried by turn as they recognised just how radically their lives had changed.

Browsing through the unopened morning papers, Carrie came across a photo from Dom's gig the previous weekend, this time on the front page of the business section instead of the social pages. Kate and Rick filled a full third of the page, Kate beaming and Rick looking proudly at her. 'That was just as we came in after...'

Seeing the blush on Kate's face, Dee said, 'Kate, you wicked girl! I love it!'

Carrie read the story aloud.

~

*"Meet the new faces of engineering. Announced overnight were the appointments of Ricardo Myers (34) and Catherine Jones (31) to lead Ironwood Engineering Solutions. Only weeks old, the company has already made waves after unveiling a new water-gathering technology during a function held last weekend by Dominique Savagewood. The guest list included present and past statesmen, senators, the mayor, and many of the country's business leaders. Mason Myers credited the couple for much of the innovation that will see many people across the world gain access to clean water. All present enthusiastically received a demonstration of the new technology, and orders are already reported to exceed 15,000 units.*

*The company has also drawn attention to itself by aggressively rehiring many of those who lost their jobs*

*when Ms Jones was ruined less than a year ago, the victim of a shameful and cowardly confidence swindle by her now ex-husband, Silvio Schivello.*

*Clearly back on her feet, Jones and Myers are set to take Ironwood...”*

~

‘Wow, they called The Prick out, didn’t they?’ Dee said.

Carrie said, ‘Where ever he is, I hope he read it this morning and popped an artery! That photo is amazing, Kate.’

‘More wine!’ declared Dee. Kate broke down at one point as a profound wave of gratitude washed over her. The rest of the evening passed comfortably as the amigas basked in their friendship and listened to old albums by candle light. A late SMS told them that the evening’s gig had wrapped up without any issues. Fatigue and the effects of the sparkling wine took over shortly after that.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

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Squinting in the morning sunshine, Kate made out Rick's name on the caller ID. 'Hello handsome, we were just talking about you.'

'Good morning Kate, I am downstairs. I assume none of you have been outside this morning?'

'No. Why? What's wrong?'

'Nothing dire, Kate. I will come up. Please stay in the apartment and keep the door locked until I get there? Would you wake the girls too, please?'

'We're all at the table. What's wrong?'

'Ten minutes, Kate. Please keep the door locked until I'm there.' Kate looked at her friends and told them the content of the brief conversation before checking that their door was as locked as it could be. They could see nothing obvious from their windows.

They jumped a little when he knocked on the door. 'It's Rick,' his familiar voice said. Dee and Kate opened the door and started to hit him with questions; then they saw the heavy red lettering. The amigas followed Rick into the hallway to see graffiti painted in large red letters spelling out 'cunt' and 'slut' all over their wall and door.

'Silvio!' Kate declared, immediately recognising the peculiar way Silvio formed his "t".

'There's more out front as well. A clean-up crew is already en route. Kate, we need to bring Natalie in on this.'

Somewhat in shock, Kate just nodded to him, looking at her friends in bewilderment. Carrie was

shaken and Dee was angry. The foul epithets were repeated everywhere.

An elderly neighbour came out when she heard their voices and stared at the writing, dumfounded. Carrie went to her, knowing that of the three of them, she was the closest to calm.

‘Is that man dealing with this?’ the neighbour asked Carrie as soon as she was close enough to speak to quietly.

Surprised, it took Carrie a moment to adjust to her neighbour’s unexpected question. ‘Yes, Deidre, he is taking care of it right now.’

‘Does he know who did it, Carrie?’

‘Yes, Kate’s ex.’

‘The Prick?’ Carrie nodded. Her neighbour took Carrie by the shoulder and turned her, whispering, ‘Look past him, up the hall. Tell me what you see.’

Carrie swore under her breath. For a moment, like something you only catch out of the corner of your eye, she saw a different figure superimposed over and around Rick. Her skin tingled and prickled as she recognised in that dark apparition the personification of every good reason why human beings had learned to fear the dark.

The shadow faded when Rick noticed them and looked up, nodding and smiling reassuringly to them.

‘You saw it too, didn’t you Carrie?’

‘What did you see, Deidre?’

‘Same black thing as you did, I reckon. Do you trust that man standing there, Carrie? *Both* of them?’

Carrie gave the question a long moment of thought, still seeing the amorphous shadowy shape in her memory. She could think of nothing to make her falter in her trust of Rick. ‘Completely, Deidre. Absolutely. All of us.’

'In that case, I shall sleep well again tonight. Take care, dear,' she said, waving to the girls and smiling in farewell as she closed her door.

Carrie stood there for a moment, staring at her neighbour's now closed door and puzzled by Deidre's simple acceptance of what was happening. Walking back, she could almost see the dark apparition still pulsing around Rick until he closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath. Joining her friends, she heard him say, '... Nat, thank you, you are right, of course... would you email me a copy of your paper please? ... Brilliant. Thank you from all of us, Nat. I will, Bye.'

Looking at a text message, Rick said to the girls, 'A crew will be here soon. Nat and Nita send love and hugs. Shall we go inside?'

With fresh cups of coffee, the four sat at the table. Rick started. 'Did you see the story in yesterday's business section?' The girls nodded, and Dee told him that they had only opened the paper and read it yesterday evening themselves. He said, 'You know Nat profiled Silvio in a paper she recently published?' More nods. 'She is emailing it to us now. The reporter thought he was doing the right thing in bringing Silvio up like that. He probably got the story from hostile chatter in the crowd.'

'Nat says his type of sociopathy has an unusual self-gratifying narcissistic overlay. She believes he will take that story as a direct insult and challenge. Actually, it's Kate's public success that he will take as a personal insult. His profile suggests that after lashing out so directly like this, he is likely to become violent if this goes on unresolved for more than another few days. I don't want to sound all alpha and macho here, but for all

our sakes, would you all be willing to please let us deal with this?’

Without hesitation, the amigas gave him their wholehearted affirmation.

‘Schivello has dropped off the grid for the moment, but we are looking. Nat expects that since we can’t find him, he’s already likely to be directly observing the apartment from a distance. He is also potentially escalating into a rage, which is why we need the graffiti gone quickly, so there is less for him to focus on. After the social columns made us the subject de jour following Dom’s party last weekend, yesterday’s article was probably just too much for him to stand, especially if he saw the follow up piece in the business section today. There was a very nice half page piece on how wonderful Kate is at engineering; they listed some of her projects and even talked to some old clients and professors.’ Rick smiled at Kate proudly for a moment before he asked, ‘What functions do you have today?’

‘Just the mayor’s for this afternoon and evening instead of tomorrow night. It’s at his apartment. He has security.’

‘Please forgive my bluntness. One needs to understand the scope of a threat to respond appropriately, and his security people don’t have the right training. Schivello’s pathology is, at best, only a few points shy of clinical psychopathy. In his current state of mind, he has quite probably crossed that line already. If he comes at us, it’s a two in three likelihood that he will present in an extended disassociated rage. If he does, there is a very high probability that he will come armed. He is unlikely to represent a normal or predictable security situation that the mayor’s guys can respond to appropriately, even after we warn them.’ Rick

pressed a speed dial on his phone and his call was answered right away. Rick said, 'Hi Dom. Here with three, all unmarked. Nat has the profile and pictures... mayor's place. We need to be there with response in place.' The line went dead.

'Rick?' Kate said.

'Once you guys get to the gig today, please don't leave the front door without Dom, or at least letting him know you are heading out, but preferably not at all, okay? You all come back here tonight to keep the routine looking normal from the outside. Tomorrow's gigs?'

Dee answered, 'Only one. Senator McMillan's, in the government building.'

'That's good news. Those guys can adapt well enough. I will make a call shortly. Can I get someone to email Juanita a list of your gigs for the next week, please? Thank you all for not resisting my intrusion into this situation.'

Kate said, 'Are you kidding? We wouldn't be anywhere this calm if you weren't sitting there right now making everything feel very safe and under control.'

'That goes double for us,' Carrie said, grabbing Dee's arm. 'Go *Rambo* on The Prick's arse and I'll bake you a cake.' Their laughter discharged the nervous energy that had been building.

Carrie was almost sure she could sense Rick's shadow already sniffing the air, hunting. She knew they had nothing to fear from him. Carrie grunted to herself in satisfaction after she'd thought about it. *Rick loves Kate like we do. If Silvio is stupid enough to come at her, well, so bad for him.* Thinking about it a little longer, Carrie said, 'Rick, The Prick hasn't got a clue what he is walking into, but don't underestimate him.'

‘Never have, never will. We always assume and plan for the enemy having superior firepower, tactics and numbers. Ladies, this is a temporary inconvenience and nothing more. Soon it will be a distant memory and we will all live happily ever after.’

Kate was learning a lot about her man as she watched his calm command of the situation and himself. She also felt almost inappropriately naughty when she became a little warm and aroused as she watched him in action. Rick’s phone buzzed with a message. He was already standing and had asked them, ‘May I?’ a few seconds before the knock on the door.

‘No need to ask, Rick. Please,’ Dee said, sweeping her arm towards the door.

The demeanour of the three men who entered made it abundantly clear that they were not regular cleaners. Rick gave them a fast briefing and the three started moving after a rapid murmured discussion between themselves. One started carefully disassembling the doorjamb after laying down a drop sheet. The second placed a few tiny boxes in the apartment, pointing towards the doors and windows. Seeing the questioning looks, Rick said to the girls, ‘Directional movement sensors, not cameras.’

The third man set down drop sheets outside their door and started scrubbing at the graffiti. He also emplaced two motion sensors and a camera covering their door and hallway; as well as setting a pressure mat under a carpet in front of the elevator doors and positioning another motion-sensing camera to cover the fire stairs. He came back in briefly to say that Silvio had used common paint and the graffiti was lifting easily from the utilitarian surfaces of the hallway. The girls watched in fascination as he used hand signals to have a



second conversation with Rick, pointing to the devices he'd setup outside the apartment.

Rick said to them quietly, 'We know that in here is likely to be clear, but there may be listening devices out there. It's highly unlikely, but if we think of it, we have to assume that he has too.' The girls nodded, comprehending at that moment just how capable Rick and the others were likely to be in dealing with Silvio.

The second man was already downstairs, ostensibly to tackle the external graffiti whilst subtly distributing other devices in the surrounding gardens and alleyway.

Remembering that Giselle and Suzette would soon be on their way for the morning briefing, Kate sent them a text message telling them to stay home and that they would call them both shortly. A few minutes later, the man who had been scrubbing the hall came in waving a buzzing device all around the apartment before giving Rick a thumbs up sign and heading back out. He said to them, 'No listening devices or transmitters other than ours.' A simple thumbs-up symbol came by message on each of the amigas' phones a few minutes later. Rick explained, 'That means your phones are clear. It was not a strong likelihood, but it would be silly for us not to check.'

Carrie stayed with Rick at the table as he made some calls, the first to JC, and then to the senator's security detail about tomorrow's event. When Dee and Kate came back to the table after doing their morning briefing by phone, Carrie asked, 'How did they take it?'

'Badly, until they found out Rick, JC and Dom were on it. Now it is a big adventure, complete with heroes and a bad guy. I think Giselle has her sights on JC too, she mentions him a lot.' They chuckled, needing the release.

The man who had been working on their door walked to the table and said, 'All done.' He set his laptop computer down and handed each of the four of them a key on a chain, pointing to their initials inscribed on each of the key fobs.

'Both door-locks are now decoys. The fobs are really your keys. When you put a key in either of the door locks, the system will interrogate this transponder and allow the key to turn the lock. The door will open a half second after that. Twist the surfaces between your fingers like this to align these check marks, and the fob is turned off. Please get into the habit of keeping them off unless you need to open the door. If stolen, a turned-off fob will not open the door, but will send for a security response that is less than thirty seconds from the door downstairs. If you trigger it by accident, just turn it on and open the door. There is a camera covering the hall so we will see you are ok and cancel the response. If you are under duress, turn the key in the lock twice or more during that half second delay, just like you are nervous, and leave the rest to us.' He paused to make sure they understood his last instruction before continuing.

'Twist the fob on and off three times in ten seconds or less and it is a panic alarm. If you are in doubt, let us figure out it's a false alarm. Even if it's just a cat tipping a bottle over or you just thought you heard something; your job is to call us every time, okay? In the worst-case scenario, try to keep the fob with you if trouble happens. We can remotely activate an internal beacon and follow it, on or off, for a minimum of four days. May I ask each of you to turn your fobs on and off please?' The girls and Rick did as he asked, repeating the procedure to

practice triggering the panic alarm. He closed his laptop, nodding to Rick.

'Thanks, Sean. Smooth as always.'

'A pleasure, sir. Ladies, I trust you will have an uneventful time. There will always be friends nearby, you can count on it.' Rick saw him out before closing the door and reading a text message. 'Ladies, it looks like our friends are finished and the graffiti has been dealt with. Kate, you need to stay here this week. After Wednesday I will stay here too if that's okay with everyone?' Dee and Carrie were nodding, loving the idea.

'Thank you, Rick. For everything,' Kate said.

He kissed her forehead in response. 'I will head off. No matter what, Schivello will not get near you guys. Dom and Nat will be there for dinner and Harold will shadow you in. Can you text him the time he should be here and not leave until he is at your door? There is a camera out there, and we can override the door and keep it locked if need be.' He took Kate in his arms and they kissed. 'I love you,' he said when they broke apart.

'Awwww,' Dee said, 'what about us?'

'You know I love all of you.'

After a fast round of laughing and teasing, he was gone. Carrie said, 'Katie-J, I really like that man.'

'Yeah, I kind of have a thing for him myself.' Kate sighed. 'Shower time. We have a gig to do.' Kate bounced down the hall, her bravado a little fragile, but the girls let it slide. They felt much the same way.

When she heard the distant sound of Kate's shower running, Carrie asked Dee, 'Did you look at Rick when he was on his phone in the hall?'

‘You mean how he got all dark every time he said The Prick’s name? Hell yes, I saw that. I thought it was a trick of the lights or something. You saw it too?’

‘So did Deidre.’

After a thoughtful pause, Carrie added, ‘I think The Prick’s in deep crap if he comes back.’ Both nodded, satisfied with that thought. Carrie got up to clear the table and said, ‘You have first shower, babe. I’ll be right in.’ Dee kissed her in thanks, appreciating her love yet again.



There was no sign of trouble when they arrived at the mayor’s apartment and they went about their normal routine, setting up in the now-familiar space for his afternoon and evening gig.

Natalie and Dom sat next to the mayor and chatted merrily with him and his wife like the old friends that Kate suspected they actually were. The evening passed without a drama, except for the experience of an unfortunate and very intoxicated reveller who was about to urinate on a convenient bush in front the mayor’s building as he stumbled his way home.

After looking around to check the coast was clear, the drunk was about to lower his zipper when the bushy shrub in front of him rose up to become some kind of monster. Standing frozen to the spot in wide-eyed horror and making high-pitched squeaking sounds, his bladder problem quickly became a laundry challenge. When the apparition groaned and lurched for him with branches for arms, he remembered how to run, suddenly feeling very sober.

Juan-Carlos smiled darkly to himself, the whites of his eyes were the only human thing about his painted face as he dissolved back into the garden. With a sly grin, JC thought afterwards that the zombie groan and reach might have been a little cruel, but it sure did break the monotony of standing watch. His earpiece sounded briefly with Harold's and Edison's chuckles as they acknowledged his antics.

Edison, Dom and Natalie followed the girls back to their apartment and stayed for a cup of coffee, ensuring everything was as it should be. Rick called Kate to say goodnight right after Dom closed their door. It ended up being a two-hour call; Silvio was a topic only in the first few minutes before the lovers found far more interesting things to discuss.



The following evening, the senator's security detail was sharp and alert and his gig passed without incident. Rick reluctantly left Kate and the girls after they'd fallen asleep to take care of some necessary business details at the lab. After Dom and Mason had made some calls, the rest of the week's gigs had been cancelled without fuss or publicity. The venues where the gigs were to be held were simply too hard to secure discreetly.



Early the following morning, Kate talked with Natalie on the phone. Natalie was not sure that Silvio's silence was a good sign, explaining that given the degree of his graffiti attack, he should have vented more by now; and that his silence meant that he either had found

a new distraction, or that he was building in his rage. Rick was spending at least the next three days and nights with the girls, going over details of the new firm with Kate. They had decided it was best to keep everyone in one location to keep Silvio's focus on a single target, making his detection far easier. Rick called to announce his arrival only moments after Kate had hung up.

By the time Dee emerged from her bedroom, only his shoes remained by the door. *Good for you, love*, she thought with a smile. When Kate and Rick emerged a few hours later, both of them looked happy and relaxed. Dee and Carrie loved Rick's company, and within hours, a new normal evolved as the apartment took on a relaxed and productive vibe.

The girls listened as Kate and Rick spent their Thursday discussing their business plans, options and challenges. When the two were in the middle of a particularly intense exchange, Dee looked at Carrie and rolled her eyes, shaking her head. She marvelled at Kate's capacity for processing huge amounts of data and loved that Rick's mind was so similar in that regard. They reached decisions and argued points at lightning speed. To Dee, it felt like they had barely opened a subject before it was settled and the next topic was open. Carrie just smiled and went into her kitchen to experiment with some new menu ideas that they would taste test for a late lunch.

With their gigs cancelled, there was little to do until after the official launch of the new company at the lab on Saturday evening. Dee and Carrie took the time to catch up on some movies, enjoying some much deserved 'couples-time' together through the afternoon as Kate and Rick continued making their plans.

When Rick cooked a stir-fry for their evening meal, it felt like they had become the four amigos. That evening, they all snuggled on the couch for a silly Mel Brooks comedy on DVD. The girls enjoyed Rick's boyish delight in the movie as much as they enjoyed laughing at the movie itself.

Friday was essentially a copy of Thursday, except for Rick and Carrie cooking together. Kate and Dee half-expected Rick to come running out of the kitchen at any moment, vowing to never set foot in there again. When the two presented a magnificent dinner, Carrie just smiled and winked at them.

When they were alone later that evening, Kate told Rick that he was one of a very select few people that Carrie tolerated in her kitchen. 'We work in exactly the same way, Kate. Carrie is methodical and passionate when she cooks, as am I. It was fun and I enjoyed getting to know her one-on-one.' Carrie had said much the same thing to her earlier in the evening. The lovers explored and celebrated each other before eventually falling asleep, snuggled in close together.



The next morning, Rick watched Kate take a phone call lasting less than two minutes whilst she was still dripping from her shower. When she'd hung up, Kate leaned back against the basin and looked at him silently, her eyes wide.

'Should I ask what's happening?'

Shaking her head in disbelief, Kate said, 'That was Douglas McDonough. He just gave us the job we were doing for him when my old company went down. Rick, we have a two-hundred and forty-two room eco-resort to

fit as invisibly as possible into a mountain-side, including a hydro power station and heaps more.'

'I've heard of him but don't think I've met him. When is the bid due?'

'No bid, he just gave us the job.'

Rick then witnessed first-hand what Dee and Carrie often laughed about. Kate was far more excited about a new project than she was about the grand opening of their company later today, even if it was 'her' party. When Edison knocked on the door just after ten-thirty, Rick let him in. Dee and Carrie hugged him in greeting before setting out coffee and a few light snacks. Kate already had two large sketchbooks out, along with a dozen pieces of paper filled with writing. She was drawing out a basic topographical layout of the site and filling Rick in on the project.

After watching her for half an hour, Edison said to her gently, 'Kate, you know that everything is set up at the lab for this, don't you?'

Remembering that she had a lab again, Kate looked at him with an almost embarrassed look on her face, and they all laughed with her as she closed the books. 'Why didn't you remind me, Rick?' Kate asked.

Dee fielded her question. 'Kate, you light up from the inside when you get your teeth into something juicy and new. I can't blame Rick for not wanting to stop you. I didn't want him to either.'

The grin on Rick's face said that Dee had it exactly right, as she normally did.

Edison said, 'May I suggest that you two belong at your lab?'

Rick smiled and nodded. 'Thanks, Edison. That's a good idea. Is JC there already?'

'He's still outside. César and H are there.'



'Let's go then.'

When the pair had dressed and were ready to leave, Edison turned to Dee and Carrie. 'Same as before; don't open the door unless you've told JC,' he said, pointing to a small walkie-talkie. 'I've left his clothes in Kate's bathroom. At about three-thirty, he'll come up here to clean up after Sean takes over; he was the fellow who did the door locks. You know both of their voices well enough to recognise them?' Carrie nodded. 'I know Giselle has the van today, so JC will drive you.'

Dee and Carrie were guests of honour tonight. Giselle, Suzette and Luka were managing all aspects of the actual function.

Edison drove Rick and Kate twenty-five minutes further out from the city, entering an industrial estate mostly tenanted by technology enterprises. The building was unremarkable from the outside and looked somewhat like a large, three-level, white box, its sides broken only by two rows of mirrored windows on the upper levels. On the door, a conservative and simple sign displayed 'Ironwood Engineering Solutions', but offered no other details.

Kate and Rick were too excited about the new project to think about the opening tonight. Eric and his son were already there and had just finished redesigning a part of the humidity-trap that was proving a little fragile during transportation. Kate told them about the new job and they immediately became engrossed in the new venture. Kate and Eric worked as best they could from memory to set up the initial brief for the rest of the men on Monday as his son brought up all of the topographical and geological information on the site he could source.

‘You know, Kate, half the guys will remember their parts of this project,’ Eric said after half an hour, smiling broadly. ‘God, it’s good to be back together Katie, I mean, *Boss*.’ She had to punch him in the arm for that crack before kissing his rough cheek.

When Kate next looked up from the touchscreen table where they were working, she realised that Giselle and Corey had been setting up around them for some time. They were diplomatic enough to not mention that they’d already said ‘hi’ earlier in the day. They had also seen Kate’s focus at the time and understood. When she started asking about the function, they replied together, ‘Kate, you’re an engineer now!’ Kate followed their gaze to see a huge and very cheeky smile on Rick’s face. She poked her tongue out at him like a petulant child and giggled, returning to the workstation.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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Juan-Carlos let Dee and Carrie know by text message that he was on his way up. A few minutes later, Dee opened the door to find a hunched, drunken vagrant slumped against their doorframe, obviously crippled and on his last leg. Ignoring her, he was scratching industriously at something in his groin when his radiating stench penetrated her consciousness; a nauseating and acrid mixture of stale wine, rancid body odours and God knows what else. He looked up at her just as she grasped the door to push it closed, grinning with a rotting set of yellow and black teeth at the horror on her face before straightening up and saying, 'Give us a kiss then gorgeous!'

'JC?'

Seeing him transform in front of Dee, Carrie cried out, 'Bloody hell! JC? Is that you?'

Bowing elegantly from the waist, he said, 'Underneath all this crud, I am he.' There was no mistaking his voice, but from his matted hair and bushy eyebrows down, his voice was the only thing they recognised. Dee couldn't hide her horror as she stared at the ugly weeping sores on the right side of his nose, face and neck. Walking into the apartment, he reached into his mouth and slipped the coloured and moulded thin plastic covers from his teeth, revealing his normal white smile and enjoying the girl's incredulity.

Still shaking their heads in disbelief, and trying not to breathe beyond bare necessity, the girls quickly showed him to Kate's bathroom before opening every

window they could. Juan-Carlos emerged almost an hour later wearing the smart suit and tie that Edison had left earlier in the day, and carrying a large plastic garbage bag, sealed with tape. ‘It’s the only way to keep the smell contained and fresh for next time.’

Carrie asked, ‘You want to smell like that?’

‘Hell no! I prefer to be clean, but a good disguise covers all the senses. A soak – a homeless alcoholic – will always strike a discordant note if they don’t stink, even if people don’t recognise why. When the odours are offensive enough, it buys you space, and the smell is all that people will remember of you. You see, people’s memories only store so much sensory information about any one thing. The trick is to make sure the dominant sense of that memory isn’t vision.’

Dee said, ‘There is no way I recognised you at the door. I was ready to slam it in your face!’

Juan-Carlos smiled at her and said, ‘In context, that’s the best compliment I could get. The trick is to look so down and out that people filter out your existence. Soaks are often anti-social, smelly and regularly ask for money, so people don’t want to see them. Typically, they are physically weak and represent little obvious threat, except to their own kind. You know, I’ve had two other homeless guys with beautiful souls try to help me out with shelters and kitchens down there? One even brought me a cup of soup and a bottle of water from the charity kitchen of a local church. This disguise puts me on the lowest rungs of the ladder of society. The general populace is too far up the ladder and do their best to cancel “us” out.’

‘I was looking out the window all morning, where were you?’ Carrie asked.

'I will give you a hint,' JC said. 'I saw you rack one cake and do the white icing on the other one ...' He was looking at Carrie with teasing eyes as she studied him before shaking her head. Juan-Carlos looked out of the window. Without pointing, he said, 'Keep looking out towards the other side of the park and just use your eyes in case we're being watched. From the near entrance, see that second big tree? Follow the path behind the ice-cream stand to the left. Look under that next thick bush back from the path, at the highest point of the ground. Sean is lying right where I was. Just keep your heads pointed away from where you're looking.'

Despite knowing where to look, it still took a few moments for the girls to spot the observation post. The man looked unconscious. His ragged clothes broke up his outline so effectively that they found him hard to focus on, even after they'd seen him. Shaking their heads, they headed for their bathroom to finish getting ready. A few minutes later, Carrie said, 'Dee, will you please leave Suzette alone and let her get on with her job.' Sliding her phone back into her purse, Dee looked back at her with a sheepish little smile. Carrie kissed her and said, 'They'll be fine, babe. They know what they're doing. We trained them, remember?'



A middle-aged man pulled up in a town car just before JC walked from the building. Juan-Carlos casually looked around and got two 'all-clear' signals, one from his previous position, and another from a roofline on the other side of the small park. He patted his pockets as if checking for keys and wallet before turning to open the foyer door for Dee and Carrie. By the time

he glanced back in the direction of the car, its driver was already climbing into the taxi that had followed him there. He ushered the girls into the still-running car before sliding into the driver's seat.

Once they were moving, Dee asked, 'JC, is the threat still real? Could he just have vented some anger and gone away?'

'There is always that possibility. Natalie has done almost a year's worth of profiling on him, along with a couple of others who share his specific pathology. She thinks that there are too many triggers happening for him to leave it alone now. His sociopathy makes him incapable of identifying with anyone else's humanity, which is why he's so dangerous. He is also a total narcissist. His special combination of pathologies makes him the only real occupant of his world, and that same combination of pathologies makes him reasonably predictable. Kate means nothing to him, but Kate's resounding success and public undoing of his perceived victories represents the strongest of insults that a broken psyche like his can perceive. Think of any time his authority was challenged, especially in public.'

'JC, I will not tell you how often he dragged Kate down in front of us. Prick is the only name we use in company. Don't take him lightly though. He is a fit, strong, capable man, and he's supposed to be an expert in some martial art.'

'I never assume an adversary is anything but superior to me in every way, Dee. Assuming anything less will get you hurt.'

'Rick said something similar the other day.'

'Same training, same reasons. We're not going to let anything happen to any of you. I just want to make sure that I'm the one to catch him if he comes. Rick is

normally a very controlled man, but he's clearly head-over-heels in love. I don't know if he can be as cold as he'd need to be if he physically gets hold of Schivello first. None of us want or need the drama that could follow that.'

'I saw something when he was talking on the phone the morning this all started. It was like a dark shape wrapped around him, but coming from him as well. JC, that was one of the most frightening things I've ever seen. It even felt like it looked at me for a moment. We all saw it, even a lady who lives up the hall.'

JC was quiet for a long moment before he said, very gently, 'That is why I have to be the one to catch him, and not Rick.'

'What was it?'

'Grandmother calls it the other self, or the shadow self. You know how a lion can have a cub biting it all over and just take it? The lionesses can snarl and snap at him and he'll just growl and walk off? Its light innate self is with its pride. That same lion is also a supreme predator. Its shadow self is its other side, the one that protects, hunts and kills.'

'I know we have nothing to fear from Rick, but it felt like a very real thing.'

'It is. Normally, only those very close to someone can see it. Your neighbour has probably seen it in someone she's known in the past so she is sensitive to it. The deprogramming and reprogramming we've done on Alegria does not take that aspect away, it just gives us more control over when and how we let it out.'

'Can we change the subject please?' Carrie pleaded, 'I'm getting goose bumps on my goose bumps.'

'Gladly,' JC said, 'I heard some buzz about a good news phone call that Kate got this morning?'

‘A project her old firm was working on BP; that’s Before the Prick. It was given back to her. No bids, no questions, just here it is, now make it happen. From what Kate and Rick were discussing, it’s a really big deal.’

‘Good!’ JC said with finality. ‘How are you guys doing with everything?’

‘We miss her already, of course. With The Prick’s crap? We have never felt safer or better cared for, thanks to our personal flock of James Bonds. Except for the little things like not going for a walk in the morning and the new door locks, we haven’t really thought too much about it. The three days off have been wonderful, and it has been brilliant getting to know Ricky better. He is so nice!’

‘He’s a solid guy. He’s my blood-brother from my other mother, so I am biased, but I have never, not ever, seen him like he is with Kate. He doesn’t even look twice at a cute arse in the street any more. He’s turned into a boring old man.’

‘You next?’ Dee teased.

‘You know, if I could have the same thing they have? Hell yes. Otherwise? Hell no! The problem is that even at a basic level, I haven’t found a girl who’s even half kept my attention for more than a week or two. Based on the women already in my life, I guess my bar is set pretty high to start with. I’ve never even had a girl really grab my imagination and interest beyond a glance or two. I know that sounds terrible, but it’s the truth.’

‘On this subject, you know Giselle has you in her sights?’

After a pause, he said, ‘Thank you for telling me. I will have a gentle word with her as soon as it’s appropriate.’



The rest of the drive passed in good-natured teasing and stories. As the girls had their first close discussion with JC by himself, they delighted in the quality of man they found him to be. Whilst he was manoeuvring their car into a parking space, Carrie leaned into Dee whilst looking in JC's direction, and whispered, 'Isabelle?'

Dee's eyes widened. Nodding, she said, 'Wow. Oh my God, yes. Yes.' They squeezed each other's hands in agreement. Carrie's younger cousin, Isabelle, had been raised with her for much of her childhood. Although she was currently on another continent, the idea of Isabelle and JC ignited the imagination of both girls. They just kept nodding to each other and smiling.

Noting their grinning giggles, JC wondered what was going on as he let them out of the car. He insisted they were not to touch the doors themselves, telling them, 'Tonight, you will be treated as the wonderful ladies you are.'



Colour and movement filled the interior of the lab, contrasting sharply with its intentionally bland and box-like exterior. The spaces were open, bright and positive. Large screens hung on every wall, displaying images that changed every thirty seconds.

After exchanging excited greetings, Kate assured Dee that their staff had the gig well under control. Rick and Kate gave the girls a tour, explaining that the changing images shown on each screen were intended to stimulate engineering minds towards creativity and offer new directions of inspiration. Spider webs, fish scales, mangrove swamps, clouds and even psychedelic art; each image showed subjects with patterns and interest.

Rick pointed out other pieces of art, explaining that none of the pieces were chosen just for their aesthetic value; each was intended to drive thoughts in new directions, even the complex water feature in the reception foyer. Dee and Carrie were not surprised to find out that Natalie had been involved in the design of the space.

The clock was nearing five as their new staff arrived. Like the majority of engineering types everywhere, they were all between ten and five minutes early. Kate and Rick met each in turn. Seeing many of the loved faces from her past in the room, Kate felt a wonderful *déjà vu*, as if she had lived the whole experience already.

Right on five o'clock, Dom arrived, accompanied by Natalie, Edison, Nita and the Myers. After greeting them, Kate called the room to silence. 'We have only a few moments before our guests start arriving. I want to tell you all how much we are looking forward to working with the new Ironwood Engineering Solutions team. Some of you are new to Rick, but go way back with me; some of you are new to me, but go a way back with Rick. As of this moment, we are one firm and one team. Our goal is great engineering. Credit goes to the team as a whole, so sharing ideas, discussing possibilities and helping each other out as much as we can is the most effective way we can deliver great engineering. Rick and I have some more good news. Who here remembers Douglas McDonough's development?' Almost half of those there raised their hands. 'As of today, that project is back on, and it's ours.'

Cheers sounded out from around the room. Every person who had been a part of that project remembered the thoughtful design and environmental briefs. It was

one of the good ones; the sort of development that any engineer would proudly put their name to.

Rick took over and asked those who knew about McDonough's project to share as much as they could with everyone new to it. Then he explained that there was a small level of threat from Silvio, and that there would be some extra layers of security in place until he was either apprehended or proven to have moved on.

'I hope he comes!' called one voice, to the affirmations from a number of the others there.

'I'd like a chance to *discuss* certain things with that asshole,' yelled another.

Seeing the looks flashing around and feeling their mood darken at the mention of Silvio's name, Rick said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, please be as judicious and smart as I know you to be. If it does come to that, please remember that you can't work effectively from inside a prison cell.' That did it. Appealing to their sense of intelligence neutralised the mob mentality that was stirring in the room. 'Remember, our goal is to do brilliant work. Today is about celebrating this team. We look forward to working with all of you, and tonight, we have two major projects to celebrate, projects we can be proud of, so let's have fun.' Cheers broke out spontaneously. Kate didn't think she could love him any more than she did at that moment, seeing how readily every one of these people chose to follow him. It didn't occur to her that Rick felt exactly the same about her, for exactly the same reasons.

A few minutes later, Mason, Madison, Kate and Rick formed a receiving line of sorts, meeting each guest as they arrived. The party got underway as generous platters of finger food and drinks began to circulate through the room. Just after six o'clock, Harold

delivered Douglas McDonough to the event as a guest of honour. Many of those there shook his hand in friendly recognition and chatted excitedly to him about his project.



As soon as he could, JC slipped outside after donning overalls, gloves, boot covers and a matching balaclava, all printed in the same irregular geometric shapes of deep greys, browns and dark reds. In low light, the odd patterning became instantly invisible, giving nothing to the human eye with which to form a discernable shape. Slipping into the deepening twilight, he had already decided to cover the one area beyond direct observation of the rest of the team. He nestled into the base of a large tangle of weeds and bushes and waited, loving the self-discipline of staying still in situations like this. His earpiece sounded off nearly an hour after nightfall. 'Car, pax one, north end of TT Transport yard.'

'Hold and observe,' said the voice on the radio. Each man on duty affirmed the instructions, tapping his transmit key for a brief moment.

JC was thinking that it might have been a false alarm when he spied a figure creeping along a fence line with something large in his hand. He tapped an alert code on his radio and watched. The radio crackled briefly to life a few moments later as others saw the movement. 'Michael?'

JC tapped out the letter 'm' twice on his transmitter.

Watching the figure moving along, it was clear that he was moving with the intent of remaining covert. 'Medium sized container, left hand. What looks like a

hammer, right hand, negative night vision,' the radio said in JC's ear. He smiled, knowing that this was not an armed escalation but another nuisance call. He tapped his radio again, four times and then twice, letting the others know what he had planned. 'Received' was the terse reply.

All they could do now was try Natalie's idea to try to get the message through to him, and hope that The Prick had a little sense. JC computed his probable course and worked himself into an intercept position, knowing that his companions would be doing the same.



Silvio had no idea of what had happened. He had been creeping along some bushes, unseen, following a hidden fence line. The next moment he was on the ground with pain coming from his shoulder and knee, and with boots all around him. A hand was holding his face hard against the ground by his hair, and knees were on his shoulder and hip. 'Fucking let me go you arseholes!' he blustered.

'Silvio Schivello,' JC said, capturing his attention completely, 'I can't tell you how lucky this night is for you. There are at least twenty people in that building who have good reasons to want to see you hanging from different parts of the city, all at the same time. Are you going to be quiet or do you want us to make you quiet? The choice is yours Schivello. This is your one chance. Choose now.' Silvio shook his head quietly.

'Mama Bear outbound,' JC's earpiece whispered.

He knew they had to overwhelm him completely; straight intimidation would not work on Silvio's personality type. JC just kept him on the ground until he

felt the tension pass from Silvio's body. 'Are you going to behave yourself, or do we get to do this the easy way?' Silvio grunted but did not struggle. JC let him stand up, his two men watching Silvio closely. Seeing his fully camouflaged captors for the first time, his eyes went wide.

'Schivello, you need to hear me loud and clear. Kate is gone to you. You only have one course of action that will see your life stay anywhere near as rosy as it was today; that is to walk away and never, ever, think about coming within a country of her again. If you end up in Fiji and she goes there for a holiday, you're on the next plane out, get it?'

Silvio was still trying to figure a way out of his predicament. He started to throw a fast punch at an unmoving, unflinching JC.

Silvio's blow had made it less than half way before his howl of pain triggered a visceral cringe in all who heard it, their bowels knotting in empathetic reflex at his plaintive, trailing scream. From behind, Juanita had fired her booted foot between his legs with enough force to lift him entirely from the ground just as his punch had started moving. He landed heavily on his shoulder, already balled up in a foetal position, mouthing to scream, but only managing a hoarse squeak instead. She knelt hard on his shoulder and grabbed his hair, yanking hard to lift his eyes around to hers, her strong arms twisting his neck to within a few painful degrees of snapping. 'That's my son you were about to fail to hit. You owe me a heart-felt thank you because I just saved your life, you worthless piece of shit.' She watched his surprise as he realised that under her balaclava, she was female, yet causing him such pain. She kept glaring

silently into his eyes until his fear took hold and he started shaking.

'You're not worth the effort it would take to spit on you, Schivello. You disgust me.' she said, letting his hair go and pushing into his shoulder as she stood up. Juanita looked to JC, nodded and turned to walk back inside.

The radio hissed. 'Mama Bear inbound.'

The two men lifted Silvio's whimpering form upright, this time holding him firmly by his twisted and locked arms. Juan-Carlos stood there, looking at him silently for two minutes. For the first time in his life, Silvio realised that he shared his planet with other cold, efficient predators; seeing in his captor's eyes what pitiless looked like. JC's earpiece crackled softly and he acknowledged the signal before speaking to him. 'It's your lucky day, laddie. Our orders stand and we've been ordered to set you free. Personally, I would get a real kick out of taking you for the first hour-and-a-half of a three-hour over-water flight to see if you can learn to fly, but higher powers and all that. You know how it is, don't you, Schivello?'

With his legs barely able to support him, still whimpering from the deep throbbing pain filling his whole belly and with his eyes running freely, he was smart enough to remain quiet.

'I know you think you are the king of the hill and all that, laddie.' One of JC's companions lifted Silvio's head by his hair to meet JC's disdainful glare as he leaned in close to examine him before speaking with a voice devoid of any humanity. 'Silvio Schivello, you need to listen carefully to me now. You need to listen to me like you've never listened to anyone in your sorry pathetic excuse for a life. The Kate you knew is gone. You killed her that day you fucked her over and

destroyed the lives of many good men. You won. They all died that day as well. Do you understand what I am telling you Schivello? No, you really still don't get it, do you?'

Silvio's eyes went wider. For the first time in his life, he felt abjectly terrified as JC studied him for a long time, just as coldly as he might regard a mosquito on his arm. 'I will explain it to you, so listen very carefully. Silvio Schivello, you have just discovered within yourself, tonight, a desperate and immediate desire to move countries. Not cities, not states, but countries. An *immediate... urgent...* desire. Schivello, if we ever see you again, nothing will save you, do you understand? We will not even bother to say hello, you will just cease being a burden to this world. Schivello, you're an arsehole; and as of midday tomorrow, arsehole season is open and we already have our hunting licences. You get until then to be in the air and gone for good, and not one second more. Remember, Schivello, your Kate is dead and gone. Your life depends on your total dedication to not being anywhere within four or five time zones of the Catherine in there. The Catherine in there is my sister now. She is family to all of us, and she has a very...' JC lifted Silvio's jeans up sharply, dragging hard into his damaged groin, '...very protective family. Disappear, tonight. The day, or night, that any of us see you again is your last. Understand?' JC wiped his gloved hand on Silvio's shirt with clear disgust at having touched him. 'Your Kate is dead. You won. You killed her. At one second past midday tomorrow, arsehole season opens, and we are hunting you.'

Silvio nodded, tears still streaming down his face. For the first time in his life, Silvio felt complete helplessness and abject fear. It was not pleasant, and it



confused him. They showed no emotions and he was helpless. It was supposed to be the other way around, and made no sense to him.

'Put him in his car and watch him drive away.' Looking back at Silvio, JC said, 'You have no idea how lucky it was for you that I was the one that found you, Schivello. Now be smart, take your victory, and go away, yes?'

CRACK! Silvio's head spun, his face on fire from JC's heavy, open-handed slap.

'Schivello! You have been handed a golden one-time opportunity to promise me, right now, on your life, that this is over. You do that, and you get to have a tomorrow. Understand me very clearly now. It is on your life that you are swearing, make no mistake.'

'Okay, fuck you! All right! Fuck you, fuck her, fuck the lot of you.'

JC smiled a hangman's smile under his balaclava. Slapping Silvio on his throbbing shoulder in a friendly gesture, he said in a disproportionately cheerful voice, 'Good enough for me, Silvio. You have promised, on your life, that you are taking advantage of our extremely generous offer to not only be able to wake up tomorrow, but to see your next sunset from a different continent. That is what you just promised me, on your life, isn't it Silvio?'

'Yes, you heard me fucking say it.'

Juan-Carlos motioned with his head to the two men to take him away, and watched them go.

'Three good signals, Michael' his earpiece said. *Michael* was JC's call sign. Rick's was *Gabriel*. Whilst JC had held The Prick, a team had quickly gone through his car. Silvio's wallet now had a transponder stick inserted between its leather and lining. His smart-phone

had a new application installed that would report its whereabouts in three dimensions whenever it moved more than two metres. There was a GPS beacon on his car and another in the lining of what looked like a favourite briefcase on the rear seat. They had a good chance of knowing exactly where he was for the next few days at least.



JC rejoined the party after stripping off his camouflage overalls. Dom caught his eye and JC shrugged, folding his hands in a gesture of prayer. Dom nodded and watched Juan-Carlos walk over to his mother. She grinned at him. 'I think I nearly broke my foot on his nuts.'

He had to give his mother a joyful hug, saying, 'I am so glad you got to sink it in, Mama Bear. Perfect timing. We've done our best. Nat says it's a six in ten chance that he has the self-preservation to walk.'

The rest of the party was oblivious to the excitement and enjoyed the function, celebrating their new firm and their first large-scale outside contract. Kate noticed McDonough give a nodding smile to Dominique when he saw his project already on a workstation screen. It was clear to her that as well as Douglas's loyalty, there was another agency at play. Kate thought for a moment before coming to the happy conclusion that it was a good thing. Their connections would help to secure the work. Their talented team would complete it and recruit more.

She sensed Dom and looked up to see him winking at her, almost as if he were acknowledging her conclusions. *Get out of my head!* she yelled to him in her mind. He looked back at her with his generous smile

and winked again, making her shake her head before she burst out laughing. *That's it. Natalie is teaching me how to do that*, she decided.

It was almost inevitable that as the late night became early morning, many of the IES staff were too excited by the new project to go home. A certain type of mind thrills to a challenge, and Rick and Kate's team was made up exclusively of such minds. After the other VIPs and guests had departed, workstations lit up as they made real the thoughts and ideas that had been brewing all evening. Sitting quietly with Dom and Natalie, Douglas McDonough stayed and watched his project reforming before his eyes. They all marvelled at Kate's memory for details as she explained the finer elements of each aspect of the development's requirements to the team. At 3:30am, Rick and Kate held a meeting, discussing and assigning jobs for the coming week. Rick then made the executive decision to close for the night, telling everyone there not to come in before midday on Monday. They were reluctant to leave the energy of the room, despite the time, and he knew he was wasting his breath. *They'll probably come in tomorrow*, he thought, smiling to himself. *We need to add a dorm as soon as possible, with a gym and lounge.*

Rick drove the amigas back to their apartment, and all four were asleep within minutes of laying their heads on their pillows.



Juan-Carlos roused to his alarm a little before 5:00am. By quarter past, he was stretched, showered and moving, dressed in very ordinary clothes and looking like any night-shift process worker heading home. He

read a message on his phone and started walking. Silvio's car and briefcase were in a long term parking garage near the airport, but his phone and wallet were in the seedy outskirts of the red-light district. *At least he was smart enough not to go home*, JC thought.

Using a small direction finder, he was able to approximate the tag in Silvio's wallet to the third floor, agreeing with Silvio's phone. *Good enough*.

He went into a pay-by-the-hour motel opposite, renting a room facing Silvio's. A scantily clad working girl knocked on his door and joined him soon after. She nodded to him whilst kicking off her ridiculously high platform shoes. Sitting on the only chair in the room, she took a novel from her bag. When the time was right, she would get on the bed and make the appropriate sounds.

Juan-Carlos felt a little surge of righteous satisfaction when Silvio came lurching out a little while later, obviously still in significant pain and moving carefully. Shortly after Silvio left, a greying man with a strong Spanish accent, bad acne scars on his cheeks, and a burn-crippled hand bribed a clerk for a key to Silvio's room. Discretion had a price in this part of town.

Searching Silvio's room carefully, JC looked under a bedside table and swore as he removed a hand grenade from its hiding place. It was an ugly and efficiently lethal device. He took a few more minutes to complete his methodical search – there could always be more devices – and then he stopped to analyse Schivello's psychological profile and what he'd found. Satisfied, JC set to operating on the bomb. He worked carefully for almost fifteen minutes, returning the still-live grenade back into its original hiding place and smiling grimly as he left the room. Juan-Carlos had turned the bomb into one of a soldier's worst nightmares, a grenade that

would detonate almost instantly instead of after its normal four-second delay.

A half hour later, he was back in his room and cleaning off the last of the glue that had puckered his skin so badly to simulate the acne scarring. A few minutes later, the balding night worker with extremely thick glasses and lots of hair in his ears slapped his room key on the front desk and walked on, smacking his prostitute's bum on the way out. The clerk didn't even bother to look up. JC rode a bus to a shopping mall, walked through it and got into a car on the other side of the mall without it actually stopping.

Edison looked at his son with a raised eyebrow.

'M26 in The Prick's room,' JC said. 'I lightened it a bit for him.'

'Risky. How short?'

'Real short. Everything in the room says he's doing a runner but he went out light. Sean is on him.' His phone vibrated and he looked at the screen. 'Speak of the devil... Shit-head!' JC swore.

He looked at the phone again and read the text message aloud for Edison. '2 x full 10 litre plastic jerry cans, 2 x duct tape, 1 x takeaway breakfast, 1 x bad walk. Rental car - hybrid, heading back.'

Hitting a speed dial, he said tersely, 'Action, two fuel cans and an M26 ... Thank you.' The call terminated and he said to his father, 'You going topside?'

Edison nodded, signalling over his shoulder to indicate JC's small tactical bag. 'The other one is in the back. It stinks too much to have in here.'

JC grimaced. 'I shouldn't have bothered with the shower.'

Thirty minutes later, another of the city's drunk and invisible homeless was sleeping his addiction away under a bush in the small park opposite the amiga's apartment building. A briefing came over the radio an hour later. The girls and Rick were staying put. There were five of them around the building, including JC on the ground and Edison on a nearby roof.

The day passed unremarkably. Late in the afternoon, JC staggered around a bit, relieving himself near a footbridge to the vocal disgust of some joggers. They quickly retreated when he turned to show them a mouth full of rotting teeth, spittle flying as he ranted. A police officer responding to the joggers' complaint challenged him. The policeman really did not want to touch him, and offered him the option of leaving or going to jail. The drunk staggered off, limping in the general direction of Alberto's and muttering incoherently to himself. The officer was sure he could still smell the vagrant's stench in his clothes hours later.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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Silvio eased his quiet hybrid electric car along the dark and deserted alley without headlights. Earlier in the day, he had pulled the bulbs from the interior light fittings to avoid attracting attention when the doors opened. He selected a spot where the shadow was deepest, parking with his passenger's side right up against a solid brick wall so it wouldn't inadvertently block another vehicle and be noticed if one happened to come through. Silvio grimaced as he stood, taking a moment to let the pain from his groin settle before awkwardly picking his way on foot to the next cross alley. He turned and followed that narrow laneway to a point where he could covertly observe Alberto's front door from just across the road, with almost no chance of being noticed.



A ragged figure moved stealthily up the alley, pausing behind an industrial bin to shed his bulky overcoat. He held his night vision goggles up to his face one more time before setting them aside with the overcoat. He silently covered the remaining thirty metres to Silvio's car and eased the door open, thankful that it was unlocked and quiet. He worked on the bomb for a few moments before locating and turning off Silvio's mobile phone, slipping it into his pocket. Less than ninety seconds later, he pressed the car door closed with his hip before retracing his steps. He shrugged the rancid

overcoat back on and climbed into the heavy steel industrial bin. Juan-Carlos touched behind his ear and said, 'Two plastic fuel cans with the lemon, all taped up tight.' Lemon was the military nickname for the M26 grenade. He wedged the heavy steel lid of the bin open slightly with a piece of packaging he'd found inside the bin and settled in to wait, taking the opportunity to remove the sim card from Silvio's phone.

After almost thirty minutes, he heard via his radio that his friends were arriving at Alberto's. Peeking out from under the almost closed lid of the bin a few minutes later, he watched Silvio walking awkwardly back to his car and slowly ease himself into the driver's seat. As Silvio reached across for his crudely assembled but deadly firebomb, Juan-Carlos closed the angled metal lid over himself and ducked deep into the protection of the thick metal industrial bin. Squatting on some discarded packing material inside, he closed his eyes, covered his ears and opened his mouth...



Watching the restaurant, his patience was rewarded. Seeing everyone arriving with smiles, laughing and heading into the restaurant, Silvio was becoming increasingly livid. They weren't even breaking routine, as if they expected him to just tuck his tail and run away. It was all that bitch's fault! She was taunting him. Every image and every lie she told from the business and social pages was her way of disrespecting him. The lying bitch even blamed him for her own weaknesses! *That lying slut, prancing about with some rich pretty-boy as if she was something special!* How dare she think she was equal to him? Tonight, she would learn to respect him,



her and her asshole friends, all of them. Tonight, they will all learn, and they will know that they fucked with the wrong man. Especially that cowardly bitch who kicked him from behind. He smiled, thinking about how much he was going to love seeing the looks on their faces when they realised that he was their better and that they had lost. *As if they could ever hope to match me!* They were still laughing at their temporary victory... he could hear them laughing at him from where he hid. Soon they will learn, and they will burn and die with his face and his victory in their feeble and despairing little minds.

Still shuffling to reduce the pain from his swollen testicles, he left his concealment to retrieve his bomb. Throwing the thing was going to hurt, but he would use the pain to make him stronger. He lurched towards his car, wishing there was a breeze to clear the air as his nose wrinkled at the smell of an industrial bin. As if he would let them get away with treating him like that. That coward who let a woman fight for him had said it's asshole season. *Well asshole, I'm about to show you who's the lion and who's the hunted.* How dare they even dream they could get away with treating him like that?

He climbed gingerly into his car and sniffed, still smelling the pervasive odour of the bin. Never mind... they were in there, all of them. He grunted and smiled. It was time to make things right.

He reached across, carefully feeling for it in the dark. It was still on the floor on the passenger's side, right where he'd left it. He closed his door to push against with his knee, and repositioned himself twice until he could shift his weight enough to lift it without too much pain from his swollen groin. Making sure he

had a solid grip, he lifted and hauled it onto his lap in one smooth movement. A question started forming in his mind, wondering if he'd actually heard or imagined a metallic 'ting', like something bouncing off the passenger's window. It was the very last thought that Silvio Schivello had.

The M26 fragmentation grenade has a lethal range measured in metres. Silvio's grenade was less than thirty centimetres from his nose and taped to twenty litres of high-octane fuel in his lap when it detonated, obliterating him. His existence had already ceased long before his eyes had enough time to even start registering the flash of the exploding grenade. At that close range, everything that had been Silvio Schivello was instantly pulverised and incinerated. Propelled and spread by the grenade's explosion, and its thousands of annihilating fragments, the burning fuel that filled the car ensured the totality of the destruction. The inferno consumed everything in the car, including the cord that had secured the loosened pin of the grenade to the underside of the passenger's side seat.



In Alberto's, the conversation, laughter and music completely masked the deep 'thump-whump' of Silvio's demise; the car, the buildings and the distance muffled the sound. In an ironic twist of fate, Silvio's passing happened, uncared about and unobserved by anyone but Juan-Carlos. The restaurant was kicking up a storm and even the sirens responding to the already dying flames were unnoticed. Everyone in the restaurant was having too much fun.



A few alleys over from the fire, a figure in ragged clothes slipped behind a building. JC walked out of the narrow walkway on the other side of the same building, getting into a passing car that only slowed without stopping. A grim smile was the only communication as both noses turned up at the smell of the rolled clothing that Juan-Carlos was quickly stuffing back into a heavy garbage bag.

‘At least we get to burn that outfit now.’ Edison said, a grim hangman’s smile on his face.

‘It’s served me well. I’ll have to break in another one sooner or later I guess.’

‘First class job, son.’

‘Thanks, Dad.’



Kate watched Rick take his earpiece out moments before Dom did the same thing. As it went into his pocket, Rick looked at the amigas and nodded. The three girls saw in his eyes and tight smile that it was over. The details could wait.

Giselle was a godsend only minutes later, asking where JC was. Dom got on his phone and noisily told JC to, ‘Stop working and get your butt to Alberto’s, pronto! And bring that workaholic father of yours with you.’ Thirty minutes later, JC arrived with Edison and their night became a celebration within a celebration. The girls could barely contain their questions but understood from the demeanour of the others that their curiosity could wait.

At one point, JC took Giselle aside. When they came back a few minutes later, her face was a little longer, but she was still smiling. JC gave her shoulder a friendly squeeze before she took a deep hug from him. With Giselle still wrapped around him, he looked up to see Dee give him a wink in support.

Dom and Natalie followed Rick and the girls to their apartment. JC was already there and opening the windows to clear the air. He had showered and changed there before going to Alberto's, but the odours of his disguise were of the type that lingered quite persistently. When hot cups of coffee and tea were on the table, Natalie said to the amigas, 'Band-Aid off fast or slow?'

'Fast,' said Dee, the others nodding in agreement. Nat looked at JC. He said, 'Silvio died tonight by his own hand. He was planning to firebomb Alberto's tonight and kill everyone there. He died instantly when his IED – sorry – his bomb, went off prematurely. It is doubtful that there will be any possible forensic identification of his remains. We will continue to keep extra security around the lab and gigs visible for the next week before we all decide that he must have gone away of his own accord.'

The table was silent.

Kate looked to JC. 'How?'

'He had a hand grenade taped to two plastic jerry cans full of fuel. When I say he died of his own hand, all he had to do was not action his plan to kill everyone I care about, and he would still be happily on the way to the rest of his life.'

'It was no accident though.' Dee's statement was also a question.

'Dee, it was death by misadventure, with a little passive insurance. He only needed to leave and walk

away, that's all. If he hadn't picked up the bomb, he'd still be breathing. When he picked up the bomb in the dark of the alley near Alberto's, the pin *fell* out of his grenade, and it went off in his lap. It was violent but instantaneous. If it makes any difference, he was air pollution before he could have known or felt a single thing. The human brain and nervous system just doesn't work that fast.'

Another silence hung heavily over the table. Kate's and JC's eyes locked. She got up, walked around the table and hugged him, holding him tightly, sobbing in great waves of relief and catharsis. 'Thank you,' she said every time she could find her breath.

Juan-Carlos gently passed Kate to Rick when her initial reaction had passed. Dee and Carrie hugged JC next. When Carrie asked him if he was okay, the others turned, shocked at themselves for not asking him already and apologising. He raised his open hands and assured them that he was absolutely at peace with everything.

They talked about things until Natalie was happy that the amigas were stable and reconciled with the fact that Silvio was gone. Staying with the girls, Rick walked the others out before coming back in. After another cup of herbal tea and talking about things some more, they all went to bed.

Kate was in his arms and stared at the ceiling for a while before she spoke. 'That's what you were talking about when we were in your apartment the first time. Silvio made it him or us... and everyone else in Alberto's!' Kate shivered at the thought that he intended them all to die in a violent inferno. 'It really is that simple, isn't it?'

'That's the ugly and despicable brutality of it, Kate,' he said, pulling her closer into him. She breathed

in his scent and found peace in his presence, as he found his own peace in hers. He regulated his breathing to hers and felt her respond, automatically slowing and relaxing. They melted into each other and fell asleep.



The burnt-out car made Page 2 headlines and generated many theories. The complete destruction of the car and the fire department's enthusiastic efforts to extinguish the remaining flames severely hampered the efforts of the police. The inferno's intensity, and the Fire Department's response, had reduced both the car and its contents to bare twisted metal and a few dirty puddles of watery ash. Spread by the grenade's initial and destructive explosion, the burning fuel of the bomb, and the immolation of the hybrid's own batteries and fuel load combined to leave almost nothing behind. Even the alloy wheels of the wreck had deformed from the heat.

The investigating detectives soon discovered that the car had been rented under a false name, paid for in cash, and guaranteed with a cloned credit card. The rental clerk's vague description was useless and their security camera had stopped working years before. A liquor store nearby had some grainy CCTV footage of the man in question, but it was as useless as the clerk's description. The detective's day old case was already running cold. The forensic identification of the grenade's fragmentation pattern and the discovery of its lever and pin generated a second wave of attention, but again it led nowhere. Silvio's name remained unmentioned and had no reason to come up.

Investigators canvassed the local businesses with little enthusiasm. Alberto explained that until reading

about it the next day, he hadn't known that anything had happened. The police officers walked away still clueless at the end of their third fruitless day. The press lost interest when a 'name' banker was caught red-handed, stealing from his own bank, and the futile investigation of Silvio's demise went into a bottomless drawer, filed under 'One-of-Those-Things'. Police ultimately assumed it to have been a shady deal gone wrong. In an ironic way, they were right.



The next three months saw a natural and easy progression in their lives. Dee and Carrie's business was booming. They now had eight permanent staff and were booked out nearly twenty-four months ahead.

Tears had flowed when Kate moved into Rick's apartment. When the three were unable to stop saying goodbye, Rick ended up insisting that Dee and Carrie stay in the guest bedroom for a few nights.

Ironwood Engineering Solutions was also thriving. The first mass produced humidity-traps were already in the field and working well. Douglas McDonough's eco-resort had broken ground and was ahead of schedule. They had picked up another five significant contracts and had nearly fifty staff working in two shifts. Rick had extended their building to include a ten twin-room dormitory so those working late had somewhere to bed down for a few hours. The people of the IES team were the sort to walk outside at 2:00am and be surprised that the sun was not still up. The dormitories were regularly used and universally appreciated. Kate and Rick inevitably spent a couple of nights a week there in their own private suite as well.



Like everyone from Alegria, the amigas had become increasingly distracted during the week. In only a few days, they were all heading back to participate in the New Day celebrations, and the final days seemed to crawl by.

Kate and Rick had decided to stay on the island for the two weeks following New Day. Releasing them from much of the day-to-day running, Eric and Tyson had everything under tight control as Rick and Kate's deputies. Their projects were at the stage where the gears were turning and things were happening without requiring their input. Philippa, a youthful, ex-military logistics specialist known to both the Myers and Dom, was their new operations manager.

She'd won Eric's and Tyson's confidence on her first day. They recognised and welcomed her as another of their own. In the six short weeks since she'd joined them, it felt to everyone as if she'd been there from the start.





## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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Those bound for Alegria awoke early, too excited by the thoughts of returning to the island and the New Day celebrations to sleep. Rick woke Kate in the pre-dawn twilight, kissing her all the way down her back and lightly biting her bottom. When she rolled over, still half asleep, he couldn't help himself, and Kate started her day in the best way possible. They staggered to their shower some time later, still awash in the afterglow of their lovemaking. With their bags already packed and by the door, the couple shared coffee and croissants, chatting brightly, but with their feet jiggling until their anticipation overwhelmed them. Kate called the girls to see if they were awake as Rick grabbed his keys.

Twenty-five minutes later, Rick was rearranging and packing the last of Dee and Carrie's luggage away as they piled excitedly into the rear seat of his car. They had been driving for less than a minute when Kate's phone buzzed. She giggled before reading Juanita's text message to her friends. *"Couldn't sleep in and can't wait, we're off. See you there"*

She typed out in reply, *"Ha Ha! Us too! 4 on board and leaving now."*

Juanita's message a minute later had them laughing. *"Dom, Nat & M2 just called, departing in 10 mins. lol"* Everybody's planned 9:30am departure time had advanced to 7:30.

During the drive, the four friends caught up on everything that had happened in the two weeks since they'd last been together. Kate took great pride in how

well the girl's business was going, delighting in each bit of news and success. Dee and Carrie felt exactly the same proprietary pride hearing about Kate and Rick's business. The long drive passed quickly, filled with happy chatter, teasing, laughter and anticipation.

Rick slowed and left the asphalt before picking his way along a few very unremarkable tracks and passing through two sets of padlocked stock gates. The rocky woods ahead looked like advanced four-wheel-drive terrain, but their sedan handled the drive easily. Rick followed a well-concealed all-weather track that was virtually invisible from the last gate as it snaked through and looped around the many apparent barriers.

They broke through the trees to see the approaching barge only a few hundred metres from shore. Alegria sat picture-perfect in the middle of the lagoon, shimmering slightly in the warm mid-morning air. On the far side of the lagoon, a hazy plume of smoke rose above the trees in the direction of the Race, the site of the New Day celebration.

'They'll be lighting the oven fires now to start the earth drying and heating,' Rick said, pointing. 'They use one long fire-pit to cook everything. We'll all head over before dawn. Remember, it's a full 24 hours, so a two-piece swimming costume under lots of layers is good. The Race can get some savage breezes at times, especially in the early evenings.'

Rick started laughing. The girls turned, following his look in the rear-view mirror as Edison, Juanita and JC pulled up behind them. They all waved excitedly. Edison gave Rick a blast of his horn in faux-impatience when he had not driven for the barge as soon as the ramp had hit the gravel. As Rick turned his car to reverse onto the barge, he and Edison swapped some good-natured

ribbing through their opened windows, to the general amusement of all.

Once they were underway, they exchanged cheerful greetings with Emilio, the captain. When his vessel was against the shore, he was serious and businesslike, but as soon as they were in deep water, Emilio reverted to his normal happy-go-lucky and smiling disposition. He'd decorated his barge with branches of flowering plants, and had strung brightly coloured flags around the railings.

When she saw the calm water of the Shelf, Kate squeezed Rick's leg. 'Anybody else feel like a swim?' she asked. Turning to the girls to gauge their response, she smiled. Carrie was asleep on Dee's shoulder and Dee's eyes were drooping heavily as well.

Once on the island, Rick moved the oversize buggy out of the garage and parked their car. He drove the girls to the maloca before heading off to drop their luggage at their cabins. Uncle and his acolyte couple were inside the dining area, and met the girls with excitement and smiles. Maria and Paz soon joined them; they had the day's feast in the oven pit and they quickly dragged the amigos out to see what was cooking.

When Rick returned, he dropped Edison and Juanita at the maloca, setting off another round of excited greetings. JC stayed with Rick to catch up and help with the luggage. Driving past the sweat lodge, Rick looked at Juan-Carlos and said, 'We should do one if you can stay longer?'

JC smiled and said, 'Ricardo, you're on. I don't have to be anywhere until Monday week. Are you guys staying after?'

'Brother, we have two solid weeks of Alegria happening after New Day. Any fall-out from the job?'

‘No, none. One sick and twisted arsehole in exchange for more than eighty good people is a pretty easy sum, bro’. It was his decision at every step, and the cleanest job ever. He bought it, loaded it, and squeezed the trigger all by himself. I’ve done a couple of debriefs with Nat. All good.’

Rick smiled, his concerns for Juan-Carlos put to rest. ‘I still wish I could have seen Nita stick it to him.’

‘Oh man! Don’t go there, brother. It was a week before I could stand up straight just thinking about it. It was magnificent! You should have seen him walking the next day. It was baaaad! Anybody with a quarter of a working brain would have taken the hint and limped off into the sunset. We couldn’t have done any more than we did to warn him off... nothing.’

Dom was parking his car when Rick and JC came around the bend to collect them. After exchanging hugs, JC took the wheel, letting Rick catch up with his parents and fill them in on recent events with the firm. In the maloca, the warmth and enthusiasm of the greetings helped everyone leave their everyday world behind. JC and Edison headed off in the buggy to distribute the last of the luggage as Maria and Carrie brought out a large pot of herbal tea, followed by Paz carrying a platter of cut fruit. Happy conversation filled the air as everyone caught up.

When their discussion turned to New Day, Madison said to the girls, ‘You are going to see a true spectacle this weekend. The Race, where the sea and lagoon meet, is a long, deep channel in a granite canyon, and the force of the racing water has to be seen to be believed. Even on the smallest neap tides, there is still a huge current between the lagoon and sea. In these early autumn evenings, we have blooms of bioluminescent plankton.

They glow when agitated and they all light up in the Race's flow. It is like a giant river of sparks. Even here around the rocks, you will see them glow with every little wave.'

Rick added, 'A lot of us used to ride the Race when the water flow is at its slowest, which is still around seven knots, forty seconds end to end. The practice was banned by the Elders a couple of years back when we lost Rocha to sharks in dirty water and Guillermo drowned after hitting a rock deep underwater in the same month.'

'Did you do it?' Kate asked Rick.

Madison spoke out with clear dislike, indicating Mason was very much included in her comments. 'They both did. I hated it. The Race is a deep rocky fracture over twenty metres deep and a hundred and thirty-five metres from end to end. It is sheer granite on both sides and does three sharp bends. If someone doesn't swim into exactly the right spot, they get sucked into a vortex, long horizontal eddies like underwater tornados. Nobody can swim well enough to get out of one until it breaks up at the next turn. The last time they did it, the water was fast and Rick and JC got caught under turn one. It was ages before they came up half way past the next bend. I died a little that day, I am sure of it.'

'What was it like? What happened?' Kate asked Rick, glancing apologetically to Madison.

'JC and I were following Pedro, from the Race. He used to play in the race all the time, and swims as if he's part fish. He was leading the way and showing us exactly where we needed to be. If you hit it right, it's like the coolest water-park ride in the world. Well this day, a whole tree must have been underwater and dug end-on into the bottom right below us, just as we were

entering the start of the faster water. Suddenly we're swimming in the monster's upper branches. We just swam like crazy to get clear of the tree before we hit the bend and were way out of position. We linked arms, tucked our heads into each other's stomachs and kept our legs up, feet out. It offers the best protection. Pedro always had everyone rehearse it, every time, with breath-hold, before he'd lead anyone into the running water. We were folded under, probably about seven or eight metres down, spinning and rolling in the vortex. We were most worried about meeting that tree again, not the water or the Race itself.'

Madison grunted in the universal sound of a mother's disapproval.

Rick smiled at her and continued. 'All we had to do was focus on doing what we needed to do. We can both hold our breath for a minute and a half easily when we're spear fishing. Survival in any situation is almost always about not panicking. We had plenty of breath to make it right to the sea if need be. The next turn, the water folded back and we popped up right next to Dad. He just said something like, "You should have seen Dom's face when you went under boys!"'

Dom grunted self-consciously and shuffled in his seat.

Mason continued for Rick. 'Dom popped up in the wash, where the current meets the sea. He'd swum down after them, riding the vortices all the way to the sea to make sure they weren't down there.'

'Never mind he could have gotten brained on a rock without a buddy, or been caught up in that tree,' Madison said with an edge to her voice.

'We had discussed contingencies and were prepared, darling,' Mason said to his wife. 'Uncle, Pedro

and others regularly swam the whole Race underwater at peak flow. It is twenty seconds start to finish at that speed and if you stay sharp, the ride is pretty safe. The boys had the smarts to do it and I knew it. Poor Dom lost it a little bit though.'

'I saw Maddi's face. There was no way I was swimming out of there if they didn't,' Dom said. Everyone knew he'd been scared for the boys. It was one of the few times that anyone could remember Dom reacting without thinking.

'Edison was in it too, no doubt?' Kate asked.

Madison snorted. 'Now you know who first suggested it. Edison and Dom both came up with it at the, ahem, *same time*. Every male there took it as a personal challenge.'

'Which it was, Mother,' Rick said gently.

'I rarely worried about you when you were goodness knows where doing God only knows what in the service, but that day I was terrified. I was terrified every damn time you did it. It was cruel to even tell me.'

Kate looked at Madison and said, 'I understand exactly what you mean. I can't imagine how nerve wracking that must have been for you all. I'm surprised Juanita didn't kick up enough of a fuss to stop Edison and JC doing it.'

Mason laughed and Rick chuckled. Kate saw Juanita's ears turning uncharacteristically red and Madison smiled resignedly. 'She was first in!'

'And first through. She rode the last eddy on purpose to beat Pedro. She'd have been a hell of a jumper,' Mason said, his son's grunt affirming his thought.

Dom added proudly, 'Our commanding officer put a Regimental Beret on her once she'd healed enough to

put it on. He gave her a full passing-out ceremony in front of the whole regiment.’ Juanita looked uncharacteristically small when the girls looked to her at that moment.

Mason added, ‘Officially, that never happens. Only twice, ever, have ‘civilians’ received one of those berets. Both times with the full regimental crest and combat ribbon. The other was a retired colonel who made a huge difference on another island a long time ago. It is a mark of respect for those who fought honourably and ably alongside the Regiment. Only one of our own gets to receive that beret. Nita was the first woman, and is still the only civilian, included on the Regimental Honours List.’

Smiling at Juanita, Dom said proudly, ‘She earned it and deserved it. Nita never put it on again, but it’s in a case right next to Edison’s and Edward’s. Although it was way too big for him, JC was given an un-crested beret that same day. It was the same one he wore when he took the regiment’s colours.’ The girls could hear the croak in Dom’s recollection.

The discussion halted as JC and Edison drove in, their overloaded buggy crowded with the latest arrivals as the boats from shore started arriving. More boats were coming and JC took the buggy back to collect the next group. After they had met the new arrivals, Maria said to the girls, ‘If you are going to freshen up, now is probably the time, things are about to get noisy.’ Everyone agreed and broke for their respective cabins. Arm in arm, Kate and Rick strolled down the eastern path to the cabin that had been his the last time they were here.

Rick had to ‘endure’ another tight embrace from Kate after she saw that their cabin had been renamed. The dark teak shingle had been replaced, and ‘Ironwood’



was deeply engraved into the new shingle. Rick said, 'That's Australian Grey Ironbark. I am sure it's more metal than wood. You know, we went through three router bits to do those eight letters? And two drill bits to make those holes! It's so hard it throws sparks. Real sparks!'

'I love it Ricky, thank you,' Kate said, touching the deep lettering for a moment before they went inside to freshen up.

JC drove around the ring road in the buggy to collect them after they'd washed their faces and changed into clothes suitable for the warm afternoon temperatures of the early autumn day. By the time they arrived back at the maloca, the fiesta was gaining momentum. Including the transient population of the Big End, there were fifty people there, all excited and chattering happily. The afternoon became evening as the food and drink flowed. It ended in the same, happy mood with a mass hug after Maria said the same words that Grandmother had said on their first visit.

They were almost stumbling with fatigue as they walked through their cabin door that evening. Rick said to Kate, 'Why don't you have first shower, I'll make us some tea.'

'You sweet talker you,' she said, kissing him before heading to the bathroom.

Rick joined her a few minutes later and they took delight in soaping and washing each other's bodies in a ritual they enjoyed greatly. The tea was a perfect drinking temperature by the time they had dried off and it had them both sleeping soundly before their snuggling could become anything more.



Kate moaned, wriggling contentedly. Rick had woken her with gentle strokes and tickles on her back and massaging her shoulders. Kate was sure that it was very nearly the nicest possible way to wake up. She sighed, stretching luxuriantly and making her back more available to Rick's skilled hands. The pressure in her bladder eventually forced her to leave the happy comfort of the bed. Rick was up and active when she came back. She glanced at his watch on the sideboard and saw that it was just after nine already. A little part of her hoped he'd still be in bed, but all was forgiven when he presented her with a steaming cup of tea. It had a strange but pleasant taste, and was different to any she'd had on the island to date.

They made some toast and coffee to take down to the water, savouring the last balmy breezes of the morning. Today promised to be a hot one. Electric blue butterflies were gathering and flitting about under the trees around them. Looking at them, Kate said, 'Lightning tonight.'

Rick took her by surprise, taking her by the shoulders and turning her to kiss her firmly. 'Have I told you how much I love you lately?'

'Hmmm, I seem to recall something along those lines.' She giggled. 'What was that tea? It was really nice, but I feel kind of edgy.'

'Sorry, that's my fault. I shouldn't have made us coffee. It's a purification tea that helps the body get ready for the journeying tea tomorrow, and it's fighting with the caffeine. Even if you don't want to take the journeying tea, the cleansing effect it has on the body is good anyway.'

She said, 'You know I am happy to participate in all parts of New Day, Rick, we all are.' The smile on his

face told Kate that this was actually a lot more important to him than he had let on until that moment. Her face became serious. 'Now, mister, we have something dire to discuss.'

'Faker!' Rick taunted.

They had both been studying the Facial-Action-Coding-System (FACS) at which Natalie excelled, a system of reading the involuntary facial flashes that reflected a person's true thoughts at any time. Truth, deception and deflection was quickly revealed using FACS. It was interesting and fun, and they spent at least a few minutes a day trying to challenge the skill of the other. It also gave them valuable insights into the sub-text of the endless negotiations that their innovative engineering projects seemed to necessitate.

Kate poked her tongue out and they both giggled. She looked at him and said, 'Ricky, I do have something I want to ask you.' Rick tilted his head and listened. 'I love everything we do and you know it. God, you blow my mind so regularly that I can't remember what it was like before you. It just feels like it's been ages since we've played any games. I know it's really only been two weeks since we did... since... you know... but I want to ask, is anything wrong?' The look of horror in his eyes allayed her fears instantly.

'God no, Kate. Nothing at all. We've been doing twelve to eighteen-hour days, and I didn't think either of us was up to an extended session. Kate, I don't want you to feel neglected, ever.'

'I don't feel neglected, Rick, I just needed to check in and ask. I have no complaints. I love everything we do together, and I love that on most days we still manage to find a way to fit something wonderful in.' She smiled at him, making sure he knew that her double entendre was

deliberate. ‘We have been working a lot, too much in fact, and I think we need to do something about that. It might be being back here on Alegria, but I couldn’t help remembering Nat and Dom, and then you talking me through a scenario on that couch inside...’



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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Kate landed on Rick's shoulder, feeling a firm slap on her bum that accented his intentions. 'As you wish, my lady. I happen to be in the right mood for some fun.'

Kate sighed loudly and said, 'Take me away, Ricky.'

She felt his breath catch. Already wrapped in his arms, he set her down and kissed her deeply. The next moment, she was back over his shoulder and headed towards the cabin again. Her hand rested on his arse, feeling his muscles working. Every muscular ripple and twitch as he walked caused her to quiver deep inside.

Rick set Kate down in front of the en suite door before disappearing into the guest bathroom himself. As soon as she opened the door, he walked in. Grinning, he wordlessly stripped her clothing from her before leading her by the hand into the huge shower space. Kate giggled at the speed with which he shed his clothes as he stripped himself naked. Rick started the shower and rinsed them both with warm water. Kate smiled as she looked at him, her face set with wicked intent.

'Yes?' he asked.

She said, 'Out there, I am yours. In here, you're mine.' She pushed him backwards with one hand, sitting him on a long wet-bench in the shower space. Squirting a measure of body wash onto a loofa, she started exploring and caring for her lover. She felt herself grounding and relaxing as she massaged deeply into his muscles, taking her time as her mind ran ahead to the edge of the mental space that she craved to revisit. Once

she had scrubbed every part of his skin clean, she stood him up and rinsed the last of the suds from his freshly polished body before sitting him back down. Kate placed the showerhead back on its mount and knelt between Rick's knees on a long cushion of waterproof marine foam. Using her hands and mouth, she took him right to the edge and held him there for a while before she slowed and backed off; pinching his nipple firmly when he groaned in complaint.

Rick chuckled, 'Mmmmm, you are so going to pay for that, my lady.'

'I'm counting on it,' she grinned.

'My turn. Sit here,' he said as he stood, patting the wet bench where he had been sitting.

Kate loved and hated that her body did what he asked without consulting her. No matter how much she could have tried to fight his instruction, his voice and her libido seemed to have a private agreement. He adjusted the warm water to a mere sprinkle over her body and lay her out straight on the wet bench. Just as she had done to him, he started with her foot, carefully washing and massaging his way up her leg. She celebrated his close attention, feeling as though he was scrubbing away the energetic detritus of the last six months. She sighed contentedly as he started on her other foot. Kate experienced mixed feelings of disappointment when he finished rubbing a part of her body, and exultation as he started washing and massaging a new area.

When he had scrubbed and rinsed every centimetre of her body, he sat her on the cushion in front of him and shampooed her hair in a private ritual that they both loved. Rinsing her clean, he kissed and nibbled her wet neck, electrifying her. Standing behind her, he lifted her to her feet and started caressing her shoulders and neck,

letting his hands widen with each sweep until he was holding her against his body with one arm, one hand cupping her breast, and the other massaging every part of her he could reach. Kate let herself rest back against him and felt his hard cock pressing into the bottom of her lower back.

Just as her hand automatically closed around him, she felt her legs go weak. 'Oh God, Rick!' His fingers were massaging her pussy, his other hand still holding her close against his body. She started to shake and he chuckled, taking her close to the edge before slowing and lessening his pressure until she knew he intended to leave her hanging in the same state that she had left him.

'You are cruel sometimes, my lord, and God I love it!' He rewarded her by taking her close to the edge again with his mouth, the warm water of the shower still running over their bodies.

When they had dried off, Rick asked, 'Are you comfortable?' Their code for checking to see if a toilet break was likely to be needed in the next while.

'All good. I want to forget the rest of the world exists. Take me away please, Ricky.'

'As you wish, my beautiful lady.'

He took her by her hand into the bedroom, and Kate found herself folded over Rick's knees as he sat on the edge of their bed. He started massaging her bum cheeks and tickling her back, turning her to jelly as she sighed with delight. He let his hands run softly over her back, bum and legs, accenting his fingertips now and then, squeezing and kneading her into deep relaxation. Kate found herself slipping towards sub-space in anticipation, needing to discover how deeply she could voyage into its sacred joy. She lifted and wriggled her bum a little.

The slapping pat of his palm didn't sting, he was too good at it. Kate only felt a sensation of impact without force, warming her skin and muscles up. Never, not once, had he ever caused her actual pain. He started repeating those soft pats, alternating with more massaging over her bum and thighs. Kate felt herself lifting her bum up, pushing into his hand and demanding more. The next few almost stung and Kate breathed every sensation in as deeply and completely as she could, each outbreath a moaning sigh. *God, he is so good at this.*

Rick gave her four sharper spanks, her skin singing with the echoes of the sensations. He backed off to light but slightly sharper pats instead of massaging between each sharper slap, keeping the sensations more present than before. Kate felt her rational mind desert her, displaced by an intense state of arousal that took her over. Riding those sensations was her ticket to bliss. 'Deeper, Ricky, please.'

He kissed her on her back. 'We have all the time in the world, my love.' He kept kissing and stroking her until he felt her relax, letting go of any need to hurry and surrendering herself to their timeless moment.

Four more smacks landed, this time using his whole hand with his fingers splayed, holding his hand firmly at the depth of each spank for a few seconds, multiplying her sensations. It probably should have hurt, but it didn't; it was something different. Whatever it was, it thrilled and challenged her, and she wanted more. Relaxing over his knees, she let herself drape across him, her hands and feet resting on the floor.

She cried out. He had changed his angle, adding a little lifting flick with the flat of his fingers right where her thigh and bum met. He dragged a finger down her



spine, their signal reminding her to breathe. Wordlessly, after a pause to see that she was riding the sensation again, he gave her five more spanks, each identical and on top of the last. Each spank burned deeper into her being. Unrequired, Kate's rational mind floated in the corner of the room, watching her body drinking in every sensation.

Kate needed to challenge herself, she used the sensations to push deeper into herself. Part of her mind recognised how Rick was timing each of his actions with the very start of her in-breath. He was massaging her now blushed skin, and then repeated the series on the other side. Kate fought every urge to wiggle or even acknowledge his presence in a game known to submissives everywhere. Floating outside herself, she wanted more sensation, wanting him to take her deeper. She needed him to take her deeper.

She felt herself retuning to real time as she became aware of his lips on her bum, kissing her blushing skin better. 'It sounds ridiculous to say, but that actually works,' Kate said. Standing her up, he bit her bum lightly, delighting in her little squeal of surprise with a deep chuckle. Turning to face him, Kate became aware that her readiness had formed a cool wet trace on the inside of her thigh. Rick saw it too. Smiling, he wiped the nectar from her skin with a fingertip before sucking it clean whilst looking directly into her eyes. At that moment, it was the most sexually charged thing she could remember seeing.

He sat her on the end of the bed before darting out. Returning a moment later with a case, he produced some wide, padded leather ankle-cuffs. Taking his time, he silently fixed each to her. He drew out two matching wrist-cuffs and smiled, wordlessly fitting those as well.

Kate felt herself swimming inside. Everything he was doing seemed like the most impossibly sensuous thing. She drank in his attention and his nakedness, watching his muscles as he moved. Every time he looked at her, his eyes set every nerve in her on fire.

A rope came out and he quickly secured her ankles to the lower corners of the bed, her knees wide and folded over the edge of the mattress. Another rope took her arms above her head, loosely stretching her out. At his signal, Kate made sure she could find the end of the rope to free herself if she needed to. His uncompromising attention to her safety allowed her to abandon herself completely in his care. He slid a soft cotton wrap under her upper chest and folded both ends across her, tying them off with another rope that he had run under the bed, fixing Kate in total restraint and completely at his mercy.

He left again, returning with a glass full of ice cubes, grinning evilly. Kate smiled as her stomach and pelvis clenched in anticipation. He held up a blindfold and Kate shook her head; she wanted to be able to see him today. He let his hands run all over her body, palms, nails, fingertips and occasionally his lips and teeth. Kate heard herself moaning and sighing continually as her skin rejoiced in his touch.

Her body arched up and she squealed at the almost electric and very intense sensation on the inside of her immobilised right foot. The new feeling was a complete surprise to her. When she looked up at him, he was watching her face with a very self-satisfied expression. He held the device up so she could see their new toy. It looked similar to a dressmaker's pinwheel, but with far better defined points and made completely of stainless steel. He ran it along the underside of his forearm so that

she could see the pinwheel in action. Kate could see that it didn't pierce or damage the skin, but only produced intense sensations. He ducked back down and the insistent, sharp sensations came again. Kate reminded herself to breathe but found the intensity of each sharp point of sensation hard to absorb. He ran it slowly back and forth along the same part of her foot, making the sensation become more and more intense.

There! Breathing rapidly, Kate felt the doorway slip past and her mind raced back to find it again. There! She discovered how to breathe the intensity of the pinwheel in and control it, changing what had almost been unpleasant in the moments before into something intensely sensual and gratifying. Rick felt and watched her find her way above the new sensations before he started rolling the pinwheel along her foot and up her calf, moving only while she breathed in and holding still on each out breath. Slowly and intently, he worked past her knee, retracing a zone if she started to drop out of subspace until she regained her trancelike state of blissful control.

He rolled it up the inside of her immobilised thigh, higher and higher. When she realised that he wasn't going to stop, Kate started breathing faster and deeper. Her knees were folded over the edge of the bed and held down by the ankle cuffs, holding her spread legs fixed and motionless. All she could do was squirm helplessly in anticipation. As the sensations slowly approached, and then crossed her pussy, she squealed and giggled, held immobile in her bonds. He brushed her chest, reminding her to breathe.

He smiled in acknowledgement as she refocused on her breathing. Lifting the pinwheel, he brushed the inside of her left foot with his fingers to warn her of his

intentions before starting again. This time she knew how to better use the sensation, challenging herself to take and convert more. Again, she felt each point of sensation, but now she swam above them, riding each new contact and soaring higher with each new sensation. In some ways, Kate felt as if she was already in a state of energetic release. She felt him work his way patiently up her thigh, and heard her body crying out from some distant place as he rolled the pinwheel across her smooth pussy once more. She came back as he kissed her lips. Then he moved down, kissing and teasing her nipples.

He reached into his bag again, lifting some nipple clamps with another wicked grin before adjusting their grip and wordlessly fixing them to her breasts. Kate breathed the relentless new sensations in, surfing on each wave of feeling. He lifted the light chain joining the clamps and jiggled it a little, changing the angle of the clamps and tweaking her nipples slightly. The increased sensations shot through her chest and into her libido, setting the bottom of her stomach into a hard urgent clench. He slid a pillow under her head and placed the light chain in her mouth with a grin that made her love him even more. Sighing, she let her head fall to one side a little and realised that if she moved her head, she would pull on the light chain held in her mouth, automatically giving her nipples a tweak. Her mind swam as she let herself sink into the scenario with a luxuriant moan.

He held up the pinwheel and brushed the outside of her foot so she knew what was coming. She concentrated and breathed the sensations in deeply as her mind swam in sacred waters. She could hear her body squealing and giggling, but it all seemed very far away. He worked the pinwheel up the outside of her leg, all the way to her hip,

and then across her thigh and over her mound. She heard herself squealing and felt the nipple clamps send electric sensations through her chest as she writhed. Kate revelled in the complex sensations and greedily breathed everything in. He changed sides and repeated the same tortuously slow roll of the pinwheel, working up the outside of that leg before rolling it over her pussy again. She closed her eyes and drank in his attentions, floating in her own paradise.

The cold of the ice on her clitoris came as a shock, followed quickly by the intense twin sensations coming from her breasts. She'd arched her neck back and pulled tight on her nipple clamps. He was looking at her, grinning with the ice cube between his lips. That began a flood of sensations that she could not breathe in. At some point she dropped the chain from her mouth and cried out, feeling the release that came with her uncensored voice. Her mind found her vocal release opening another door and she was again swimming in sub-space. He started multiplying the sensations and she rode them deeper than any time she could remember, allowing herself to scream and writhe against her bonds. In one hand, he had a pinwheel and in the other a small rubber whip, too small to sting or hurt but perfect for a sensation of weightless impact and accent.

He returned his mouth and its melting ice cube to her pleasure and Kate lost herself to his actions. She felt everything that was extra to her washing away. Too many sensations coming from too many places carried every extraneous part of her mind away until all that remained was her body, her soul and her desire. She had found her keys into the deeper sub-space she had been craving, feeling as if the whole universe was within her yet somehow she was still floating above it, outside it

all. Swimming in her bliss, feeling herself still sinking deeper whilst floating higher at the same time, Kate became profoundly aware of the sheer focus, love and energy it took for him to hold her in that space.

He bit and kissed her shoulders and throat, flicking the chain between the nipple clamps, letting his hands run all over her body. The immobilising pressure from the wrap holding her shoulders and chest to the bed felt incredibly sexy; in fact, it all did. When he started paying her breasts close attention with his mouth and the remains of an ice cube, jiggling her nipple clamps now and then as well, she slipped into timelessness again.

With a mischievous grin, he watched her still floating for a moment before applying another cube of ice directly to her clit. Kate's eyes opened in shock, her squeal delighting him. Rick alternated the ice with his cold fingers around her clit until she felt her body rebel, her first throws of orgasm not far away. He slipped the now smaller ice cube inside her, and held his hand fast over her mound and pussy. Kate felt the intensity of the ice inside her dragging her orgasm deeper, but further away. He stayed still until she was fully back and glaring at him, growling. The cold urgency of the ice inside her was intense and unrelenting.

Giving the nipple clamps' chain a jiggle, he raised a new set of sensations, refiring every feeling that had been ebbing away as he denied her climax.

Rick knelt between Kate's immobile legs and placed on the bed a Hitachi Magic Wand, universally regarded as the best orgasm-producing vibrator of all time.

He slid two fingers into Kate's ready body, capturing the melting ice and holding it directly and firmly against her g-spot, eliciting such a loud growl that

she startled herself. In an abstract way, she knew the noise had come from her own mouth, but it sounded far from human, even when she heard it again. Kate felt pleasure and liberation in her surrender; neither knowing nor caring what he was doing, but simply experiencing the overwhelming vortex of sensations that he was giving her. Kate strained against her bonds, loving how they physically held her fast, but granted her mind total freedom.

Rick started the vibrator, holding it in the palm of the hand he had inside her, and massaging either side of her still cold g-spot with his vibrating fingers. Kate groaned, feeling her eyes rolling, surfing the flood of intense pleasures washing through her. Feeling for her spasms, Rick timed his movements to keep pushing her towards her orgasm and then holding it, building its force.

Now and then, he would let the vibrator's head touch her clitoris and labia, raising a wave of sensation and distracting her from her climax whilst causing her to spasm around his fingers. Rick was in Dominant's heaven and Kate was floating in sub-space paradise.

Kate was sure she was coming, and had been for some time, each muscular wave that moved through her body danced with Rick's fingers deep inside. She could hear her cries and growls, feeling her release building into a physical force within her. It was searching for a way out, a wild animal seeking release.

He denied her full release over and over, edging her until she felt her pussy clamp tight around his fingers. When Kate thought that her climax had been denied for too long and was lost, she looked into his eyes and saw his smile, realising that he was completely in control of what was happening.

His vibrating fingers started to move in and out, a third finger filling her now, the sensations running into her soul. He left the vibrator against her clitoris for a few moments until she felt that the power of her orgasm was back, building and gaining energy to an almost frightening level. Kate was sure her lungs would soon burst, her anticipation holding her body rigid.

He touched her chest with his hand, looking into her eyes. She looked back and felt a wave of total peace wash through her as she took a deep breath. He smiled and moved back to her pussy.

His vibrating fingers still massaging her body from the inside, Rick slid his tongue between her clitoris and the vibrator and pulled her into a black hole. Except it became white. Blinding. Hot. Tearing her body apart. She felt herself release and abandon her body, allowing it to disintegrate. Her mind experienced an explosive liberation into a universe of pleasure and joy. Kate heard herself still screaming in release and revelling in her freedom as Rick coaxed spasm after spasm from her body.

In seconds, he slipped her fastenings to free her completely before moving her up the bed. He drew her knees high and smoothly entered her just as the last waves of her orgasm were drifting away. As he filled her, her receding climax re-energised. She felt his body against hers, his muscles and skin delighting her fingers, his body within hers. She grabbed his arse and pulled him into her, locking her legs around him and straining for more... she wanted all of him. She focused every bit of her desire to demand his release. She didn't want his control right now, she wanted his pleasure to join hers and she looked him in the eye and told him. He responded, holding her pleasure in that wonderful state



where it wasn't quite there, but it wasn't quite gone, either. She urged him on; begging him to come with her as she aggressively met each of his thrusts with her own. She pinched his nipples and bit his throat. She dragged her fingers into the skin of his back and made love to him as he made love to her.

After only a few minutes, he was breathing deeply and she renewed her efforts to drive his control from him. He arched his back in an explosive release and she felt her climax reviving to meet his. Kate breathed Rick's orgasm in, finding she could fuel her own with it, and feeling him doing the same. They shared their climax, holding and exchanging their intensity between them. At one stage, she wondered if she was ever going to stop coming, and found that she simply didn't care about the answer.

Still basking in their bliss, the ringing of the maloca bell shook them from their reverie. Kate was lying, panting on Rick's chest and they looked at each other in confusion. Rick looked at his watch on the sideboard. 'It's one-thirty!'

'No way!'

'Yes way, he said, offering her a look at the watch face.

The lovers started laughing then. They laughed even more as they discovered how non-responsive their legs were as they stumbled their way into the shower.



## CHAPTER TWENTY- FIVE

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When Rick and Kate joined the rest of the Big End's population for lunch in the maloca, Dom and Natalie were still unaccounted for. All of Alegria's permanent inhabitants were at the Race today, helping with preparations for New Day and catching up with friends and family before the festivities. In the maloca, everyone was in a calm and relaxed mood except JC. He was buzzing with an air of satisfaction about him that eventually prompted Rick to ask him what he'd been up to.

'Well, since everybody else on the bloody island seemed to be making the beast with two backs, I went spearfishing,' he said, disappearing towards the ovens with boyish glee. Juan-Carlos came back carrying a whole roasted fish that hung nose and tail over both ends of a huge platter. He had packed a salad of wilted greens against the sides of the fish, and cries of approval met his presentation to the table. Edison noted that JC had made a perfect shot, one that would either miss completely or kill the fish instantly. It was from directly above and was the hardest shot on a free-swimming fish to make underwater. He looked at his son with an obvious question on his face.

'Just this one and I got out quick. The bulls came in straight away.' JC looked at the girls and said, 'This early in autumn, the water is at its warmest, and the sharks are very active, the bigger bull sharks especially. The deep reef is too dangerous to try for more than one fish at this time of year.'

His mother looked at him, knowing that asking him to be more careful would be useless. She knew her son too well. If she expressed her concerns, he would just bring a shark back next time to prove he was okay. *The worst part is, he'd actually think it'd settle my nerves about him spearfishing alone*, Juanita thought, shaking her head.

Dom and Natalie walked in moments later, looking happy and relaxed. Dom commented approvingly on JC's shot, asking about the sharks as well. When Carrie complimented JC's cooking of the fish and the salad that rounded out the meal beautifully, his chest visibly swelled a little, to the delight of everyone there.

They all went to the Shelf after lunch, enjoying the warm waters and bright sunshine, spending the afternoon swimming, wrestling and generally playing like the big kids they became on Alegria.

A freshening breeze warned them that a change was on the way. The first glimpses of the storm's anvil head were showing on the horizon. 'Here it comes,' Dom said. 'Shall we rinse off and share a snack in the maloca?'



By the time the towering storm was unleashing its rage at Alegria, the maloca was zipped up tight and they were already finishing off the last of JC's fish from their late lunch. The noise of the thunderclaps was awe inspiring as lightning repeatedly struck the granite spires that stood over the island. They watched the storm driven wind thrash the lagoon, covering it in a blanket of white-capped waves in minutes. Rick observed, 'There's going to be dirty water after this. That means nobody in

the water at the Race for sure.’ Seeing the question on Dee’s face, he said, ‘When the water is dirty, the sharks lurk in the Race’s spill zone and are too aggressive. When the water is clear, they don’t bother; but in murky water, it’s a different story.’ To the amigas, the idea of predators around their island paradise seemed out of place, but if these men showed the creatures such respect, that was good enough for them.

The storm only lasted for twenty minutes before moving towards the west, still rumbling in the distance and glowing around its peaked edges with the last red and pink hues of sunset. Talk in the maloca turned to New Day, giving the amigas an idea of what to expect, and discussing what to wear. By unspoken but mutual agreement, everyone wanted an early night to be ready for their pre-dawn start in the morning.



The sky showed only the barest hint of dawn’s twilight as the barge pushed through the water towards the Race. They had left when it was still dark and everyone was quiet, lost in their own thoughts and staring at the bright phosphorescent sparkles of the plankton disturbed by the turbulence of their unhurried passage. With their arms around her, Kate stood between Rick and JC, feeling like the safest and most loved girl in the world.

The electric anticipation building in their bodies soon started to make itself felt as they closed in on the cove, marked by two dim red lights and only barely visible. Kate had not yet been to this side of the lagoon. Even in the low light of the approaching dawn, the nature of the vegetation and shoreline was recognisably

different to the other side. This side of the lagoon was much cooler, deeper and saltier than the water on the other side of the lagoon. On the far side of the land, the swell of the ocean crashed directly against the sheer cliffs of volcanic rock. Despite the distance, the ocean waves' resonant thump and wash sounds were impressive on the light sea breeze. The salty aroma in the air smelled fresh and added to their building sense of anticipation.

Kate had never before seen her normally self-contained friends so obviously excited. Dom was actually bouncing in place on the balls of his feet, Mason was pacing on the spot, and Madison was jittery. Only her sharper movements betrayed Nat's anticipation, and Dee and Carrie were wide-eyed with excitement.

The ramp sung as it pushed onto the gravel of the shore. Men leapt aboard, dragging heavy ropes behind them to secure the barge to the shore. Each man double-checked the work of the other and waved to the captain. Knowing that the Race would destroy any drifting vessel caught in its violent churning waters, Emilio reversed his engine and pulled hard against the ropes to test their hold before shutting his engine down. More people came aboard to greet them, gathering the new arrivals up in their enthusiasm. Kate simply went with the small crowd as every person there hustled towards the village, chattering brightly in anticipation. The entire population of Alegria was gathered on the beach, and as the sky began to show the golden hues of the coming dawn, their rising levels of excitement became palpable. Silence fell a few minutes later when Uncle started pounding a one beat a second rhythm on a log drum. Each person moved to the water's edge and remained quiet, facing east into

the brightening sky. Just before dawn broke, Uncle stopped drumming and joined everyone on the foreshore.

The people met the first rays of dawn with an explosion of noise, making the amigas jump, despite expecting it. Every Alegrian was whooping and calling over the water, filling the air with sounds like animal calls. From the smallest child to Grandmother, they were all yelling, calling and rejoicing. Kate's ear started to pick out words. She heard words of thanks, of gratitude, and of remembrance. She heard names coming through as each person there shouted their gratitude and thanks for every other person there. Hearing Rick's name mentioned with hers, she realised they were giving thanks for her and Rick, and wept in recognition of the depth of her acceptance within this family and these amazing people. Kate's own feelings of gratitude overwhelmed her, and she shouted out her own thanks without inhibition, joining her new family in celebration.

It took nearly fifteen minutes for the energy of their calls to falter. Uncle was at the log drum again, and he started rapping out a broken bass beat. Another man joined him, striking a higher pitched counterpoint beat on the rim of the log. Pedro then joined them, adding to the rhythms a complex series of beats. The combined sounds became almost hypnotic and compelling in their subtle complexities.

Sweeping the girls up in a communal movement, people started dancing. The rhythms felt like they were dealing directly with her soul, and that all she had to do was allow her body to move. Normally self-conscious about dancing unless tipsy, Kate felt herself connected to a wonderful source of freedom and movement as the rhythms pulsed through her body. Looking around, she saw everyone dancing with similar actions.

*I'm a puppet*, she thought, feeling the drumming take her over as the sounds moved her body and formed shapes with her limbs. Kate experienced a moment of clarity, recognising that the rhythms and movements were another route to a familiar place, similar to her experience of sub-space. The musical drumming danced through them, moving their bodies without the need for control. In her euphoria, Kate felt as if anything she could think about had a solution attached. They danced on as drummers changed on the fly, the rhythms changing form but never faltering.

When the beat changed, Kate had a feeling of almost falling back into her body. The dancers slowed and stopped, many hugging and everyone laughing. As the crowd settled, the first platters of food were carried out. It was a rice dish, combined with what seemed like every possible vegetable product from the land and sea. It was delicately flavoured and delicious.

Most of the people there had fasted in anticipation of the feast and fell upon the food with gusto. Rick leaned over to the amigos and said, 'This is the best meal to fill up on. Pick here and there after this one, but fill up to well satisfied now. The platters will be smaller after this, with a new course coming out every hour or so.'

Grandmother stood when most of those sitting in the broad semicircle had finished their meal. The people fell silent and leaned in to hear her. With a musical cadence to her speech, she started. 'In the time before Alegria, we lived far away. Our people cared for the Mother as our ancestors taught us, and She cared for us. Our people were strong and clever...'

Grandmother's clear voice had a compelling edge to it. Kate listened as Grandmother recited lines of leaders and notables, seemingly stretching back for

generations. The people all repeated each of the names as Grandmother said them, listening to their songs and relearning their histories.

Grandmother sat and Maria stood, stamping each foot hard into the ground before she spoke, a look of blazing fire in her eyes. 'Then came the poison. The gold hunters raped the Mother. They destroyed our jungle. They killed our river and ...'

The story of their village's decimation from pollution and then the drug cartel's thugs was told. No emotion was held in check, and the people cried out in anger and fear, raging and cowering by turn. Even the amigas found themselves drawn in and participating in Maria's words. '... my father. It was then that Uncle made me his daughter, and Juanita my sister, as well as my cousin by birth.'

When Maria fell silent, Rick leaned across and whispered to the amigas, 'Jaguar and bear are the people's names for Dominique and Edison.' The three amigas nodded and looked back, watching Maria sit down. The silent tension in the crowd was electric.

Uncle stood and stamped each foot down several times in turn, planting himself hard into the earth under his feet. He thrust a spear deep into the ground between his feet in a resolute action of defiance. 'The jaguar and the bear rose [Dominique and Edison leapt to their feet, roaring like angry beasts] and fought our Mother's enemies with our people [the people all leapt to their feet and roared].' Uncle waited until he could be heard again. 'When our home was threatened, we were one. They maimed our Mother, setting fire to our jungle and poisoning our sacred river. Our Mother was injured and could no longer feed her children...' The people were howling at the story and stamping their feet.



Grandmother stood and joined him as the crowd stilled, wanting to hear her words. She said, 'Then the way was made clear. Auntie had a dream and saw the jaguar leading our people to a place where the Mother lives and is strong. The jaguar led us to this place, our home.'

'ALEGRIA!' the crowd yelled as one.

Uncle held a dramatic pause before he said, 'We arrived in our new home on this day; the day when dark and light are equal, when the summer is tired and the winter is rested. Twenty-one years ago on this day, when I was a much younger man, the Mother gave me a large fish on my first cast into the Race that took all of my strength to pull in. We returned it to Her so She knew that we, Her children, would never take more than we need. We made fire for our people, there, under the sunset stone.' He pointed to the western spire of the island. 'The Mother is strong and bountiful here. She cares for us and gives us all we need, many times over. Our children grow strong and clever, our old are healthy and wise, and we are home. Here, we care and honour the Mother as She protects and cares for us.'

'ALEGRIA!' everyone thundered again.

The drumbeats started again and, in another flurry of dancing and movement, the tensions raised in the telling of the stories were expended. The dancers would randomly shout calls of happiness and names in remembrance. After a little more than a quarter of an hour this time, the dancers slowed and the next round of food came out.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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Grandmother stood and began telling a far more detailed account of their home, long before the trouble. She told stories she'd learned from her elders and teachers, and stories from her time as a girl, and later, as a woman. She shared her memories and the histories of her people through the songs of Alegria. The amigas listened to her in rapt attention, feeling as though they were experiencing the memories first hand through Grandmother's words. When she finished, a light meal of cooked fruit and plain rice came out.

Uncle stood next and told of the times when he was young, taking up where Grandmother's story had left off. He told many of his stories with humour, using clever imagery and metaphors to bring his songs to life. Everyone could see in their minds the characters and events as he described them, feeling as though they had been there and he was simply reminding them of those events. Rick couldn't help himself and stared at Kate's smiling face as she sat and listened, realising again how beautiful she was to him.

When Uncle finished his songs, Pedro started rapping out a monotonous, regular, four-a-second staccato beat on the big log drum. This time, the beats were different, deeper and bigger. The girls looked at each other, astonished at how the bass sounds became a reverberating resonance that echoed up from the ground beneath them.

Uncle's acolyte couple came forward with a large container as Uncle retrieved a basket of coconut shell

cups. Each person came forward at Grandmother's beckoning. She looked at him or her carefully, sometimes resting her hand on their head, before selecting a cup and filling it with a specific amount for that person. They first held the cup to their forehead, then kissed the rim before quickly drinking its contents. They nodded their thanks to Grandmother before returning in silence to where they'd been sitting.

Grandmother called Kate forward and gave her a large serve. Kate did as the others had done and drank it quickly. Sitting back down in front of Rick and his parents, she tried to understand the complex tastes in her mouth. Whenever she thought she had the flavour nailed down, it seemed to change. It was neither pleasant nor unpleasant, but it was distinctly alien. The looks on Dee and Carrie's faces showed that they appeared to be having a similar experience.

Grandmother finished serving out the tea, and everyone but those playing the drum remained seated. Without dropping a single beat or breaking the rhythm, the drummers changed on the fly, keeping the deep regular beats resonating from both the drum and the surrounding ground.

As the vibrations of the drumbeats passed through her, Kate felt a warm sensation washing through her body, a comfortable and somehow familiar feeling. It was as if she had fused with the essence of the rhythm and nothing more existed. Sitting still, she felt the beats radiating from her own body, and from every other person and thing around her. Kate realised she could hear Rick's breathing and wondered if he was okay. She turned, and was surprised to find him well behind her and breathing silently, even though she could hear him. At that moment, she recognised that she was not hearing

him with her ears, but she was hearing him clearly all the same.

He looked at her, his smile soft. 'I love you, Kate.' The physicality, the absolute reality and truth of his statement rocked her to her core. At that moment, she understood how profound and deep his feelings were. She heard his words, but more incredibly, she felt his thoughts and intentions as if they had formed in her own mind.

She looked into his eyes and whispered back to him, 'And I love you.' Kate saw the same reaction in him as he felt the meaning and depth behind her words to him. The lovers shared an awareness of their deep connection and closeness. She couldn't stop herself from thinking about how she felt when he made love to her. The people near them softly cheered and chuckled, smiling at her and Rick. With huge grins, a few of the ladies teasingly fanned themselves.

Kate's instinctive reaction of embarrassment stopped as she felt the people showering her with loving acceptance. Rick ran his finger down his chest and Kate understood his signal. She sat straight and let herself centre and breathe. As her mind relaxed, she found she could perceive those around her as if they were distant extensions of her own body. Rick was there, but so too were Dee and Carrie, the depth of their feelings for each other clear and bright to her. Kate looked at the girls and they smiled back, clearly experiencing the same effects and sharing their own merging. In her mind, she found Dom and Nat and received a revelatory insight into their dynamic. Every single person there was also present within her.

The love and shared devotion that tied the congregation together took on a physical quality that

flowed around and over them. People started standing and embracing each other, their interactions clearly felt and experienced by all. Kate stood and turned to Rick. As his arms encircled her and she hugged him back, a wave of pure light surged through her, through them both. 'Alegria!' called those standing near as they rushed in to add their blessing and share in their embrace. Soon everyone was in a single laughing mass and rejoicing as they shared themselves, all parts of a singular, happy and loving communal mind.

The drumming changed, slowing and breaking its rhythm before stopping. People took their places in a tight semicircle to hear the next stories. Grandmother stood. She told the story of Edison being found by Juanita's father in a tree, still in his car, drunk and singing; her recounting of the events bringing raucous laughter. She told of the love at first sight that he and Juanita experienced, of JC's birth and the happy times and events of the next few years. She talked of Dominique and Edison's parents as her own, weeping as she described the day they were lost in the plane crash when Dom and Edison were both lying injured in hospital. Grandmother's face darkened and she placed her hand on Maria's shoulder before she sat beside her.

Maria stood and took a deep breath. She started to tell the histories of the horror and carnage that forced them from their home, starting with the poisoning of the river and their search for drinkable water. In graphic and spine-chilling detail, she told of the cold-blooded executions of Juanita's father and brothers. She told them of Juanita's brilliant leadership in the face of her loss, and of her wounding. How Dom and Edison fought with them, and later when the rest of Dom's unit arrived and joined the battle.

Maria left nothing out of the accounts of the fighting and the suffering. The pain and memories were physical and present to everyone listening to her words as if they'd experienced every terror, and were reliving every loss themselves. Kate felt like her mind would cave in from the power of Maria's stories until she felt Rick's hand on her shoulder; as she automatically took a deep breath, everything became manageable again. Kate glanced to her side and saw that Dom and Madison were doing the same with the girls.

Uncle stood and hugged Maria before he continued. As his story went on, more hands reached out to more shoulders until every person was touching and being touched; connected and united in their experience. Uncle told the story of their long exodus from the jungle whilst being hunted by the army and the drug cartel; and of their long journey from South America to Alegria. They all felt the anguish of caring for and losing others, still gravely ill from the poisoned water and wounded from the fighting. A number of people were physically sick with the emotions of the story, their purging helping the whole group to feel better. At a suitable point, the story paused and Uncle clapped loudly before Grandmother passed out slightly smaller portions of the journeying tea. Everyone sat in clusters, needing the physical touch of those around them.

When every person there had received some more of Grandmother's potion, Maria stood and described the first moment that the people saw Alegria, their new home, twenty-one years ago today. Grandmother joined her, and together they told Alegria's stories of loves and marriages, life and rejoicing. Kate felt tears running freely down her face as they all wept, sharing their

profound elation. Uncle stood with them and they told stories of beauty, wonder and acceptance.

The listeners grew ecstatic with the energy of these positive songs, and the atmosphere became palpably vibrant. Suddenly the log drum resonated in a long series of deep irregular notes. The bass notes changing tempo as more drummers joined in, creating a rapid rhythm that was a sound of pure joy. Kate felt the music lift her body from the ground and she started moving as the rhythms pulsed through every cell in her body. She danced with her new family in a free and ecstatic celebration of life.

A long while later, Kate realised her legs were about to give way from under her, and she sought Rick out, knowing where he was just by letting her mind feel for him in the throng of moving bodies. Rick smiled and wrapped her in his arms; and then they kissed.

The music stopped. The voices stopped. The dancing stopped. The lovers noticed none of it, lost in a starburst of feelings and unity. Together they felt how perfectly matched their personalities were. Some of their strengths they shared, and some of their strengths filled a weakness in the other. Everyone stood silent, watching and waiting for their kiss to end, sharing in their experience.

Kate could feel a single idea forming as the crowd formed into a tight circle around them, but couldn't grasp it. Those in front squatted down to offer those behind a clear view. Rick knelt in front of her on one knee, and as he took her hands, she felt her mind fall into his, and his into hers.

'Catherine Jones, I love you, I adore you, and I cherish you. Would you do me the honour of sharing the rest of your life with me? Kate, will you marry me?'

Her head was already nodding, knowing that she wanted Rick and that he wanted her. The crowd was silent, sharing and revelling in the energy of the moment.

Kate looked at Rick, kneeling in front of her and dragged him to his feet. 'Yes, Rick. Yes, I want to marry you and I want you to marry me.'

Madison stepped forward with tears in her eyes, Mason's hand on her shoulder. She hugged Rick and Mason hugged Kate, and then the four hugged as everyone around them let their tears fall unchecked, smiling in silence. Madison took a ring from her finger and passed it to Rick. He kissed his mother on both cheeks and turned to Kate. He lifted her hand and slipped the ring onto her finger. Kate looked at the ring, and then at Madison, astonished at its perfect fit, and feeling how heavy its history was.

Madison said, 'Kate, that ring has bound five generations of our family. This is a family tradition, and it was obvious to all of us that it was yours the first moment you two looked at each other.'

Kate was unable to find any words and just wrapped mother and son in a huge, sobbing, happy hug, dragging Mason in as well. Every man, woman and child erupted, cheering. The music started again and the dancing crowd celebrated with them. Kate saw and felt her friends, their grinning faces wet with tears. They just kept nodding and laughing, their thoughts and emotions coming into her mind as she shared hers with them. Above all else, she could feel Rick, her wonderful man, within her. She could feel every part of him, his strength, his kindness and his shadow. She loved everything about him. She could feel his mind, and knew that he felt exactly the same way about her.



Later that afternoon and after more stories and dancing, another couple became engaged, and Kate felt what everyone else had felt between her and Rick. When she hugged the bride to be, they instantly became sisters, unable to stop hugging, laughing and crying at the same time.

At dusk, Pedro started a fire to keep the chill of the evening at bay, and for its light. More food came out, more of Grandmother's special brew, and many more, mostly happy stories and songs filled the night.

As a group, they walked under the stars to the edge of the Race. Agitated by the rushing and churning water, the plankton's glow lit the Race until it looked like a river of liquid light. The deep bass notes and distant flashes of a large thunderstorm passing well out to sea just helped to set the supernatural feel of the spectacle. Later that evening, another storm passed to the south of the lagoon, its electric display strobing spectacularly over the distant hills.

Hammocks were already tied up in advance to accommodate those who felt the need for rest. Some people slept around the edges of the cleared area for an hour or two before returning to the fiesta.

When dawn broke the next day, the people were all happily exhausted as they gathered arm in arm in a large circle on the foreshore. Grandmother and Uncle said a blessing and they gave thanks for each other and for Alegria.

After Rick took Kate for a short walk to show her the rushing waters of the Race in the daylight, and to enjoy a little time alone, they made their way back to the village. Stepping into a small open sided shelter, the lovers saw Dom and Natalie asleep on one side of the hut. Mason and Madison were at the end, next to the

girls, and Edison, Juanita and Maria lay in the middle. Rick led Kate to the only clear space left and they were asleep in minutes, slumbering until mid-afternoon.

‘Do you still want to marry me?’ Rick asked her as she woke up.

She knew that he’d been awake for a while and watching her sleep. Kate nodded and offered her mouth for a kiss, which he eagerly supplied.

‘Yes, Rick, I love you and I want to marry you.’

‘Deal.’



## EPILOGUE

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Butterflies swarmed everywhere in the bright morning sunshine, and the early summer's day was clear and perfect. All the people of Alegria filled the Village clearing, along with a few chosen friends and family.

Uncle and Grandmother stood below the Village's ceremonial tree, heavy with blooms and scenting the air with its delicious and subtle fragrance. They were both smiling, resplendent in their robes of royal blue and golden yellow, and waiting patiently. The women were still fussing over Kate's bridal garlands behind the screens at the rear of the clearing.

Rick stood in front of the congregation, flanked by JC, Mason, Dominique and Edison. The men were all in their full military dress uniforms, as were several of Rick's relatives in the congregation behind them.

Dee and Carrie stood with Madison, Natalie, and Juanita, all smiling as Kate appeared on Tyson and Eric's arms. They slowly walked Kate to the tree, sniffing and grumping against their tears the whole way, before taking their seats in the front row.

As Kate walked the last few paces to Rick's side, Natalie discreetly pointed into the tree at two emerald finches flitting about and singing in courtship. Kate smiled in recognition of Natalie's good luck birds. She took a moment to gaze around, seeing the faces of every person in the world that she loved, all beaming back at her.

Looking at her husband to be, she saw every bit of the love she felt for him reflected in his eyes, and she knew she was home.

Grandmother and Uncle rapped their staffs three times in unison...



Every time Juan-Carlos caught sight of her, he was sure he felt his heart stop. He was standing next to Rick as his best man and couldn't be too obvious as he nervously and repeatedly scanned the congregation. It wasn't just that she was simply the most stunningly attractive woman he had ever seen, although she was; she had an energy about her that radiated the beauty of her soul in a way that was beyond anything he could describe.

She was elusive and intoxicating. With every stolen glance, it seemed as if she was more beautiful than he remembered, even if his last glimpse of her had been only a moment before. When he finally made eye contact with her, she smiled at him, and he felt as if he had just stepped in front of a high-speed train.

His whole body was still trembling when Grandmother and Uncle rapped their staffs to begin. Barely able to stand without swaying, Juan-Carlos was sure that he could still feel her behind him.

As soon as he could after the ceremony, he began searching through the milling crowd with a sense of urgency. He was unable to understand how or why she affected him as she did, but he knew he needed to find her. After walking around the crowd several times in vain, he spotted Dee and Carrie standing to one side.

Walking over to ask them if they knew anything about her, JC still felt off balance and shaken. Dee caught sight of him approaching and brushed Carrie's arm. Carrie turned and smiled at him. 'There you are! JC, I want to introduce you to my cousin. Juan-Carlos this is Isabelle...



With the help of a small electric forklift, Eric and Tyson hung the large, stainless-steel panel behind the reception desk. They secured the heavy plaque in place, wanting to surprise the newlyweds on their return.

It was a perfect casting of the words that Kate's father had welded into the leg of the bridge so long ago. Both men remembered watching and helping him weld those original letters nearly thirty years earlier. They had added the title above his words, knowing it was right.

~

IRONWOOD ENGINEERING SOLUTIONS

THIS IS THE FIRST PART OF

THE FIRST OF MANY BRIDGES

BUILT BY NATHANIEL JONES,

LOVING HUSBAND OF MARJORIE,

PROUD FATHER OF CATHERINE.

ALL I EVER BUILD, I BUILD FOR THEM.

~

They both communicated in grunts to deny the tears that threatened them as they recognised how everything had come full circle. Placing a spirit level against the metal one more time, they both checked it and nodded. Their job well done, Tyson and Eric shook hands. Tyson said, 'As it should be.' Both men knew they were talking about far more than the sign. Eric looked at his friend and colleague. 'Perfect.'



The End

... for now.

## A SPECIAL NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

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Our adventure, "Welcome to Alegria: Catherine's Story", is a social experiment in trust on my part, and quite literally represents twelve full-time months of my life. (I quit my practice and walked away from my business to write this book.) My social experiment is based purely on my trust in you, and my belief in your personal decency and honesty. Before I ask you to value my work, our adventure, I offer you the opportunity to meet the wonderful characters and experience the magical world of Alegria.

You see, I think too many author's want you, the reader, to take the risk of paying up front for a story you might not appreciate. I believe in my work, so I have chosen to trust in you, and in your integrity, and assume the risk of offering this eBook to you without asking you for a payment up front.

Instead, I offer it to you to read, and then ask you to honestly value what this adventure has meant to you. To do this, please take a moment to visit <http://SongsOfAlegria.com/value>. I ask you to decide on the value of this book to you, based on your enjoyment, learning, escape or inspiration. Most of all, I trust your integrity to do what is right. You can offer as much or as little as you feel is honest and right for you.

I also invite you to write a review and share your thoughts (links are on the <http://SongsOfAlegria.com> website) and all honest reviews are greatly appreciated. If you really can't afford what this book is worth to you, please send what you can afford, and invest some time to

write an honest review. My intent is to offer all soft-cover first releases of the six planned books in this series in the same way. To share this book with others, please share the link, <http://SongsOfAlegria.com/downloads>. I offer the following scale as a guide. Naturally, you are also able to nominate your own amount:

**\$5.00:** I enjoyed it. Thank you.

**\$10.00:** I found it a great read and enjoyed it a lot. Thanks for trusting me to share it like you have.

**\$18.50:** I loved the story and characters, and I want to go back to Alegria. Thanks for the twelve months of your life it took to write this novel and trusting me to share it like you have. Reading this was so much better than the two hours of entertainment I'd get at the cinema for the same price.

**\$25.00:** Everything above! I loved it and I appreciate the twelve months of your life and the thousands of dollars you invested in making it, and I want to encourage you to write more. Thanks for trusting me and having faith that I will honour your trust and pay you what your work represents to me.

... or purchase a physical copy from Amazon.com for \$29.95, which includes this eBook as well, with my thanks.

-

Comments and feedback are also invited via the website: <http://SongsOfAlegria.com>.





RUINED BY HER NOW EX-HUSBAND, A SOCIOPATHIC CON MAN AND PREDATOR, CATHERINE (KATE) HAS BEEN LEFT PENNILESS AND HOMELESS. HER NATURAL STRENGTH AND CAPABILITY SHINES THROUGH AS SHE RESCUES HERSELF AND FORGES A NEW LIFE WITH THE SUPPORT OF TWO LIFELONG FRIENDS.

NOT SEARCHING FOR LOVE, SHE MEETS DOMINIQUE, AN ENIGMATIC AND POWERFUL MAN WHO RECOGNISES HER INTELLIGENCE AND ABILITY WHEN SHE SAVES A PROJECT OF HIS THROUGH FAST AND DECISIVE ACTION. INVITED INTO HIS WORLD, AND WELCOMED INTO HIS PRIVATE ISLAND PARADISE OF ALEGRIA, SHE FINDS HERSELF IN THE COMPANY OF A MOST UNUSUAL GROUP OF PEOPLE.

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER SETS OFF AN UNEXPECTED CHAIN OF EVENTS, TAKING CATHERINE ON A CHALLENGING AND LIFE-CHANGING JOURNEY OF PERSONAL AND EROTIC SELF-DISCOVERY.

THIS IS CATHERINE'S STORY OF COURAGE, EXPLORATION AND TRANSFORMATION, HER SONG.

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