

# IN TIME FOR LOVE

A TIMELESS LOVE BOOK ONE



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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## With Gratitude

*I've never written a dedication before, so I think it's probably time. There are a lot of people who keep me going, far more than I could name, and I appreciate all of them. Novels don't happen without a lot of background support, and there are some amazing people who make the magic happen behind the scenes.*

*For Kat, who has been my champion, friend, writing partner, and personal editor for so long I've lost track. She's been there through magazines, short stories, and now books, with hardly a complaint about the number of times she's had to fix the exact same error. Without her, I probably never would have dared to make the jump to novels and there's a good chance she had to proofread this dedication and fix at least one thing in it.*

*For Kiki, my navigator, who offered what I needed the most and helped me find the right path during a rough patch when I couldn't see my way through. Always ready with an encouraging word and positive reinforcement, she somehow quietly manages to out-stubborn me when I get stuck and provides a calm place for me to regroup. Also, she can fold origami dinosaurs, which makes her pretty much perfect.*

*For Wenchy, my captain, who actually is helpful despite signs indicating otherwise. Ruthless when it comes to ripping open plot holes, she's also the one who sits down to help plan out the needed fixes afterward. She would fearlessly steer us right into a hurricane just for the sheer adventure*

*of it, laughing at the danger while Kiki plotted our course to safety. They balance each other perfectly, and there is no other ship I'd rather crew.*

*And above all, for my husband, Shaughn, who fell in love with me the first time we met and for some reason has never changed his mind since. He drags me off the computer and makes me interact with the world way more often than I'd like, constantly pushes me to try new things, and is always my inspiration to create because there's a little bit of him in almost every character I write.*

## CHAPTER 1



*K*atherine stood at the rail, staring out across the water. Her hands were clenched around the smoothly polished wood as she swayed to the gentle rhythm of the moving ship. She hadn't quite gotten her sea legs yet and still found the rolling a little dizzying, but that wasn't the reason for her tight grip. That would be the happy people walking the decks behind her, chatting and laughing while they enjoyed their vacation. Envy clawed at her as she tried to ignore them. She wanted to be one of those happy people; she'd had every expectation of enjoying this trip and had looked forward to it for months.

Who wouldn't enjoy a week sailing the Caribbean? Nothing but sun, too much food and not a worry in the world other than avoiding getting too badly burned. At least, that had been the plan, but all of her expectations had been toppled a week ago. For the trip...and for her whole life.

Tears sprang to her eyes and her fingers tightened to the point of hurting. It took her a second to realize that the physical pain was coming from the head of a screw that jutted out of the underside of the rail, digging into her hand. The emotional agony that was clouding her mind had blocked it out at first, and she let go of the

beam with a hiss and shook out her hand. Peering intently at the red indentation that had come close to ripping her skin, she frowned.

"Damn it," she muttered, but she wasn't really upset. The pain had shaken her out of the mood drop that had started. She had to watch herself every minute these days, if she didn't want to end up a sobbing mess in public. Everywhere she looked, she was reminded of Christopher and their plans. Maybe coming on the cruise alone had been a bad idea; she just hadn't known what else to do with herself. She already had the time off work. Of course, she did, because he'd arranged it, and everything was paid for, so she'd come—alone.

But now that she was here, all she could think about were the things they'd talked about doing on the trip, the adventures they were going to have while they sailed through a series of island ports. She'd never been on a cruise before, but he had, several times. He'd laughed and called her a virgin and she'd blushed, because it was yet another thing that he'd promised to show her. His world was so vast, and hers had always been so small.

She wasn't sure when it had happened, when he'd become such a focus in her life. It hadn't been that way in the beginning. She'd been shy and uncertain, dragging her heels at every step, while he tugged her along impatiently. She'd given over the reins of her life inch by painful inch until, finally, he'd taken over everything. She'd let him do it because submission had always been her biggest fantasy—a deep dark secret that she'd never shared with anyone, though he'd once told her it had been obvious to anyone with eyes.

She supposed he was right about that, though it galled her to know how blatantly it must show. She'd always been the one to back down in any argument. She avoided confrontation, and people with strong personalities rolled right over her like an iron, flattening her until she stopped fighting and let them have what they wanted. She *did* have a strong independent streak, though, and

an introvert's need for space and alone time. He hadn't cared much for that side of her.

The harder he pushed to have every piece of her; mind, soul and body, the harder it had been for him to pin her down. He'd mistaken her submission for weakness, and she understood why he'd think so, but it simply meant she fought in other ways. She'd read some book once about martial arts, and it had talked about a style of defense based on water, and for some reason, it had stuck in her head. Water could be slow and gentle; it yielded to larger objects, but over time, it exerted enough pressure to wear away stone. She wanted to be like that. She wanted her submission to be seen as a kind of strength instead of a weakness, but when she was with Christopher, somehow...somehow, she always ended up giving in.

It hadn't been like that in the beginning, or maybe she just recalled it differently. She remembered her first day of work and the way he'd been so kind, helping her get situated. A real gentleman, she'd thought, and on first impression, the nicest boss she'd ever had. Of course, working in an office, even as a file clerk, was a step up from the minimum wage jobs she'd held before and during college. She'd expected people would be nicer in a white-collar environment than in a fast food restaurant, but still, the way he kept coming over to check on her was so sweet.

She'd only been working there about a month when he'd asked her out for dinner. She'd hesitated, sure there was some rule about dating your boss, but he just looked at her questioningly and she'd said yes, of course. That was the beginning of his courting her. It started mostly in small ways—coming into work and finding a simple carnation on her desk with no note, but she knew who it was from. There was only one person in the office who knew it was her favorite flower.

Sometimes, he bought her lunch, and she was grateful, not just for the break from work, but also because she didn't make very much yet and, soon, she'd have to start making payments on her

student loans, now that she had her degree. He took her to expensive places she'd never be able to afford on her own, and often, she was able to bring home leftovers to cover her evening meal, as well. If sometimes the meal went over her allotted half-hour lunch break, the fact that she was with the boss meant no one was going to complain about it. Still, she was careful to work extra hard afterward, to make sure no one thought she was getting extra privileges.

This was something she worried about constantly, since it seemed like it had to be so obvious to everyone else in the office that he liked her. But no one said anything unkind, so, either they didn't care, or they hadn't noticed. She hoped it was the latter because she liked most of her coworkers and wanted them to think well of her. She wasn't a gold-digger; in fact, she did try to refuse many of the small gifts or expensive rendezvous that he suggested over the next couple of months, but that wouldn't stop them from getting that impression.

A whole year of her life she'd given to him, more, actually, since they'd begun dating just shy of her twenty-third birthday, and now she was well into her twenty-fourth year. So much time to have wasted for nothing. She swallowed hard, taking a deep gulp of sea air as she struggled to pull out of those thoughts. If she continued through their whole relationship, she'd have to follow it to the end, and then she'd have to face the fact that she had no idea what she was going to do with her life from this point forward.

Go back to working for him as though he hadn't become her whole world? See him every day and know that she no longer belonged to him? She wasn't strong enough for that, not when so much of their personal life had spilled over into office scenarios after hours—and sometimes during the work day, too, if they were discrete enough.

He was a dominant, and where he led, she followed. If he snapped his fingers and told her to kneel by his desk, then she would hurry over and drop to her knees without protest, though she always made sure the door was locked first. A knock would



send her heart racing in a panic and she'd look up at him, pleading for permission to stand before anyone guessed her secret. No, she wasn't going to be able to handle the change of circumstances, and that meant that there wasn't even one corner of her life that would be left unturned.

Because he'd dumped her. Without warning, without discussion, he'd simply dismissed her. She wasn't sure how she'd failed him, not really, because he hadn't given any explanation beyond, "I think it's time we ended this." It was funny, really, because when he'd said he had something important to discuss with her, she'd had the silliest idea that he might ask her to marry him. Wasn't that what they'd been building towards over all those months? Progressing from dates to weekends and, finally, to a week-long vacation together, which he'd paid for.

She'd tried to contain her excitement as she waited for him to pick her up for dinner. Dressing oh-so-carefully in his favorite slinky black dress, making sure her make-up was perfect and her hair swept up off her neck as he preferred. They'd ordered dinner and a bottle of wine to be served immediately, but between the pouring and the meals' arrival, all of the happiness went out of her life.

"You're welcome to take the cruise anyway, of course, Katherine. I really think you should. It's paid for, and you deserve the vacation. I'm sure everything will be easier for you after you've had some time alone to think things over," he'd said kindly. 'Without me' was unspoken, but she understood.

And so here she was, on a giant ship sailing through crystal clear waters toward a beautiful island paradise with a bunch of happy vacationers. But things weren't feeling any easier yet, and she didn't expect they would any time soon. Of course, it was only her first full day on board, maybe...just maybe...there were some distractions to be found. She'd heard these ships were like floating cities with no end of things to do, and she hadn't had a chance to do any exploring at all yet.

She'd hung around her room, feeling washed out and listless for a few hours after waking, and then she'd made herself come up on deck to check out the view. It was breathtaking, but the vast open water had caused the surge of melancholy that she'd been fighting off. Something about all that emptiness made her feel so small, so lost. The loneliness had crept up on her.

It was time, she decided, for a drink. She had a fully-paid beverage package and she intended to use it! If getting away from the memories at home wouldn't cheer her up, then maybe she could drink away her sorrows. People did that all the time; her parents, for instance, had never missed a chance to get wasted. It was because of them that she normally avoided drinking much at all, but hell, this was a vacation, and she had more reason than most to get drunk. Didn't she? She did.

She hadn't realized how easy it was to get alcohol onboard a cruise ship. You almost couldn't avoid it, and she made no effort to do so. She headed for the tiki bar on deck, festooned with coconuts and island motif, and settled onto a high barstool. One of her sandals, new for the trip and slightly too big, slid off her foot and dropped to the deck, but she ignored it.

"What can I get for you?" the bartender asked with some exotic accent she couldn't place. The number of accents she'd heard so far had been a surprise at first, but she enjoyed listening to them. Handsome and dark, the bartender leaned in and flashed her a brilliant white smile, every tooth perfect under a bushy mustache. His eyes glanced over her discretely, but she was fairly sure there was no interest there. He'd want to make her feel beautiful and desired for the tips. Christopher—always the full name, never shortened—had told her that the cruise lines hired people from all over the world and then worked them nearly to death on low wages, but it was worth it for the tips. All part of the ship etiquette he'd taught her in advance.

"I'll have a..." She paused, undecided. She so rarely ordered alcohol that she had no idea what she should get. It didn't feel like a

wine environment; she wanted something iced and fruity with a paper umbrella like she'd seen other passengers drinking. "I...wh-what do you recommend?" she asked tentatively, in a voice that sounded meek to her own ears.

"Ah, well, the pina colodas are always popular with the ladies. Or perhaps a margarita?" he suggested. He gestured to a large board behind him. Dozens of drinks had been written out in multi-colored chalk, and she latched onto the first one that sounded interesting and ordered it.

"Can I have a pineapple-lime margarita, please?" she blurted. She'd gotten so used to Christopher ordering for her that she was out of practice, but the bartender just gave her a sweet smile and turned to the blender to mix her concoction. It was frozen and filled with chunks of real fruit—exactly what she needed to ward off the heat of the day. She hadn't been entirely prepared for how hot it would be in comparison to the Denver weather that rarely made it over ninety, even at the height of summer. Beads of sweat rolled down her back under the loose sun dress she wore, and she was grateful for the shaded grass overhang of the bar that would keep her pale Irish skin from burning, even through the thick layer of sunblock. She'd have to build up her tolerance to the sun slowly, or she'd end up a giant freckle, or even worse, a glaring red color that would clash with her hair.

She spun on her stool, putting her back to the bar so she could watch the people strolling by. Slowly sipping the sweet drink to avoid a headache, she let the alcohol do its work. And it worked fast; despite the light fruity flavor of the drink, there was some seriously strong liquor under it, and she was halfway through her third before she realized it. She felt suddenly lightheaded and set the tall glass down with deliberate care. She felt like shouting 'Whee' and spinning around and around on her seat, but she refrained from acting like a child.

"Wow, these are strong!" she said to the bartender and then blinked because there was someone new behind the counter. Just as

cute, just as smiley, but no mustache. Oh, well, she didn't like mustaches, anyway.

"Yep, the customers like them that way," he laughed. "It's a good idea to eat something first or you get tipsy pretty quickly," he said. He looked a little concerned, probably wondering if he should cut her off, and if he'd have to deal with a belligerent guest if he did.

Food. Oh. Yeah, that would have been a good plan. She'd eaten sometime the day before, she thought. Yes, for sure, she remembered grabbing a cheeseburger on the way to the airport for her flight, and she was pretty sure she'd eaten it. That would have been well over a full day ago, she realized. Christopher would be so mad. He'd—

She cut *that* thought right off. Christopher would have been pissed, but what he wanted no longer mattered, because she was no longer his submissive. She, Katherine DeWitt, was a free woman who could do whatever she damned well pleased! But she didn't want to waste her first day on ship passed out in her room and the following day recovering from a hangover, so she decided that eating wasn't a bad idea. "You're right..." She paused to look at his name tag. "Tommy, I'm going to go to the buffet," she assured him as she slid off the stool with a bit of a wobble.

She grabbed her glass with one hand, while she tried to slip her foot into her sandal, but she wasn't graceful on her best day and the combination of too much alcohol, a rolling ship, and not enough coordination sent her skipping sideways comically. It probably would have been an extremely unattractive bit of slapstick if it hadn't been for the fellow traveler who caught her by the elbow and spun her around, just in time to keep her from toppling.

She felt the strong grip as things whirled by dizzily and, suddenly, she was being propped up against the barstool she'd just vacated. "You all right there, kid?" an amused masculine voice asked.

She flushed with embarrassment, and her eyes darted up to his. "I'm fine," she said defensively. "I just lost my balance trying to get

my stupid shoe," she insisted, pretending that there were no other factors involved.

"So I saw. Let me help," he said firmly as he dropped to one knee in front of her without waiting for a response. His large hands grasped her ankle and lifted her foot to slide the sandal into place with one motion and then he was rising to steady her before she could respond. The flush on her cheeks darkened, and she stammered out a thank you that managed to sound like she was irritated, rather than just flustered.

His eyebrow went up and his lips tightened as he looked down at her. He was almost a foot taller than she was, and she suddenly felt very nervous. "Sorry, I'm just embarrassed," she mumbled in apology, in case he'd thought she was being rude.

"These island drinks are pretty strong, and if you're not used to them, they can get you into trouble," he said in a tone of warning. Somehow, he made a simple sentence sound like a lecture, and she felt herself reacting naturally and shrinking down into herself.

Her eyes dropped to the deck floor, and she nodded. "I don't drink often," she admitted.

"I heard you say you were headed to the buffet? Happens I was headed there myself; why don't I just escort you there?" he said. Again, it didn't really seem like a suggestion, because he'd grasped her arm very lightly and was turning her towards the line for the outdoor grill.

"Wait, I need my drink," she protested, turning to reach back for the over-sized glass she'd set down. It was still half full, but the ice was melting rapidly in the heat.

"Do you?" he asked. "Maybe you might want to hold off until you've got some food in your stomach," he said with a hint of firmness in his voice.

"But I..." Her voice trailed off, and she frowned. Who the hell was he to tell her she couldn't have her drink? She'd paid for it, or at least, Christopher had, but that wasn't the point. She didn't even know this man.

So why did she have an urge to say 'Yes, Sir' and comply? She bit her bottom lip, hesitating as she tried to remind herself that no one was the boss of her anymore. "I'd really like to finish it," she said nervously. It was about as defiant as she could manage in the face of overwhelming dominance, and she was positive her voice squeaked a little bit.

That eyebrow stayed high up on his forehead like it was stuck there with glue, but after a second, he chuckled. "Stubborn one, aren't you?" he said in a warmer voice filled with amusement. "Tell you what, why don't we get some food and have a seat, and we'll order you a fresh drink? Ice doesn't last long out on deck, and by the time we fill our plates, it's going to be warm or at least watery," he pointed out.

She almost scowled in the face of such logic, but he was right. A quick glance towards the glass showed that the slush was already separating into layers and a puddle of perspiration had formed around the base. She wanted to insist on drinking it just to show him she could, but she'd look like an idiot if she did, and she knew it. She could tell by the amused tilt of his mouth that he knew exactly what was going through her head just then and was waiting to see what she'd do. "I guess you're right. Besides, I think I'm ready to try something different," she said with a tiny bit of rebellion in her voice.

"That's the spirit; you could have a different drink every hour of the day and never try everything onboard. Though I'd stay away from the cucumber breeze, if I were you. Not sure who came up with the idea but it tastes like someone froze half of a salad...and not the good half."

"Cucumber?" Her nose wrinkled, and she laughed. "I, no, I think I'll skip that one," she said firmly.

They headed to the back of the queue and got in line. As they moved, he introduced himself. "Name's Jack. Jack Drake, and you are?"

She was startled to realize that they hadn't even exchanged

names yet. "Oh, sorry I-it's Katherine." She hesitated and then a warning about giving strangers too much information flashed through her mind and she stopped there without giving him her last name. Oddly, that almost seemed to please him, and he gave her an approving look as the conversation moved away from personal things, toward the trip itself.

There wasn't much time for talking before they'd reached the food. She was surprised at how fast the line moved and how few people were eating, and she said so as she filled her plate with the standard outdoor fare—potato salad, a hot dog, and a cheeseburger. He piled his own plate high with some of everything, and her eyes widened in alarm as she worried about it toppling.

"That's because there are two other buffets inside that run twenty-four hours a day, plus the casual dining restaurants and the formal dining room. So many places to eat that you never have to wait long. Didn't you notice last night or this morning?" he asked, distracted as he looked around and then headed towards an empty table. He must have had more grace than *she* possessed, because he managed to avoid spilling anything from his overloaded plate as he set it down.

She followed behind him and was pleased to see that he'd chosen one with an umbrella for shade. If she was lucky, she *might* just make it through the first day without burning. She set her plate down and dropped lightly into the chair across as she replied, "Oh this is my first meal since I got onboard, but I've always heard that most people gain ten pounds on a cruise because there's so much to eat."

He gave her a surprised look, freezing with his cheeseburger raised in one hand for a bite. "Didn't you board early yesterday afternoon? I know most people try to get here before the gates open."

"Well, my plane was a little delayed, so the shuttle didn't bring me over until four, but, yes," she agreed as she delicately picked up her hot dog and took a small bite. She was always a little self-

conscious about eating in front of people since her clumsiness tended to lead to spills and she ended up feeling like a slob. That wasn't the first impression she was going for, especially not while eating with such a handsome man.

"Still, that's a long time not to eat. Not very healthy," he said disapprovingly. He looked her over as he chewed, swallowing before adding, "You don't look like you could stand to lose many meals, either."

She flushed; the pink showed clearly against her pale skin and emphasized the sprinkling of freckles that dusted the bridge of her nose and her cheeks. It was kind of him to say but not true. Her weight tended to hover at about ten pounds over, and a whole week of sobbing through pints of ice cream definitely hadn't improved on that situation. Her determination to lose weight before the cruise so she'd look good in her bathing suit had fallen by the wayside, and if she was honest about it, she really hadn't made much progress on dropping a few pounds, even before she'd been dumped so abruptly.

She floundered for what to say in response, pretending to be absorbed in her lunch while she tried to come up with something that didn't seem pathetic, because she really wasn't very good at taking compliments. "I...that's sweet. Thank you," she said finally.

He snorted and shook his head. "It wasn't meant as a compliment," he said. "You don't want to start a trip off with unhealthy habits; you'll end up getting sick and missing all the fun."

There was a fond, almost affectionate tone to the lecture that kept it from stinging as much as it might have, but still, he had no right to treat her like a child. Of course, she knew skipping all those meals was a bad idea, but it had mostly been nerves. "Thanks for the advice, but I'll be just fine," she said, only a hint of snippiness in her tone as she pushed the last bite of hot dog into her mouth and chewed angrily.

He gave her a surprised look. "You're upset that I pointed it out? Sorry, if I come off as a little pushy; I realize we just met." He



seemed about to say something else and then shrugged and went back to his meal.

It left her feeling awkward and slightly confused about why. Truthfully, she'd missed more meals than he'd even realized, because she hadn't eaten since before getting on the plane, either, and in-flight meals were a thing of the past unless you were first class. So, it had been well over thirty hours since she'd eaten. It was hard to justify that with any reasonable explanation. She didn't eat much when she was nervous, and her stomach had been filled with butterflies about traveling alone, but there was the other reason, too.

She liked food, especially desserts, and when she was sad, she tended to eat them in great quantity despite knowing she'd regret it later. She'd overdone it in the past week, and it had been on her mind that a couple days of fasting would help. Not that she expected to lose much, she just wanted to mitigate the further damage she'd do during the cruise. She'd played with the idea of skipping food every other day so she could eat as much as she wanted in between, but she knew she wasn't going to have the willpower to resist the constant temptation.

Her burger quickly followed the hot dog, with bites of potato salad in between, and the combination did a lot for her mood and the dizziness. By the time she was finished eating, her attitude about being lectured was gone and she sat back in her seat to look at him while he worked methodically through his own meal. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone eat quite so much," she said with a faint tone of awe.

He looked up, flashing her a grin. "Fast metabolism and a big appetite. *I* haven't missed any meals since I've been onboard, trust me," he said and then laughed at her expression. "I've always been like this. If I don't eat constantly, I end up thin as a rail."

"I'm jealous," she sighed, looking down at herself. She wasn't fat, by any means, but her thighs were thick and her ass was a lot rounder than she liked. Though Christopher had loved her back-

side. "You have an ass *made* for spanking," he'd told her once while they lay in bed together. Her backside had been covered with the handprints to prove it.

"Don't be. It's more of a hassle than you'd think. When I lose weight, I drop muscle, too, and that's not easy to rebuild. I learned, years ago, it was best to just keep up with steady meals and avoid the whole thing." He punctuated his words with a large bite of barbecued chicken.

She snorted and shook her head. That was easy for him to say, but then, it was always easier for guys. They weren't held to the same standards, and she'd read that weight loss was a lot easier for them, too.

He gave her an amused look but wisely concentrated on the rapidly diminishing pile of food instead of trying to convince her. She watched him, somewhat astonished that he had managed to eat so much so quickly and without spilling anything on himself doing it. "You'd be aces in a professional eating contest," she commented wryly and again received a grin.

How did his teeth manage to look so clean and white while he was tearing through barbecued meat? It was like magic, and she had to refrain from saying so, because she didn't want him to realize how closely she was examining him. She turned slightly in her chair, looking out across the deck so it wouldn't be so obvious, but she kept him in view at the corner of her vision.

He was...handsome didn't seem exactly the right word. His face could *almost* have been called beautiful, if it wasn't for the ruggedness of his hard jaw line and the stubble that darkened it. His lips were full and sensuous, and his lashes were long enough to make any woman jealous. They surrounded his deep brown eyes in a thick fringe that made them seem bigger and more lustrous. It wasn't fair to waste those lashes on a guy when women would kill for them, she thought.

She bit her lip, rolling it under as she watched him. Christopher was attractive but not like this. She'd always found him good-look-

ing, but he was about ten years older than she was, and his low-energy office job had caused him to soften around the middle despite hitting the gym once or twice a week. It hadn't really mattered to her because his looks weren't what had attracted her to him in the first place, it was his dominance; but she couldn't help comparing the two men.

Jack was definitely the winner when it came to looks, and even with his baggy t-shirt and long shorts, she could tell his body was lean and muscled under them. He looked like a runner. It pleased her because she used to love running, though she'd gotten out of the habit recently.

He cleared his throat suddenly. "Like what you see?" he asked, chuckling at the mortified look she flashed him. At some point, he'd finished eating and turned his attention back to her and she'd been caught staring.

"I...sorry. I didn't mean to stare," she said feebly.

"Nothing wrong with a pretty lady looking," he said, and he returned the look with frank interest.

Her face, already pink, deepened to a rose shade and she looked down quickly to avoid the heated gaze, trying to ignore the flash of interest it set off in her own body.

"So, who was he?" Jack asked quietly. The amusement had vanished from his voice, to be replaced by a serious tone.

Her head jerked up, eyes confused. "Who's who?"

"The guy who broke your heart," he replied simply.

She faltered, mouth opening and closing as she tried to find words. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said, finally, in an uncertain tone. Her hand went up to play with her hair, tugging the pony tail forward so she could curl the ends around her fingers in a nervous gesture. Her agitated fidgeting had always irritated Christopher. He would snap at her to stay still, but she couldn't help it. She was always chewing on her lip or playing with her hair and even being punished for it hadn't curbed the habit.

Jack tilted his head, looking at her, and then he sighed. He

pushed his plate to the side, stacking it on top of hers and leaned forward. "If you don't want to talk about it, you can say so, but don't lie to me. I *really* hate being lied to," he said.

There was a warning to the words, and she swallowed hard as her stomach did a low flip. How did this guy, whom she barely knew, keep managing to put her on the edge like this? "I-I just... how did you know?" she asked. Her bottom lip trembled as she looked at him.

"Well, Katherine, it wasn't much of a guess, to be honest. Don't see many sad people on a cruise ship, and you looked like you were grieving there at the bar. Then, when I fixed your shoe, I noticed the, uh, jewelry." He jerked his chin down at the table, like he could see her ankle through the solid surface.

She winced as she realized what he meant. "Oh, I'd forgotten about that. I'm just so used to wearing it all the time. I meant to take it off before I left home, but I forgot." A small lie; she hadn't forgotten; she just couldn't bear to cut through the elegant silver chain of the anklet that Christopher had given her. It didn't have a clasp, and cutting it was the only way to remove it. It was what passed for her collar—something she could wear in public without anyone knowing what it meant unless they looked close enough to see the word 'Owned' etched in script on the silver band.

Since she was never allowed to take it off, there would be no reason to make it removable, Christopher had explained as she'd watched him solder the ends of the chain together. She'd been anxious, shivering nervously as the heat got close to her skin, but he was careful, and the padding he'd placed between her skin and the silver kept it from burning. There'd been no pain, only a permanent reminder that she belonged to him. She'd been with him for six months at that point. Already half-way through their relationship, but she hadn't even known it.

She really was the worst liar, and she knew Jack wasn't fooled, but he didn't comment on it, and she was grateful for that. She needed to hold onto that small semblance of pride, and admitting

she couldn't bear to take off the most tangible reminder of someone who'd tossed her away so easily would destroy that.

A deck hand with a tray of drinks wandered by, and she stopped him to order one. With a full stomach, the buzz she'd been feeling had pretty much disappeared. She made a point of not looking at Jack when she ordered, avoiding the impression that she felt the need to check with him. But she also had an odd little girl feeling of being naughty and was glad when he joined her in ordering one.

"I don't want to push, but talking helps sometimes, and I'm a willing ear if you need one," he said, once the waiter had wandered off towards the bar. "Guessing this guy who has you all broken up was more than just a boyfriend?" he asked.

She caught her breath and then nodded slowly. "He was my dominant, too. My first and probably my last," she added with a bitter laugh. She dropped her hands into her lap, one holding the other tight enough to hurt as she tried to head off the tears that wanted to pour out of her.

"I'm sorry. Sounds like it happened pretty recently and you're still trying to deal with it. That why you took a trip? To clear your head?" he asked gently. His eyes darkened as he watched her, a look of sympathy filling them when the question caused her to take a gulping breath.

She shook her head and looked past him to the rail. She could just see a line of water from this angle, but most of the view was the beautiful cloudless sky. She focused on it as the words began to pour out of her. She explained about the trip. Telling him how Christopher had purchased the tickets as a one-year anniversary gift, several months back. She babbled through the description of the sudden break-up and the wreckage it had left of her life. "Fuck, I-I even work for him. We have the same gym. I-I guess I should just be really thankful that I never moved in with him. He wanted me to, you know? He said it was silly for me to keep my crappy little apartment when he had a whole house with plenty of room. I

was actually considering it, but it seemed like such a big step." He'd pushed, and she'd balked, as usual.

He'd already been involved in every other facet of her life; the idea of coming home to a shared house had made her feel anxious. She enjoyed her own space and, sometimes, she really needed to be by herself. Christopher had wanted to possess every second of her life, and she was just now realizing how much it had irritated him that she wouldn't give in. She would have eventually, of course; she always did, but he wasn't the most patient man.

In hindsight, there'd been a change in his behavior when she'd told him for the third time that she needed more time to think about it. Maybe he was planning to leave her, even then. If she'd known, she almost certainly would have let him have his way, but caving because she was afraid of losing him didn't make it the right choice, she reminded herself sternly. Some of her internal conflict must have shown on her face, because Jack gave her another sympathetic look.

"If it was right for you to move in, you'd have known it. The fact that you hesitated probably means you had good reason to wait," he said.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly until she felt the tightness in her chest releasing and then she nodded. "I guess. I should have realized he'd give up on me, eventually. He's not that patient, and I can be pretty stubborn," she admitted.

Jack frowned, and he gave a sharp headshake. "A good dominant..." he paused and then corrected himself "...*Anyone* who truly cares about you should respect your need for time and space when making a decision like that." There was heavy disapproval in his voice, and she shivered, even though she knew it wasn't for her.

She wondered why she felt compelled to try and defend Christopher still, but she did. "You don't understand. I was supposed to obey him. A real submissive would have wanted to please him enough to take that step without questioning," she said

earnestly. Those weren't her words, not really. She was parroting things he'd implied more than once when she got too stubborn.

"Ah. I'm not entirely sure it works just like that," Jack said. He looked at her thoughtfully and seemed to be weighing his words. "I think if you have to force submission, then it's not meant to be, not with him. Maybe part of you knew that and that's why you hesitated?" he suggested gently.

She shrugged, looking away from his intense dark eyes and focusing instead on a pair of lovers crossing the deck hand-in-hand. Her heart ached at the sight, but she couldn't take her eyes off of them. They seemed so in love.

He watched her watching them, with a look of concern on his face. He wasn't entirely experienced at cheering up miserable women, but he was going to do his best. "Katherine, you do prefer Katherine, right? No nickname like Kathy or Katie?"

She shook her head without looking at him, still intently focused on the happy lovers. "Katherine it is, then. Listen, we're both here solo, and these things are more fun with company. How would you feel about getting to know each other better?" he suggested.

That caught her attention, and her head swiveled back around in surprise. "You mean, do the cruise together? Excursions and stuff?"

"Yes, absolutely. I'm sure I could go to the concierge desk and have them change our dining room seating assignments so we could sit next to each other, and I don't really have any special plans for the trip. I've been on a few cruises, so now I'm more laid back and only do what I feel like, but I'd be happy to play tour guide," he assured her, offering her an easy-going smile.

I...but I don't think I'd be much fun. I mean I'm such a mess," she said. Her tone sounded lost, not unlike her expression, but there was just a touch of noticeable interest there, too.

"So? Everyone goes through rough spots, and it's better not to be alone for them. I'll keep you company and we'll have some fun. I

can tell you that there're some great places to see that *aren't* on the standard cruise excursion list," he said, coaxing her to say yes.

She hesitated, nibbling one corner of her bottom lip and looking tempted. "I'd hate to ruin the trip for you."

"Katherine, I promise you that won't happen. You can be sad if you need to be, and I'll be happy to sit next to you and listen, but I'm hoping I can at least take your mind off things for a while. So, what do you say?" he pressed gently, one eyebrow going up in question.

Her hands fluttered nervously in her lap, and she folded them to keep them still. There was more than a hint of dominance to his personality, and it called to her. Plus, his casual acceptance that she was a submissive also implied he wasn't inexperienced with D/s, either—or at least, he wasn't uneducated about it. Part of her, a big part, wanted to grab onto that with both arms and cling, but the rest of her was scared of getting in over her head. She'd tried the submissive route and look what it had brought her—a lover who tossed her away when she didn't comply fast enough. What if Jack wasn't any different? What if...

Thoughts racing a mile a minute inside her head, she was torn in so many directions, it was a complete surprise when she heard herself agreeing. "I-I think I'd like that, Jack," she said in a calm tone that was the complete opposite of the frantic, overwhelming emotions she was feeling.

"Good, then it's settled. What would you like to do today?" he asked pleasantly, settling back in his seat with a look of contentment on his attractive face. Since they were at sea, the activities would be onboard, but that didn't really limit them much.

"I didn't really look at the schedule today, but I could go back to my room and get it," she suggested. She knew there were a lot of things happening on the ship but had no idea exactly where or when. She'd mostly just planned to avoid the sun and drink the day away, so she hadn't bothered to look at the scheduled activities



printed on the morning news sheet that had been slipped under her door.

"Not necessary," he assured her. "They post it all over the place, but if you prefer, we could just relax. Maybe swim? Hot tub?"

She brightened; swimming sounded like a wonderful idea. The sun beat down on the deck, and even under the canvas umbrella, she could feel beads of sweat rolling down her skin in salty drops. Only the stiff ocean breeze kept the heat from being oppressive, but a swim sounded just heavenly. "That's a wonderful idea," she said, expressing eagerness for the first time.

Her smile seemed to light up her face, transforming her, in that instant, from pretty to beautiful, and his attention was immediately caught. An answering smile appeared on his lips as he gave her a heated, almost possessive look that seemed out of place on someone she'd only just met, but it still gave her a little flutter of pleasure. The idea that she was desirable to him lightened some of the depression that had covered her like a suffocating blanket lately.

She cleared her throat nervously, dropping her eyes as her pale skin pinkened again. "I'll just run and change into my suit," she whispered as she got up quickly.

She reached down and picked up her plate, but he stopped her. "Don't worry; I'll clean up. My room's close, so it won't take me long. You know this ship has three pools, right?" he said and then laughed at her surprised look.

"Three? Why...oh, well, there are a lot of people," she said. While it was true the ship was so huge it didn't seem crowded, there were still thousands onboard.

"One is set up for children, a pirate theme, I think. The second one is secluded and adults only. It's got some kind of romantic theme." He paused, looking her over, and she stiffened. Her hands clenched around the edge of the plate she was still holding, worried suddenly that he was just looking for a one-night stand. "But I

think you'd be more comfortable with the open salt-water pool on the top deck. It's big, and there are hot tubs, too," he finished.

He hadn't missed her sudden anxiety, and he had no intention of rushing her. The chemistry was there; it was enough that they both felt it. She relaxed, her eyes lifting to meet his as she smiled again. "Yes, please. That sounds perfect. I'll meet you there?" she asked, letting go of the plate and slinging the straps of her tote over her shoulder.

"I'll be there," he assured her. He started clearing up their lunch mess as she hurried away.

There was a spring in her step as she headed inside. Unfortunately, her cabin was all the way at the other end of the ship, because Christopher had gotten them a special suite to celebrate. It had its own balcony that looked out over the ocean, which was nice, but it was also isolated and far from the fun parts of the ship. Purposely, he'd said when he'd shown her the cabin chart. "It will be worth the walking and the extra money." He had smirked. "Walls tend to be on the thin side on ships, and I intend to do many evil things to your body. I don't want the neighbors ruining my fun with noise complaints," he'd said, chuckling when she shivered, squirming a little in her seat.

He always knew exactly what to say or do to get the reaction he wanted. No matter how much she tried to stop her body, it always betrayed her. Just a few words from him or the slightest touch of his hand were enough. In a way, she hadn't just been grieving emotionally for him, her body had been in mourning for his hand, as well. She so badly needed to feel a caress or a hard smack to help her pull everything back together.

She stepped into the nearest elevator and hit the button for her floor. She leaned against a mirrored wall and looked out through the clear glass at the back, watching the cavernous inside of the massive ship passing by for a moment as the car began to descend, and then she closed her eyes and sighed. Jack...Jack Drake. His name sounded like some action star out of a movie, but he was

strong. Dominant, too, that had been obvious. She was already feeling drawn to him, and part of her felt so guilty about it.

How could she feel like a traitor to Christopher when *he* was the one who threw her away like yesterday's trash? Maybe she was more loyal than he was, but it didn't matter. She'd come on this trip hoping to have some fun and pull out of her depression so she could think and make some decisions about where to go in her life, and that was exactly what she was going to do. Jack was probably just what she needed to break the hold Christopher still had on her.

Besides, she was on a cruise ship far from home; if Jack was a mistake, she could simply walk away and never see him again. Maybe that was even the best plan, she decided. Throw herself into the trip, enjoy every second, and then, at the end, she'd go back home and it would be done. There was a niggling bit of doubt in the back of her mind that it would be that easy, but she ignored it.

The elevator stopped, and from there, it was a ten-minute walk to her room. The gorgeous sprawling suite, so expensive on a ship, deserved the moment of attention she gave it before digging through the drawers for her new suit—all done in shades of cream and blue, she'd had a comfortable evening lounging on the sofa and soaking in the Jacuzzi tub, but she was glad she'd forced herself up on deck today. It had turned out to be worth it, and she'd never have met Jack, hiding in her room.

She tossed her suit on the king-sized bed and began to strip, hurrying a little because she was anxious to get back to his company. The air-conditioned walk had dried her skin, so she didn't have to fight to get the spandex over clammy skin, which was good, because it was very formfitting. She turned in front of the mirror and admired her reflection. She was rarely pleased with how she looked, but this suit flattered her in all the right places and she felt confident, for a change.

She threw a gauzy white cover-up on over the suit and grabbed her tote bag. It held a book that she doubted she'd be reading now that she had company, but also, the all-important waterproof sun-

block to keep her from crisping. The trip to the top deck seemed faster, maybe because she was excited, or maybe she was just getting used to the journey. Either way, she stepped out on the deck feeling like she hadn't taken too long to get there. Jack, however, was already there and waiting with a smile.

His dark eyes roved over her body in appreciation, and she flushed. She scolded herself mentally. If she was going to fully enjoy this trip and her time with him, she was going to have to stop blushing every time he looked at her. "Ready to swim or do you want to lie on the deck first?" he asked, leaving the choice to her.

"Oh, swim please. I'm not used to all this heat," she said, sighing. She grabbed a couple of towels from a stack and then looked around for some empty deck chairs.

"Over there," he said, pointing to a couple of unoccupied loungers.

She dropped the towels and her bag onto one and then hesitated before pulling out the sun-block. "Um, would you mind?" she asked shyly as she extended the bottle towards him. "I burn easily," she added.

"Can't have that, now, can we?" he said, taking it and squirting a puddle of it into the palm of his hand. She appreciated how efficiently he covered all her exposed skin with the heavy white cream, rubbing just enough so that it began to sink in. She'd expected him to use the opportunity to grope her or linger too long on her skin, but he didn't. He simply covered her in a thick layer and handed back the bottle.

She wasn't sure if she should be annoyed or flattered, but she didn't have time to figure it out since he was already striding across the deck to dive effortlessly into the deep end of the pool. She'd never learned how to dive, but he made it look easy. Still, she wasn't the type to jump into anything with both feet and, instead, made her way to the shallow end. Working her way slowly down the wide steps into the pool, she let her skin adjust to the chilly water.

She was actually surprised that it *was* cool; she'd expected bath-water warm, but it wasn't.

The sun beating down on her back and shoulders made the water feel even colder as it saturated her bathing suit to the waist. It made the fabric cling to her skin, and she stopped short, shivering for a second before she forced herself to step deeper into the pool, easing in slowly. It was typical of her personality, always that hesitation to immerse herself, but apparently, Jack had something else in mind. He unexpectedly emerged directly in front of her, popping out of the water to send a sudden wave over her, drenching her head-to-toe in saltwater.

She squealed in surprise and shock, eyes wide as she stared at him, spluttering indignantly before she retaliated. Suddenly, they were engaged in an epic water battle as they tried to swamp each other and all the other swimmers around them. The salt water stung her eyes, and she ended up squeezing them shut and splashing blindly in his general direction until she was out of breath from laughing.

Leaning against the wall, holding onto the ledge as she tried to catch her breath, she wiped at her eyes until she could open them enough to see his grinning face right in front of her. She suddenly realized she felt happy, if only for the moment. "That was an unfair attack," she said, a wide smile curving her lips.

"Maybe, but totally necessary. I could tell it was going to take you all afternoon to get into the water, the way you were going," he said, as he pushed at the hair plastered across his forehead. The blond was water-darkened to a light brown and long enough in front that the wet ends were curling down around his eyes, drawing her attention to them.

Dark, dark like unsweetened chocolate, but with small amber flecks that caught the light. She realized she was staring and laughed as she turned her head. "There's something to be said for going slow," she pointed out, still amused through her embarrass-

ment. The pain that had been sitting in the pit of her stomach for days had loosened, and, for a change, her smile wasn't fake.

"Yeah, something to be said for jumping right in, too," he replied. He let go of the ledge, flopping on his back and floating there. "Sometimes, you have to take that leap."

"Uh-huh, but there's a difference between jumping in yourself and being pushed," she said with a snort. She turned, resting her elbows on the deck behind her, letting her feet kick out in lazy motions as she watched him float.

"True, but we all need a little push, sometimes. Don't you think?" His body was cushioned in the extra-buoyant salt water, which left more of him on the surface. She couldn't help but admire his lean, muscular form. His skin was the healthy tanned color of someone who'd been out in the sun a lot, and she was jealous. She tended to go from white to red and then maybe slightly tan, once she peeled, but never that nice bronze color.

She pushed off the wall without answering, sliding under the water and swimming under him to pop up on his other side. "Maybe. Is that what you're doing? Pushing?" she asked. She wasn't talking about the little water fight.

He grinned, eyebrows going up. "Maybe. That a problem?"

She hesitated and then shook her head. No, if it helped her pull out of the depression, she'd take the push, and she was actually having fun, which she'd never expected.

"Good." He had an odd expression on his face that she couldn't entirely decipher, but she did recognize the mischievous glint in his eye. "Race you to the end of the pool and back. Winner claims a forfeit!" he suggested.

"What kind of forfeit?" she demanded, narrowing her eyes playfully. She was a pretty good swimmer, but she had no idea if she could beat him.

"Hmm, winner chooses how we spend the evening?" he offered in a teasing tone. "Relax, any R-rated activities, of course, would

not be part of the bet. I'm just talking about shipboard entertainment," he added when she looked skeptical.

She relaxed, though there was almost a slight feeling of disappointment. It certainly would have made it simpler to fall into bed with this gorgeous man if she'd *had* to do it, but she wasn't sure how she'd have felt about him if he'd gone that route. "All right, that's fair enough then. Hey!"

The second she'd agreed, he'd stroked off across the pool, his strong arms cutting through the water like some kind of Olympic swimmer, and she stared for a second in shock before getting her own body in motion. Even without the head start, it was unlikely she could have beaten him. He'd made it there and back before she'd even gotten halfway, and when she finally caught up, he was standing in the shallow end with his arms crossed over his chest, looking smug.

She stood as soon as she could set her feet on the bottom and glared. Her blue eyes narrowed in irritation. "That was cheating!" she snapped.

He laughed, running his hand through his hair and shaking his head. "Just a trial run. Catch your breath, and we'll do it for real," he said, placating her. She had the sense he was testing her to see how she reacted in different situations, and she wasn't sure how she felt about that.

Mollified, she relaxed and wiped the water off her face. "Ha ha. Very funny," she said, trying not to look amused, but the whole light-hearted tone was doing wonders for her mood despite herself. The sun, however, was not doing as well for her skin, and between it and the salt, it was starting to itch and prickle. "I need to put on some more sunblock before I burn," she said, sighing.

She made her way to the steps, turning halfway to look at him. "Could you help with my back again?" she asked, after a shy hesitation. Things had relaxed enough in the pool that now the shyness wasn't because he was a stranger, it was because she was hoping that he'd be a little less clinical this time.

She went to the chairs they'd staked out and dug through her bag for the bottle. She poured a large dollop into her hand before passing it to him, so she could cover her face and chest with the cream, but when he put his strong hands on her shoulders and began to massage the sunblock into her back, she practically melted into the floor.

Agile fingers worked it into her skin, probably taking more time than was strictly necessary but doing a thorough job of covering every inch of skin that was exposed by the cut of the bathing suit while she took care of her front. And while he might have taken his time with the job, he was careful not to put his hands anywhere they didn't belong. It was a pretty low bar to set for a guy's behavior, but she'd had dates with men who couldn't even manage that, so it pleased her that he didn't take liberties.

She lifted her heavy wet hair, piling it temporarily on top of her head so he could get the back of her neck, and he laughed. "I love the dusting of freckles across your neck and shoulders," he commented as he squeezed a quarter-sized drop of cream onto his hand and smeared it across the speckled skin.

"Oh, they're all over, but any place I burn tends to get a bunch. My grandmother used to call them angel kisses," she said, then immediately flushed. Why would she tell him such a stupid thing? she berated herself mentally.

"Angel kisses? Huh, that's a new one. Guess the angels really liked you then." There was a soft chuckle and then he was dropping down into a squat to get the back of her legs. He smoothed the sunblock down from thigh to ankle, and even though she could have done most of that herself, she wasn't really minding the touch of his hands as they glided over her skin.

She was, and always had been, a very sensual person. Touch was important to her, not necessarily just in a sexual way, but in all ways. The more anxious or sad she was, the more she wanted and needed to be touched. It was unfortunate that the breakup that had put her into a place of craving contact so much had also deprived



her of that comfort. Her body rippled like a cat and her eyes shut blissfully as he finished.

Sighing, she let her arms drop from the top of her head, hair falling back with a wet slap across her skin. "Thank you," she said without specifics. Let him think it was just for helping her avoid sunburn; she knew it was more than that. She slipped the bottle into her tote and turned back to him with a wicked smile. "Ready to lose?" she demanded.

"Lose? Me? I never lose, pretty lady. Just watch," he said, smirking in return. A minute later, they were lined up at the base of the stairs and ready to go. A quick count of three, and they were off, splashing across the pool in a frantic race to the far wall. She slapped her hand against it and did a somersault underneath so she could kick off hard towards the finish.

He did still beat her but only by an arm-length, and she was pretty sure he'd actually had to work for it because they were both panting as they stumbled into the shallows to collapse across the submerged bottom step. "Damn, I thought I had you," she muttered.

"I thought you did, too. If my legs were a little shorter, you probably would have won," he replied. The admiration was obvious in his voice.

"Swim team, high school," she admitted. She'd never been a real contender, but her coach had always said she was a steady, dependable swimmer, and he used her in relays often.

He whistled and shook his hair off his face. "Teach me to make a bet without knowing the odds of losing. Guess I'm just lucky," he said.

She laughed as she leaned back on her elbows and shot him a side-glance. "Guess so. So, what's on the agenda for tonight, then? Winner's choice, right?"

"That's right," he said with a slow, easy smile. "I was thinking maybe the Italian restaurant on Deck C and then hopping over to the Disco Inferno."

"The what?" Both eyebrows went up.

"It's a nightclub, seventies themed, so lots of disco music and terrible polyester outfits," he explained, chuckling at her expression. "It sounded like it might be interesting to check out anyway."

"I-I suppose. I don't really have any clothes that would work," she said uncertainly. Was there anything she could convert or a place to buy something appropriate?

"I wouldn't worry about it. I don't have anything, either. I expect most of the costumes are going to be worn by the people who work there. Who has the luggage space to bring a bunch of themed clothes on a cruise? There's already the Mardi-Gras night and the toga party," he pointed out.

That was true; she remembered the trip paperwork she'd been sent. There were notations about the costume nights and what she should bring. She'd decided to skip all of that once things had crashed around her, so she hadn't planned for it. She shrugged. "I'm willing to give it a try," she said, without a lot of enthusiasm. He *had* won the bet, and she didn't want to be a poor sport about it.

They lounged in the pool for another hour or so, soaking up the sunshine while avoiding the heat by staying in the water. They chatted about light subjects until their fingers wrinkled from the water and then they moved to the deck chairs to lie in the sun and bake themselves dry. There was less talking then, as they both dozed. It was relaxing and exactly what she needed, but eventually, she knew she was either going to have to apply more sunblock or go inside.

She sighed and sat up, stretching her arms over her head until her back cracked. "I can't believe how tired I am," she commented.

He lifted the arm that was bent casually over his eyes to block the sun and looked at her. "Probably rude to say so, Katherine, but you looked a little worn out earlier. Maybe like you hadn't been sleeping well lately."

He kindly didn't mention the dark shadows under her eyes, but she'd seen them herself, every time she looked in the mirror. "No, I don't think I've gotten more than a few hours a night all week," she

agreed. Just thinking about it made her yawn, and she hastily covered her mouth to hide it. She'd spent too much time crying and not enough doing anything else.

"What if we met for dinner at seven? The nightlife onboard goes late; things will barely be getting started then, and it would give you a couple hours to nap," he suggested. *Suggested*, but it wasn't really optional because, as soon as he said it, he was swinging his legs off the chair and pulling her to her feet like she'd already agreed. "But, I—"

Whatever protest she was going to make, he wasn't listening to it as he interrupted her. Already shaking his head, he scooped up her tote and pushed it into her arms. "Nap time. You don't want to be too tired to enjoy the fun tonight, do you? I plan on keeping you out late," he said. His voice was soothing, and she found herself automatically following him into the ship. He pushed her into the elevator gently. "Go, sleep. I'll see you on Deck C at seven," he said firmly and then he watched as the doors closed between them.

She wanted to be annoyed that he'd been so high-handed with her, but, honestly, she couldn't argue the common sense of it, and she was simply used to obeying. So, she blew out an exasperated breath and slapped the button for her floor, allowing herself a little dramatic frustration now that he was out of sight. But, it *was* nice to be told what to do. He wasn't dominating her, exactly, but there was an undercurrent there that she could feel and it drew her like a magnet.

She wasn't in her suite for more than a minute before she was staggering over to the bed and flopping face down on the soft down comforter. The sea air, sun, and exercise had wiped her out so completely that she forgot to set the alarm before she fell asleep, seconds later.