

# CARNAL CONFLICT EXCERPT

## TWENTY YEARS AGO

I loved Meredith Kincaid with every fiber of my being. She was the one I was meant to spend my life with.

Then the accident changed my life and everything I believed in.

I gave her some flimsy excuse—I can't remember what—for needing to borrow the Porsche 914-6 to shop for a ring.

"You just want to go for a joyride." She laughed. "Take all the time you need. I'm going to bike down to the public beach. I need some exercise if I'm going to keep up with you." She dangled the keys and pulled me in as I reached for them, wrapping herself around me and kissing me deeply.

Several long, breathless minutes later, she cupped my butt and guided me out the door. I paused and took another look at her as she stood framed by the bright afternoon sun.

*My God, she's beautiful!* Yes, this was the woman I was going to spend the rest of my life loving.

I was thrilled to find the perfect ring in the beach town of Bayfield and eager to get back to Meredith. I cranked up the volume on the sound system and sang at the top of my lungs to my favorite Eagles tunes. Meredith was *my* sweet darling, and she was going to get the best of *my* love. Unsure of how I was going to do it, I was equally sure I'd propose that very night. Meredith was my world.

I came back to reality with a jolt when I neared Kincardine and saw a cluster of cars and people ahead. I pulled to the side and walked over to one of the bystanders.

"What happened?"

"Someone got hit."

"Are they badly hurt?"

"She's not moving."

"I don't think she's breathing."

"Has anyone gone for help?" I asked.

"Yeah. Some guy said he'd go to the nearest house and call an ambulance."

I pushed through the crowd to see whether I could help. The crushed remains of a bicycle lay beside the mangled front end of a van. For a split second, my brain refused to process the sight of Meredith lying curled on her side on the pavement.

I strode forward, pushing someone out of my way, knelt beside her, and gathered her in my arms.

*She's only fainted. That's it. She passed out. She'll come to in a minute.*

But her utter stillness and the trickle of blood oozing from the corner of her mouth told a different story.

I cradled her and screamed and screamed and screamed without making a sound. I remained frozen with her until the emergency crew took her from me. There were no tears and never would be again. My pain hardened into rage.

"Who did this?"

The woman crouched beside me shrank back at the quiet intensity of my voice. She stood and pointed to a man sitting on the curb holding his head in his hands, rocking, and mumbling. I stood and walked toward him. The smell of alcohol fumes overwhelmed me. The man's mumbles became a chant: "It's not my fault. I didn't mean to." I looked at him, and the beginnings of a white-hot fury threatened to consume me.

I bent and whispered, "Even prison is too good for you. I'll make sure you pay for this the rest of your miserable life."

Tormented by the pain of my loss, I shut down and walled off the world. For just over a week, the only action I took was what I needed to keep me alive. At night, I lay on the bunkhouse bed and stared at the ceiling. My chest constricted and my heart tore, again and again and again. I stared at the unpainted planks adorning the far wall and saw nothing but my own tortured thoughts. During the day, I moved to the picnic-table bench in the tiny kitchen.

I couldn't function; at times, I couldn't breathe. Inch by inch, my emotions crawled a little closer to the room in the corner of my mind where I would lock them up and throw away the key. If loving someone hurt this much, it would be better not to love at all.

Over time, I accepted the fact life would never be the same for me. Any emotion I may have known reminded me of how pathetic and weak I'd become. That was about to change. I vowed I'd never allow myself to feel this kind of pain again, to believe in a world that callously tears you apart, seemingly without reason or the slightest hint of compassion.

At the end of ten days, I emerged, unshaven, ragged, and a little beaten down. I was determined to attain the wealth and power I needed to assure me complete control over all aspects of my future. Brett Sandvine, media mogul and my beloved Meredith's mentor, was just the man to help me. He made me his protégé. Under his tutelage, I transferred from medical school and completed a master's in business administration.

I'm not sure whether Brett saw potential in me or whether he took me under his wing knowing how much I'd loved Meredith, but together we built the media empire that was Magnum International. I became the son he never had. He taught me everything I needed to know.

Magnum grew into a powerful consortium beyond expectations. In time, Brett turned over control of the company to me and assumed the position of chair of the board. We were unstoppable. Being busy and successful filled the void. I had my work and my Masquerade Clubs. I had companionship at the snap of my fingers. It was easy to convince myself I needed nothing I couldn't control. All was right in my world, except . . .

## CHAPTER ONE

### Katherine

I hadn't thought about Connor in years. There were times the feel of his hand smacking my ass consumed my dreams. I had pushed those dreams aside. Oh yeah, no time for that nonsense. Yup, everything was tickety-boo, that is until my boss, Vice President of Editorial, Kevin Jordan, introduced me to the new Senior Vice President of Operations as one of Magnum International's star performers. I went rigid with shock.

Standing right in front of me was the drop-dead gorgeous Connor McClane, impeccable in what had to be a custom-made suit with a gray shirt and black tie setting off his striking, angular features—*trés chic*. I yearned to reach out and stroke that suit.

*Forget the suit, stroke him.*

Seriously, my heart went into arrhythmia. Cardiac arrest was imminent, and I wasn't sure whether it was seeing him again after all these years or how gorgeous he looked.

His left eyebrow shot up, and a charming smile spread from a pair of exquisite lips right through the rich velvet of his gray-green eyes.

"Star performer, eh? I'll have to keep my eye on you."

He shook my hand. His gaze caressed my body briefly before he turned his attention to the others in the group.

I saw a flash of recognition and longing jolt through him, but perhaps I read into it. Speechless, I stood and stared after the man I'd loved, and left, in our youth. He hadn't changed. Yes, there were subtle differences, but the fine hair on his arms still started in the same place on his wrist. His hair still had the silky curls I wanted to run through my fingers, and the sound of his voice still made me feel as if I were taking a bath in warm toffee.

I couldn't tear my eyes from him. I was fascinated by the way he motivated and managed the executive group and painted his vision for future growth with fluid grace and ease. He wasn't outgoing even if he could be quite animated when in the spotlight, but he was absolutely stunning with a magnetic personality.

The women on the team each tried their hand at engaging his attention, and I worked hard to control the annoyance shooting through me when they fawned over him. He stood back and watched. Although never impolite, it was evident he rejected their advances. He still seemed to prefer his own company. I relaxed a little; I had no right to be tense.

*Looks like he's still as hard to get to know as he ever was.*

Red-hot lust shot through my core every time I glanced his way, and I found it hard to focus. My attraction to him was as strong as it had been twenty years ago—maybe stronger, and it scared me. I took care to match his professional courtesy during any interaction.

*Note to self: watch it, Katherine.*

Exhausted from the effort of trying to appear nonchalant all day, I opted out of dinner and dancing with the group—a political *faux pas*, no doubt, but necessary. I'm an introvert at heart, and I detested having someone dictate how I spend my social time. I needed a few minutes away from the social roller coaster of the executive team meetings, so I grabbed a drink at the hotel bar. I ordered a long island iced tea instead of my usual red wine—not the smartest thing to do, but I needed a release from the pent-up energy driving me, source unknown.

Okay, yes, that's a big fat whopper. Connor was the source, as much as I hated to admit it, and seeing him again had sent me for a major loop. I sat at a small table in a dark corner of the room where I could watch the dancers unobserved.

A bolt of electricity raced up my spine as if the ions rearranged themselves in the wake of a shooting star. I looked up and recognized Connor's cat-like grace as he strolled over to the bar.

As he ordered a drink, I struggled to keep the intensity from my gaze so I wouldn't attract his attention. Then a stunning blonde approached him, stood on tiptoe, and whispered in his ear. His smile was a mixture of humor and cynicism, but he bent to listen. The old irrational possessiveness came flooding back as if it were yesterday. *If he's going to be with anybody, it should be me.*

His reply made the blonde tip back her head and toss her hair. She said something else to him, and he shook his head. I almost heard Blondie's "humph" before she flounced off. He smiled to himself, scanning the room before settling on one of the barstools. I quickly looked down at my table and sank further into the darkness of the corner booth, watching him out of the corner of my eye.

I signaled the server and ordered another "tea," intentionally oblivious to the effect the blend of triple sec, light rum, gin, vodka and tequila was having on me. When I reached for my wallet to pay for the drink, the server said, "It's already taken care of."

"By whom?"

"By me." Connor gestured toward the chair opposite me. "May I?"

"I guess so. I mean, sure."

I took another mouthful of my drink. *Jeez, Katherine, could you be any more articulate?* I blushed at my inability to think of something witty or clever to say. Try as I might, witty

repartee always occurred to me after-the-fact.

"It's been a long time." I wanted to kick myself.

Connor held my eyes for a long moment and smiled.

"You left me without a word," he said.

Intense. Always to the point. *My turn.*

"And you never came after me," I retorted. *Came after me? Where did that come from?*

"If you'd wanted to be there, you would have stayed."

"Maybe." *Stalemate.*

I couldn't stop staring. He was exquisite. Those mercurial eyes gazed steadily back. The half smile that made a flutter of sunshine spread throughout my loins came and went. He undressed me with those penetrating eyes. I took another gulp of my drink.

More staring. It would appear he was still comfortable with silence. I most definitely was not, at least not with him. After what seemed like a lifetime, one in which I had more to drink, I looked at my watch and gasped.

"Oh my God. I've got to go. I'm giving a presentation in the morning."

As we got up to leave, I stumbled. *Oh shit, I'm drunk.* And there sat Mister Calm-Cool-and-Collected acting as if he'd been drinking his beloved Pepsi.

Connor smiled, cupped my elbow, and walked with me to my room. As we rode up the elevator, I fought the desire to reach up and kiss those luscious lips, afraid of rejection. I fumbled with the key card. He reached over, took the card, and slid it through the lock.

I froze. Every nerve in my body tingled. He pushed open the door and gave me the key. Those intense eyes undressed me. But I broke eye contact and walked into the room. When the door closed behind me, I released the breath I'd been holding. When I turned to shut and bolt the door, Connor leaned against it, watching me.

"Let me see you." He spoke in a voice quiet with command.

Ignoring the dampness between my legs, I made a pact with myself—I was *not* going to allow this to happen.

"Connor, I'm not . . . We're not . . . I mean . . . It's been years since . . ."

I took a deep, calming breath. *Twit.* Here I was acting like the young woman I'd been on our first date, right down to the wetness spreading between my legs.

"Let me see you," he repeated.

"Um, give me a minute." I fled to the bathroom. *Get it together, girlfriend.*

I splashed cold water over my burning face in a vain attempt to sober up. I looked at the wide, brown eyes staring back at me in the mirror until calm settled over me. What to do? Should I send him packing? Did I even want to? *Wow, wait a minute. Give your head a shake.* Of course, I should stand up to him.

*"Let me see you."* The words brushed through me, washing away logical thought.

I kicked off my sandals and took an eternity washing my face and brushing my teeth, my mind at war with the sexual hunger burning through me. Part of me hoped Connor would get sick of waiting and leave. Part of me raced with excitement at the certainty of his command of himself and the situation. I straightened up with new resolve. If Connor was still there, I'd ask him to leave.

He sat in the corner, hands steepled under his chin, and looked at me. Under his scrutiny, I instantly became a schoolgirl again, a child who had disobeyed. He shook his head slightly and, with effortless grace, stood facing me.

*"Come here."* His voice was quiet yet full of command.

As if hypnotized, I moved in front of him. The tips of his fingers traced my bare arms. Goose bumps immediately sprang to the surface, and sexual electricity jolted through me. I lowered my head. He reached under my chin and forced me to look up, challenging me to react. He edged down the zipper of my little black dress and let it fall to the floor. Suddenly, nothing else existed outside my need to give myself to him, to have him take me, *now*.

The heat emanated from him as his fingers outlined the curve of my breasts. I shivered. I loved his hands. His touch reminded me of the thing I craved. Thoughts that filled so many sleepless nights. Thoughts that I avoided admitting to myself—to surrender to his will.

He hooked his index fingers in the band of my bikini briefs and drew them down my legs, waiting until I stepped out of them. I did, like an obedient child wanting to please him.

Now I was naked and more than a bit self-conscious. Needing to do something with my hands, I reached out to unbutton his shirt, but he pushed my arms down to my sides, encouraging a passive acceptance of his control. I complied, allowing him to focus his attention on my breasts while I tried not to think about how I looked standing there. He played with each, first with nimble fingers and then with his lips. I couldn't stop the moan of pleasure escaping as more moisture built between my legs.

*"Lie down and spread your legs wide for me. Don't move. Don't speak."*

I started to protest. He put a finger over my lips and led me to the bed. I should have objected, but couldn't. I closed my eyes and waited. That was the moment I surrendered myself to him, and I liked it.

*"Watch me,"* he said. Again, his voice insisted he be obeyed.

I watched him undress. He had a splendid body, all smooth lines and sinew. I swear Michelangelo used him as the model for David, right down to the brown curls framing

the sculpted lines of his face. His engorged cock sprang to attention when it escaped from the prison of his pants.

Naked, he straddled me and pushed my arms up over my head. I closed my eyes.

“Look at me. I want you to watch me watching you,” he said.

Holding both hands above my head with one hand, he reached down with the other and pulled my nether lips apart and thrust his cock in straight to the hilt and rode me. He took his time, gliding his heat out inch by inch to the tip before burying it deep within me again and again. With each stroke, my clit brushed against his pubis, fanning the flames of my passion.

Each time my eyes started to close, he reminded me to watch him. Each command, like each thrust, drove me nearer to a frenzy so powerful I wanted to scream. His cock glistened with my essence, exciting me more. Nothing else existed except his body moving in mine. For what seemed like an eternity, he fucked me. I lay spread and captive to his will.

When I struggled with the need to come, he tightened his grip and continued his languid ride. He seemed to take pleasure in teasing me to distraction. Finally, he increased the tempo of his thrusts, and together our bodies convulsed in explosive orgasms.

“Alley Kat.” His whisper was so soft I might have imagined it. Without another word, he slid out of me, got dressed, and left.

*Some things never change.*

I lay alone, relaxing in the afterglow except for a few unexpected quivers running through me. That was the Connor I remembered. Not so much the way he dominated sexually, but the obvious control and emotional distance he maintained. He was a man women wouldn't or couldn't say no to. It wasn't that you ever felt forced or intimidated. It was more the realization that if you resisted, he would only smile and walk away, leaving you wondering about what could have been.

*He never kissed me.*

He sparked an overwhelming sexual need that exposed every dark fantasy you tried so hard to hide. If I was honest with myself, it was a need I knew too well. One I avoided my whole life. My feelings for Connor threatened to break down my defenses, and that scared me more than I cared to admit. Sex was not the problem. It was those same secret fantasies, late at night, touching myself, that both tortured and excited me beyond reason.

I stumbled to the bathroom. The disarray of loose black curls framing my face mirrored my chaotic thoughts.

*I can't believe I did it again.* Yet if there were a next time, I would do anything he asked



of me. *What the fuck is wrong with me?* I was usually so decisive, so in control of my world.

I'd sworn I'd never be anyone's plaything again. Yet Connor drew me to him, like the proverbial moth to a flame. Just the thought of him brought a warm flush of desire to my core. I shook my head and put the evening's events down to the stupidity of an alcohol-fueled moment of weakness.

*After all, it's only sex, right?*

Wrong. I hadn't experienced such intensity since the first and last time I'd been with Connor.

I'd met Connor at university. Even then, he was cold, dark, brooding, smart, and one of the best-looking guys I'd ever laid eyes on. We started hanging out together. I hid the burning desire growing in my belly, convincing myself I wanted nothing more than a casual relationship. As much as he tried to hide it, my friendship was breaking through the emotional barrier he maintained with the conviction of a religious zealot. When I asked him to talk about what he was looking for in a relationship, he always passed it off saying, "Love isn't on my agenda."

Maybe it wasn't, but there was deep-seated hurt in his eyes when he said it, and I'd loved him all the more because of it.

In the ensuing months, to my growing frustration, he never attempted to sleep with me. Sure, he'd played with me, and there'd been some heavy petting sessions, but he never went beyond that. It was as if he was afraid to, which defied reason because his reputation for sleeping with almost every girl on campus was legendary. Our bond and our friendship deepened.

After graduation, everyone was celebrating at the local pub. Connor worked the room to the delight of the women vying for his attention. They reminded me of a pack of wild dogs fighting over the best piece of fresh meat. Okay, maybe that was a little harsh, but subtlety was never one of my strongest attributes. I wanted to kill every one of them, but all I'd allow myself to do was sit and watch him in action. So, no one was more surprised than I was when Connor walked me home. Just being near Connor excited me, not that I'd ever tell him that.

I was delighted when he accepted my offer for a nightcap. Of course, I chattered incessantly, hoping I wasn't coming off like a love-struck twit. During one of my tirades, Connor held up his hand, stopping me midsentence.

"Take your clothes off," he said.

I can't explain it, but the next thing I knew, I was standing naked and trembling at the foot of the bed. I didn't resist when he placed me facedown, extended my arms, and bound them to the metal headboard with a couple of scarves he pulled from my dresser.

Pulling my legs apart, he knelt between them.

I was exposed and vulnerable. If it had been anyone else, I would have resisted. But it was Connor, and by this time, I'd have done anything he asked. My excitement showed as the wetness oozed from me.

His cupped hand slid under me and captured the full mound of my sex. I pushed down, sliding through the wetness saturating the palm of his hand. My mind and body raged with need when he closed his hand in a vicelike grip, capturing my throbbing clit between the engorged lips of my cunt. In one quick motion, he removed his hand, grabbed my hips, lifted me to my knees, and buried his cock deep within me.

With each stroke, he slapped the cheeks of my buttocks, hard. His hand molded the round globes of my ass perfectly. My flesh shuddered under the impact, and I was sure he'd left his brand with a red-tinged imprint of his hand. I gasped as each slap enhanced the pleasure of his hard cock. I lost control, completely overwhelmed by the unrelenting waves of pleasure pulling me to a climax of uninhibited abandon.

I came, for the first time in my life. Connor clutched the stinging cheeks of my buttocks, arched back, and pulled out of me, painting the cheeks of my ass with the outcome of his climax. He leaned over me for a brief second, and I'm sure he whispered, "My Alley Kat."

Without another word, he untied my arms, dressed, and left.

And there I was, a young, inexperienced woman wrapped in a torrent of unresolved anguish threatening to tear me apart. *Only a slut would let a man tie her down and fuck her from behind.*

Every bit of my moralistic upbringing rose to the surface, and the emotions overwhelmed me. I couldn't admit how much I'd liked it. My desire for Connor battled with my guilt and shame. Without experience or the perception that comes with age, my shame won out.

*Damn my Victorian upbringing. How can I ever look him in the face again?*

Left with no choice, I packed up my car and headed to anywhere else, and ended up where? Full circle, right back where I'd started with him. Except I was stronger now. This time, I had a choice. At least that's what I told myself, knowing if he had told me to beg, I'd have done so, and willingly.

*He called me Alley Kat. He remembered.*

The next morning, to my great relief, he acted as if nothing had ever happened. If not for the soreness between my legs, I could almost convince myself it hadn't. In truth, I wanted him even more than I cared to admit to myself, and I had no idea what to do about it.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Connor

When you have to remind yourself to breathe, you know you're in serious trouble. I'd avoided trouble for twenty years, and now it was standing right in front of me, and her name was Katherine Aleia King, my Alley Kat.

Seeing the familiar, cocky tilt of her head made me smile. If the definition of beauty was symmetry, she was a perfect symbol. Curves now replaced angles on her five-foot, three-inch petite frame. Loose, black curls framed a round face with large, wide-set, gold-streaked brown eyes.

I'd vowed to forget this woman, but as much as I tried, she was never far from my thoughts. My Alley Kat looked very much the same as she had twenty years ago, all cuddly and warm with tiny, sharp claws ready to pierce at any given moment. A jolt of electricity stirred my cock in a way I'd only ever experienced with two women, and she was one of them.

I should have turned and run as fast as I could. If you've ever stood on the edge of a tall cliff, you know what I mean. The view was intoxicating. The fear was paralyzing. I'd fallen once and barely survived. It wouldn't happen again.

She was the only woman besides Meredith who'd inched her way underneath the cage encasing my heart. When I'd realized I cared for her, she'd up and left. The loss was too much to bear. I'd taken those emotions and tucked them into a box, wrapped securely with a ribbon of chain, locked, and hidden away into the farthest corner of the closet. Feelings I swore would never again see the light of day. And now, despite my resolve, I couldn't stop thinking of her.

Against my better judgment, I had to see her again. Her sexuality couldn't be denied. My only thought was to make her submit to her deepest need until she begged for release. It wasn't the pursuit of love; it was pure lust. If she so much as hinted at more, it would be my turn to walk away.

Others saw me as cold, calculated, and emotionally unavailable, the consummate business type. They were right. Yet some unrelenting force drew me. The sight of her lithe, youthful body at the boardroom table during the conference consumed me with thoughts of her writhing beneath me. The tension would build in my cock until it was near bursting, and nothing would bring release. Finally, I relented and sent her a text message, convincing myself our connection would end when the conference ended.

*Meet me at the Old Mill Inn. Room 514 C.*

And so I began a series of encounters, assuring myself this would be another fuckfest with a willing partner of like mind.

As an executive, Kat was confident, analytical, driven, and often brutally honest. As a lover, she acquiesced and submitted. I liked that. When I opened the door of the suite to greet her, she shed one persona for the other. Was she aware how compelling this was for me, or, for that matter, did she even know she did it?

We sat on the couch, unwinding after a particularly taxing day.

“Are you finding it difficult to keep our work and personal relationships separate?”

“What makes you ask that? Did I say something I shouldn’t have?” She looked at me, intensity reflecting in those beautiful eyes.

“Not at all, Kat. In fact, it would be the exact opposite. When you take a position counter to the one I’ve taken, you usually preface your case with, “Connor, I respectfully submit . . .”

“And how does that make you feel? Do you want me to stop?”

*There’s that psych degree of hers in action again.* I laughed.

“I can’t say it makes me feel one way or the other, and no, I don’t want you to stop. I do find that your arguments often influence me to change where I stand on an issue, and that’s a good thing. I just want you to know I’m pleased that sharing a bed with you doesn’t affect our working relationship.”

She kept our dinner conversation light, although she discussed current events and occasionally threw in a sexual tidbit about one of her colleagues. If I asked her a personal question, she answered succinctly before changing the subject or challenging me with a personal question of her own.

I learned she preferred to ply me for information about my sexual likes and dislikes and fantasies. She seemed to be searching for something through me as if I had the answers. I didn’t know if she was testing herself or me, but I was willing to find out as long as we left my heart out of it.

“It’s time you choose a safe word.”

There never seemed to be a right time to have this type of conversation, but during one of the sumptuous meals she preferred before sex seemed opportune.

“What do you mean, C? A safe word for what?”

“You know I like to dominate sexually, and my sense is you like it when I do. There’s so much more I want to show you if you’re open to it. The safe word is for you, to let me know if things are too intense and you wish to stop.”

“You’re the one who needs to be in control, so why do I need to choose a safe word?”

Kat kept her gaze trained on me and took a bite of her salad.

"Alley Kat, a submissive, which I believe you are, is always the one in the driver's seat. If you're ever uncomfortable, all you need to do is say the safe word, and I'll immediately stop all activity."

"Huh." She took a sip of her wine. "I've got one. How about *Rasputin*?"

I coughed, almost choking.

"*Rasputin*? Isn't that a little over the top?"

She smiled. "What do you suggest?"

"How about *red light* if you want things to stop?"

"Okay, but what if I don't want you to stop but need you to back off on the pressure? Can *enough* be the signal for that?"

She was such a playful tease.

"Why don't we keep it simple and use *yellow light* in that instance."

"Sounds good to me. So *green light* would be full steam ahead, right? Shall we try it out?" She grinned at me and lifted her glass in salute.

"By all means. I look forward to it."

So far, she'd said *yellow light* once, leaving me with the distinct feeling it was more of a test than her unwillingness to comply. If there was a limit to her submissive desires, we hadn't found it. We had just scratched the surface, but I began to wonder who was leading whom.

We graduated to using beginner restraints and dildos, and I increased the duration and intensity of our sex until exhaustion overcame her. Surprisingly, she took to rolling over, snuggling her butt against my stomach and falling into a deep sleep, giving me the opportunity to watch and stroke her before I drifted off. If I wished her to service me with a blowjob or a handjob, I had to catch her before this languid state set in. When I did, she was nothing less than enthusiastic; she was the perfect lover.

I loved the feel and smell of her, especially when she was pungent with the aroma of our sex. With each encounter, my desire to explore and probe the depths of her emerging depravity grew. I suspected my own lasciviousness knew no bounds, and I started to wonder where she would draw the line. She was overcoming the guilt of exploring those dark fantasies that had haunted her. It was the first step for her, not only to accept but also to embrace the truth of her sexuality.

A plan formed in my mind and working out the details to ensure success consumed me.

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As the conference week drew to a close, I experienced emotions I had long since forgotten, and they were tearing me apart. Usually, I walked away. No regrets, no looking back. But here was a woman exploring her sexuality, and her enthusiasm was infectious. She openly embraced her mounting passion each time we came together, and the excitement of her lust became an addiction.

I ordered room service with her favorite foods. She preferred to eat in the privacy of the suite. As her confidence increased, she grew bolder. Tonight, she arrived wearing nothing but a coat and shoes. I closed the door. She spread the coat on the floor in front of the fireplace, lay down, and opened her legs for me. Dinner was cold by the time we were ready to eat, and I laughed as she tore into her steak, too ravenous to wait for me to reheat it.

We chatted about inane things as we ate, and I waited until I was sure she was relaxed and eager. As she got up to head for the bedroom, I stopped her.

"Just a minute, Kat, I have something I want to talk with you about."

"Okay, let's talk in bed," she said, smiling.

I almost caved. Perhaps we could wait. *God, this woman is challenging.*

"Let's sit here on the couch and enjoy another glass of wine while we talk."

She hesitated, frowned a little, and then gazed at me with bottomless lust in her eyes and finally complied. She sat quietly while I refilled our glasses.

"Okay, what's up?" she asked.

"I'd like to take our relationship to the next level."

The frown returned, deeper this time, and I hesitated a moment.

"Relationship? Connor, in the past week, you've helped me discover a part of who I am, and you probably have no idea how important that is for me. When I think about what I want you to do to me, it scares me. And yes, we have a lot of fun together. But you're still too emotionally distant, too guarded for me. Let's just enjoy what we have. That way, no one gets hurt."

*Damn, she mistakes me. I'm losing her . . .*

"I understand, Kat, but I'm not talking about a personal commitment. This has to do with our sexual relationship."

She seemed to relax a bit and sank back on the couch.

"I'm listening."

"I think you'll admit we've discovered a rare compatibility in our sex. I like to dominate, and you like to be dominated. Is that an accurate statement?"

“Yes. It’s hard for me to admit, but you’re showing me things about myself that I used to hide from.”

*She isn’t making this easy.*

“Well, I’d like to take things to the next level.”

“But—”

“Hear me out, okay? I’ve never made a secret of the fact I like to dominate. This has been a serious part of my life for a long time. It has everything to do with control. I want—no, that’s not it—I need someone who is not just willing to submit but must submit. It has to be an integral part of her sexuality. Someone who needs to be dominated sexually yet is her own person. Someone who finds true satisfaction by submitting to a master who pushes her to the point that breaks down her inhibitions, allowing her to give in to her darkest needs.

*What are you thinking?* Was I getting through to her? I couldn’t read the cauldron of emotion bubbling behind that piercing stare. I waited a beat. She said nothing.

“It’s not just about me. It’s about you and what you want. I think you are that woman. Or, am I deluding myself?”

“Con—”

“Before you answer, Kat, know that if this is what you’re looking for, you will do what I want, when I want, how I want, no questions asked. You can stop any time you wish, and that will be the end of our relationship. Yes, I said relationship. I’m offering you a chance to submit to me, and, in turn, find yourself. Nothing more.

“I will never do anything to cause any real pain, and you can use the safe words to stop at any time you feel the need. The choice is yours.”

I watched her carefully. At one point, she winced, but the interest in her expression encouraged me. I decided to take it one step further.

“The game may also involve you submitting to other people of my choosing and under my direction. Again, at any time, you may choose not to play, but that will be the end of our relationship.”

“You’re not leaving me with much choice here.” Her expression was inscrutable.

*What are you thinking?*

“You have complete choice. I believe we both thought this wouldn’t continue after this week. However, I’m ready to take the next step. Or we can say our goodbyes and move on.”

Was I too forward? What if she ran as she did twenty years ago? Could I accept that?

She sat quietly for a while. When she got up and walked around, my guts started to churn, afraid she might decide to walk out of my life for good. She gazed into the night,

her body rigid with concentration. It was not easy to find a woman with her combination of innocence and depravity. I shut out the doubts leaking into my consciousness.

After what seemed a millennium but was only about five minutes, she came back, sat on the edge of the sofa, and looked me in the eyes.

"I have some conditions," she said.

"But, Kat—"

She placed a finger on my lips.

"Now it's my turn. I have a few conditions," she repeated. "This relationship, as you call it, is about sex and only sex."

"Of course. I didn't mean to imply—"

"These terms are nonnegotiable, Connor. I'm not inclined toward group sex or gang bangs. If you decide on bringing other people into the equation, it can be only one at any given time and one of my choosing."

"What else?"

"I'm not into pain. Slaps and a little stinging are one thing, but I'm not into anything that causes real hurt, bruising, or in any other way physically mutilates me. I'm not into sex involving bodily excretions such as urine or feces, either."

Humor tugged at my lips, but she was very serious, so I restrained myself and said, "What else?"

"This one is most important—never, ever humiliate me. I can no longer deny I thrive on being controlled, but the thought of being humiliated makes me want to throw up and will definitely end our relationship."

*Excellent. She's interested.* I looked at her, trying to get inside of her head.

"What would constitute humiliation in your book? After all, I've had you beg during our sex on several occasions. Was that humiliating?"

Her ears turned a deep crimson. Now I knew she was willing to proceed with the game; in business, they called her conditions *buying signals*.

"No," she said softly. "That wasn't humiliating. It was controlling. Doing something like leading me around by a leash would be humiliating to me."

"I can give you my word that will never happen unless you want it to. I have no desire to humiliate you nor do I wish to play or have you play with bodily excretions as you call them, although I may want to pee between your legs during my toilet fantasy."

Her spine snapped to attention, and this time I did laugh.

"Kidding."

"This isn't a joke." She used her best boardroom voice. I forced myself to match her mood.



"I promise you I will never humiliate you nor will I subject you to group sex. Is that better? How's this—we can tweak our hard limits any time we feel the need. Will that work for you?"

She studied me for a minute and smiled.

"Hard limits, I like that. Yes, that will work for me. Now, what are your hard limits?"

"Nothing you haven't covered." I took hold of her chin, pulled her face to mine, and kissed her long and hard.

"Now we can finalize our agreement with a little fun. I want you on the bed, naked, on your hands and knees. Do you want to play?"

Without a moment's hesitation, she walked to the bed, dropping her robe on the way, and knelt over the pillows I'd placed. I knelt behind her and grabbed the soft cheeks of her ass before ramming my hard cock deep inside her. She gasped, and I smiled inwardly with the knowledge I'd surprised her with my seeming lack of care about her state of readiness. But oh, she was ready.

I thrust into her fast and hard, relishing the tremors of her orgasm. I continued to ride her to more of those orgasms, acutely aware each one left her craving the intense clitoral orgasm more and more. I slammed into her until she panted with exhaustion, and then I allowed myself to come. The spasms of a powerful orgasm jerked through me again and again until all I wanted was to sink down beside her and hold her tight as we slept. But I needed to push her even further to ensure she understood the rules. She rolled over and started to curl onto her side in her favorite post-coital position.

"Not yet, my love. First, I want you to play with yourself until you come."

She opened her mouth to protest, and I asserted my dominance, leaving no room to question. "Now."

Her movements were slow, and I reached over and slapped her ass hard enough to sting and give her the message.

"I said now. Touch yourself."

She rolled on her back and used her fingers to rub herself. Her eyes were closed tight, perhaps to lose herself in self-pleasure or to avoid the awkwardness of someone watching her. Either way, I didn't care. I took great pleasure in seeing her struggle to make herself come and played with myself as my cock jerked back to life.

I loved to watch her whether I played with her or she played with herself. During the conference meetings, I had to stop myself from imagining her writhing in agitation with her need to come or risk exposing obvious excitement when I stood up.

Finally, when I wondered whether she was over the brink of exhaustion, she came with a scream so loud I feared it would bring security, and she collapsed her legs. This

time, as she started to curl, I said, "My turn." She seemed ready to succumb to her need to rest. Would she defy me?

"Choose." I lay back on the bed and put my hands behind my head.

She knelt, took my cock into her mouth, and sucked me dry. The game was on . . .