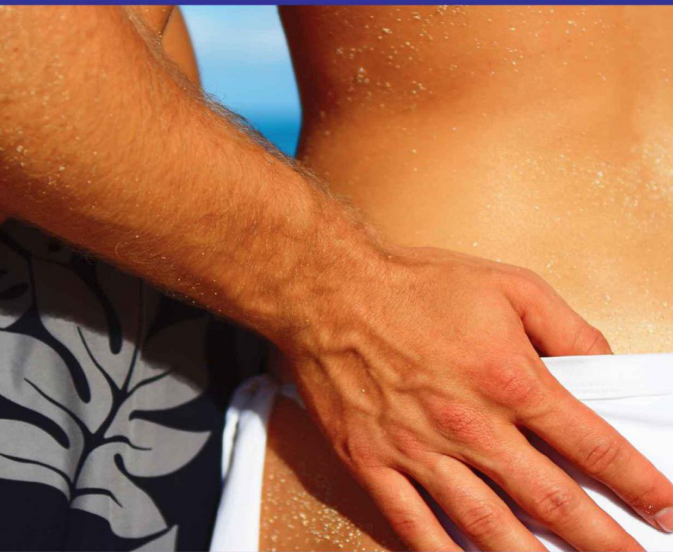


Brianna Salera



TESSA'S ESCAPE

to Athena's Ground

About Tessa's Escape (to Athena's Ground)

Tessa Donovan is too young to be an emotional and sexual has-been. She married her first and only boyfriend and when he died making love to another woman, Tessa's world was shattered. Three years, one rape, several therapists and one suicide attempt later, Tessa has just about given up on herself and her emotional future.

And then she discovers Athena's Ground, a non-traditional

center for women with relationship and sexual issues. At Athena's Ground, they don't just talk about personal growth and sexual self-discovery, they teach it—hands-on, with the best sex therapists in the business.

Conservative, shy, sexually inexperienced Tessa is desperate enough to try anything.

Even Athena's Ground.

Reader Beware: This romance

is intended for mature audiences only; it contains extremely graphic sex, naughty language and an occasional chuckle. Some readers may object to its content. Don't say I didn't warn you.

Tessa's Escape to Athena's Ground

Brianna Salera

2013

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Athena's Ground)

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Copyright Information

MAY

Tessa Donovan looked around her living room and focused on the sofa. It would certainly be comfortable enough; she'd spent enough that even the most sensitive princess couldn't feel a pea. She could settle herself on the couch and open the window blinds with the remote. She'd watch the night time Manhattan skyline with an easy flick of her finger. And with an easy flick of...

The phone rang and Tessa jumped. She willed herself to let it ring, but on the fourth trill she couldn't stand it. She'd get rid of the caller and get back to the business at hand.

"Maria," Tessa said, recognizing the soft voice of the woman who cleaned her apartment every Monday morning. "It's late. What's wrong?"

"I'm so sorry to bother you Mrs Tessa, but I wonder if I left my wallet in the kitchen? I was reaching for my cell phone and my purse fell off the counter and..."

Tessa could hear the soft voice

ratcheting up an octave, becoming frantic. "Hold on," Tessa said, walking into the kitchen, "I'm looking now."

"Maybe on the floor, between the counter and the pantry?" Maria offered.

"Found it!" Tessa said a moment later. "It was wedged between a bar stool and the counter."

"Oh, thank goodness. My grocery money for the week is in that wallet."

Tessa wondered whether she should offer to drive it over to her.

In light traffic, it wouldn't take long at all. She thought about her plans and decided not to take the chance.

"Maria, I'm busy with something tonight, or I'd offer to drive it over to you. How about I take it down to the Concierge Desk and you can pick it up at your convenience?"

"Pablo is home tonight. He could drive me over to pick it up." Maria's voice was soft, hopeful.

"I don't feel like having visitors tonight. The Concierge Desk is secure, but if it will make you feel better I'll seal your wallet in a box and put your name and phone

number on the box. I promise, it will be safe. I'll run it down to the desk right now. Come when you want, but just don't come to my apartment. I'm...going to bed early and don't want to be disturbed. Okay?"

Maria agreed and Tessa said goodbye.

Tessa carried the worn black wallet with her as she padded across the thick living room rug, down the polished hardwood in the hallway and to the entrance of her bedroom. It was a large room, not crowded even though it held two massive armoires, a settee, and an

entertainment system that elegantly displayed a 55-inch Sony Bravia, Bose theater speakers, Bose Sound System and, the thing that made Mark cringe, a Hello Kitty music box.

Tessa stepped toward the walk-in closet, intending to find a small box and some packing tape. She'd wrap up Maria's wallet, take it to Concierge in the lobby, and get on with her business. As she passed Hello Kitty, she paused. "Always adorable," she said softly, lifting the lid. The tinkling notes of "Sakura" sent Kitty White gently twirling. But Tessa hadn't wound

the box up so the song, and the girl, died after only a few twirls.

“That’s about right,” Tessa said, laying down Maria’s wallet and brushing a tear from her cheek. Holding the music box with both hands, Tessa forgot everything except the memories from her music box. She climbed on top of the massive bed and stroked the smooth box lid. She’d never felt completely comfortable in Mark’s bed, though she had some wonderful memories. Mark nuzzling the back of her neck, whispering sweet things into her ears until she opened herself up to

him. Mark's long, thick fingers gently pulling her silk nightgown up, over her shoulders and head, discarding it like the wrapper on a piece of fine candy. Mark holding her in his arms after he'd spent his passion.

Tessa wiped a second tear and brushed away her thoughts. If she didn't do it now, she wouldn't do it. "One last song for me Kitty," Tessa said, as she found the turnkey and wound her precious music box.

The sweet, somewhat melancholy, song played. Kitty White twirled. And Tessa Donovar shook the contents of her pill bottle

into the palm of her hand. It took five or six swallows, each followed by a large sip of water, but she got them all down. When she was finished, she settled into the softness of the bed and placed the music box next to her, on the pillow where Mark's head should have been. The last thing she heard was Kitty's song. The last thought she remembered was that she'd forgotten Maria's wallet. But by then, it was too late.

The first thing Tessa saw when she opened her eyes was not Mark, and she felt cheated.

“How are you feeling?” The speaker was a gray-haired woman in scrubs. She looked tired, but her eyes were kind.

Tessa pointed to her throat and said, “Sore.”

The woman nodded. “Endotracheal tubes are no fun.” She handed Tessa a small cup with ice chips. She pointed to the IV bag hooked to Tessa’s arm. “You don’t need the fluid, honey, so go easy on

the ice chips. Just enough to soothe your throat, okay?"

Tessa took a small piece of ice from the cup. Her hands were shaking so badly she nearly missed her mouth. After the ice softened the ache in her throat, Tessa spoke.

"Where...?"

"Emergency Room. You were brought in by paramedics." The nurse gave Tessa a steady look, hard but not unkind. "Your cleaning lady found you. You're lucky she was fast. Gastric lavage doesn't work past sixty minutes."

Tessa's brain was nearly as dry

as her throat. What did Maria have to do with this hospital? Why were paramedics...and then reality hit Tessa like a sharp jab to her tender belly: she'd decided to end her pain with a bottleful of sleeping pills. It was the oldest escape in the world, Tessa thought, but in her case, not the most reliable.

"The doctor will be in shortly," the nurse said.

Tessa had a hard time picking out her words over the noise of beeping instruments and the sounds of other people's pain. If God collected all the pain in the emergency room tonight, she

thought it would fill the Grand Canyon. A tear slipped down her cheek. Mark had wanted to take her to Arizona and she'd refused to go. "Too hot!" she'd told him, so instead they spent two weeks in London. She shopped Harrods and dined at Gordon Ramsay's while Mark swore he was thrilled to be in London instead of a rustic B & B in Sedona. In hindsight—long distance hindsight since it had been three years now, Tessa wondered how Mark had stood her self-indulgence. She closed her eyes, half exhaustion and half shame.

“Mrs. Donovan?”

The voice distracted her from the view. She was strolling the streets of London, hand in hand with Mark, until they boarded a long, beautiful boat. When they passed Anne Frank’s House, Tessa realized they had gone on to Amsterdam. Mark was at her side, nuzzling the sensitive spot behind her ear, whispering that the canals were only half as beautiful as she.

“Mrs. Donovan?” The voice was louder. Closer.

Tessa opened her eyes. A man in a white coat was leaning over her. She could feel his breath on

her face as he spoke.

“Are you awake?”

Tessa's eyes were wide open now and she wanted to tell him that obviously she was, except maybe she wasn't. Maybe the emergency room was a dream and Amsterdam was real.

“Yes,” she said, hating that she was.

He introduced himself as Doctor Somebodyorother and he described what they had done to Tessa upon her arrival. Now she understood why her throat was so unhappy.

“Tell me about taking the pills,” Dr. Somebody said.

For an instant, Tessa thought about lying: *I only meant to take a second one, after the first didn't work, but I must have gotten confused. I don't know how I ended up taking so many!* Only an idiot would buy that, since Tessa had taken a whole bottle. This doctor didn't look particularly stupid, so Tessa opted for the truth.

“I was so tired,” Tessa said. “I just wanted to escape.”

He nodded, as if he'd heard it before, probably because he had.

"Is there someone I can call for you?" The doctor glanced pointedly at the simple wedding band Tessa wore on her left ring finger.

"Mark," Tessa whispered before she could stop herself.

"Pardon?"

Tessa shook her head. "I'm alone," she said, thinking about David but knowing she couldn't possibly go there.

Dr. Somebody shifted his weight from one foot to the other and cleared his throat nervously. Tessa wondered if he was about to commit her to life in the Looney

Bin.

“I notice you’re wearing a wedding band. Can I talk to your husband?”

If Tessa hadn’t felt so weak, so wretched, she might have told him to call Theresa Caputo in Long Island. Two years ago, she’d almost tried it herself. Instead, she just said, “No. I’m not married.”

“Oh.” He looked puzzled. “The person who came in with you—Maria?—called you Mrs. Tessa, so and your wedding ring...”

Tessa stared at him blankly and changed the subject. “When can I

go home?"

"We'll keep you in ER for a bit longer, just to make sure all your vitals are stable. But I'm not going to just flat-out release you. You attempted suicide, Ms. Donovan, and that's serious business." Tessa noticed her title had changed from missus to miz.

When she'd swallowed the pills Tessa thought of it as escape. It felt like the only smart thing to do. But now, hearing it from the doctor, it sounded clinically sick. Stupid. Pathetic. Like her life since Mark had left her.

"By state law, I can commit you

to 48-hour observation. Since you don't have a support structure outside the hospital, I'm going to do that."

Now I've done it, Tessa thought. Looney Bin, here I come.

The doctor's face suddenly softened, and Tessa realized her thoughts must have been written across her face.

"The hospital has an excellent team," the doctor said. "Over the next two days, they'll work with you to get the help you need. When you're released, you'll have a support network and a plan." He gently patted the top of Tessa's

hand. "Now, get some rest. In a little while, we'll get you admitted and moved into a room."

To the doctor's back, as he moved toward the door, Tessa whispered, "I'm sorry." The words, so weightless the doctor didn't hear them, were so heavy Tessa wondered how she could even breathe.

Tessa's room looked pretty normal and the nurses bore no

resemblance to Nurse Ratched, much to her relief. The social worker, or whatever her title was—Tessa couldn't remember exactly, was a 40ish-year-old woman named Shawntay Green. Shawntay was more like a force of nature than a social worker. Tessa liked her.

“So,” Shawntay said, looking at her notes, “your appointment with Dr. Blaine is tomorrow at 11:00.”

Tessa nodded. Dr. Blaine was her primary physician. Shawntay insisted that she begin with a complete physical examination, “to rule out physical causes of depression.”

“On Monday, you see Dr Howard.” Shawntay handed Tessa some papers. “Will your medical insurance cover this?”

It had never occurred to Tessa to check. “I’m not sure, but it doesn’t matter. I inherited a large sum of money when my parents died. And my business is doing well. Money is one of the few things I don’t have a problem with.”

“Alright,” Shawntay said. “Fill those forms out and I’ll fax them to Dr. Howard’s office.”

Tessa took the stack of papers. The heading at the top said Dr Sinclair Howard, MD, ABPN.

“What’s ABPN?” Tessa said.

“American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology,” Shawntay said. “Means the man knows his stuff. He’ll look at the workup your primary did and together, you’ll figure out what you need to reclaim your life.”

Tessa had told Shawntay the short story she thought of as Losing Mark, and the complete and utter shock she felt at not being able to ‘get over it.’ Reclaiming her life was exactly what Tessa wanted but she hadn’t known how to do it. The pills—death—was never her real goal; it had been the only path to

peace she could see at the time. And it had been a very poor one at that. That had become crystal clear to Tessa within an hour of talking with the force of nature that was Shawntay Green. Shawntay made her see there was a much better path to peace, to reclaiming her life, and that the network of professionals she was constructing would help her find that better path.

“I will call you tomorrow afternoon to see how your appointment with Dr. Blaine went,” Shawntay said. Her words were business, her tone was mother hen.

Tessa nodded.

“And I will call you Monday afternoon to see how you liked Dr. Howard. If you didn’t hit it off with him, there are other qualified psychiatrists in New York City. We look until you find one that works for you. Got it?”

Tessa smiled. Not exactly a break-your-face grin, but the tiny glimpse of teeth was a rare, and welcome, occurrence.

“Look,” Shawntay said, “I’m supposed to remain clinical and professional. I got no problem with professional, but clinical can get a little detached for this woman to

abide.”

Shawntay’s voice was as rich as her skin and as strong as the muscled arm that handed Tessa a tissue from the box on her nightstand. Tessa dabbed the tears trickling down her own face and Shawntay continued.

“I’ll be checking on you until I know you’re hooked up with a psychiatrist. Good and hooked, got it? I will ride your ass, if I have to I’ll use every Article 9 section of the Code to keep you from repeating the stupidity that brought you here. Got it?”

“Got it,” Tessa said.

And, actually, she did.

JULY

“Tell me why this one didn’t work out.”

Tessa could tell that Shawntay Green was disappointed, maybe even suspicious. Since this was one of their follow-up phone calls, Tessa was spared ‘the look’ that went with ‘the tone.’

“I’m sure Dr. Felton is a good doctor, but I couldn’t get comfortable with her. I couldn’t

open up. Tell her the things I needed to."

"Same as with Dr. Howard?" Shawntay said.

"Yes." Tessa paused, thinking of her first shrink, and then quickly thereafter, her second. Shawntay didn't fill in the silence, so Tessa continued. "I think I'd do better with a woman doctor." Thinking of her last doctor, Patricia Felton, she added, "one with less clinical coolness."

Two months ago, Tessa had been rushed to the ER, and since then, she'd spent most of her waking hours looking for the path

Shawntay had promised to help her find. Tessa hadn't found that path yet. She knew she needed a therapist, but she had to find one that was both clinical and personal, part mother and part drill sergeant. She needed someone she could tell things to that she never thought she could share with anyone. Her secrets. Her shame.

Tessa was afraid, deep fear that made her hands shake during the day and her heart pound in the middle of the night. She thought of that classic Dylan Thomas poem, the one about going gentle into that goodnight, and it terrified her; it's

what she had tried to do when she swallowed those pills, and worse, what she might still be capable of.

“We all think our own stuff is unique,” Shawntay said. “We think it’s horrifying. Understandable by very few. Impossible to fix unless led by the most exceptional. What aren’t you telling me about your stuff that keeps me from finding a good therapist for you?”

Tessa paused. She’d not been asked that before, and it was a fair question. But to answer it meant giving Shawntay a cold hard look into her shame. Could she do it?

Tessa took a deep breath, and

Shawntay remained silent. After a moment, Tessa spoke. She began with Mark, her first and only love. The man she'd met as a boy in high school, the boy she'd followed to college, the man she'd married two weeks after graduation. Their marriage wasn't perfect, she knew, and she shared that with Shawntay. But she loved Mark and Mark had loved her. Tessa had always been an introvert, both socially and sexually. Mark had coaxed her and coached her, in both arenas, and he was the only thing she knew.

“Mark quit on me, Shawntay,” Tessa said, surprised by the anger

in her voice.

“We’ve talked about this before, Tessa. Mark died on you and that’s not the same thing.”

“It was to me! He shouldn’t have been in that Fiat.”

“Because he went on a business trip without you? How realistic, how fair, is that Tessa?” Shawntay’s tone was scalding water, blanching the skin off Tessa’s reserve.

“The Milan police found him crushed in a sports car. The driver was a local woman.”

“Oh come on, Tessa. You just

finished telling me that Mark loved you. Because he died in a car with a woman while on a business trip you're..."

"It was a sports car, Shawntay. Mark was the passenger. I found online pictures of the local woman. She was a gorgeous, sexy woman." Tessa was under a full head of steam and she wasn't going to stop until she'd said it. All of it. "The police report said the Fiat rounded a curve too fast and the driver hadn't slowed down because she'd probably taken her eyes off the road and, when or if she did see the problem, she couldn't have braked

effectively because her ankles were constrained.” Tessa took a breath and forced herself to say the next words. “Shawntay, her right ankle was twisted up in her underwear, which was found wrapped around both ankles.”

Shawntay gasped softly. Apparently, like Tessa, she hadn’t seen that coming. Tessa had never put words to this story, at least not outside of her own head, but Shawntay needed to know what Tessa hadn’t shared, and this was a huge part of it.

“The coroner’s report said the driver had been pinned at impact;

she died slightly facing the passenger's seat, with her hips tipped in an upward angle and her knees facing opposite directions. She was naked from the waist down and missing her bra, which was found in the back seat. My husband's skull was crushed at impact by the steering wheel. Think about that, Shawntay. Why was the driver's naked, open legs turned toward the passenger and where would Mark's head have been for it to be crushed by the steering wheel?"

"Oh, honey," Shawntay said.

"Yeah. The woman lost control

of the car because she was letting Mark do what I never would. And my husband, the love of my life, died with his head between some Italian slut's legs. It would make a great Woody Allen movie if it wasn't so horrible."

Tessa started to sob, and Shawntay made little "I know" noises until Tessa stopped.

"I did grief counseling after Mark died," Tessa said minutes later. "You know that. But I never could bring myself to tell the therapist exactly why that Fiat ran off the road. So we never got through the complexity of my

feelings about Mark.”

“And that’s what’s been eating at you all this time?”

“That, and the rape.”

“What!”

“Another little thing I never told anyone. Eighteen months after I lost Mark, my therapist—who didn’t know the whole picture, pressured me to start seeing people. To be fair, he wasn’t suggesting I get emotionally involved, or even sexually active. He just thought I shouldn’t be so isolated, and I couldn’t disagree. I was a junior in high school the last

time I went on a 'first date' and honestly, I didn't know how to even begin. So when a friend of a friend set up a blind date I figured why not."

Tessa told Shawntay about Kent, the good-looking six-footer with broad shoulders and an athletic build. Kent was handsome, in a rugged way, but he was also well-spoken, well-educated and nicely employed. "We went out several times, everything was fine," Tessa said. "A little hand holding. A PG-13 good night kiss. Innocent stuff."

"Until?"

“We went out to eat one night and then to a movie. When we got out of the theater it was pouring rain. It took a while to snag a cab and neither of us had an umbrella. We were both drenched by the time we got to my place. I invited Kent up, to dry off a bit, and I was going to loan him a rain slicker for his trip home.”

“But something went wrong.”

“Yes. I sent Kent into my bathroom to towel off. When he came out, he was wearing my oversized spa robe. I hadn't meant for him to take off his clothes but, since he apparently had, I offered

to pop them in the dryer. He gathered them from the bathroom and followed me to my little laundry room, off the kitchen. He stood behind me while I put his clothes in the drier and when I turned around, he wasn't wearing my robe. I was shocked. I said the first thing that came into my mind, which was something like, what do you think you're doing. He laughed, pointed to his erection and said, 'that's what I'm doing.' I told him most definitely not and turned my back to retrieve his clothes from the drier."

Tessa's voice started to shake,

and snot begin to dribble from her nose. "I was bent over, reaching for his clothes when Kent slammed me against the drier. I yelped, and Kent put his big hand over my mouth. He kept saying that quiet girls like me couldn't ask for it, even when they wanted it. He said he could tell I wanted it. I tried to wiggle away from him. I tried to scream. I didn't do either very well."

Tessa stopped, even though there was more to tell. Shawntay give her a long moment, and remained silent until Tessa continued.

"I was still wearing the dress

I'd worn to the movies. It was wet, and sticking to my backside. Kent said something about getting me out of my wet things so I wouldn't catch a cold. Then he laughed, like he'd said something funny. He lifted me up a couple of inches, bent me over the top of the drier, and pinned me face down. He pulled my dress up and ripped my panties off. I could feel his erection against my backside, but when he used force to remove my underwear, I could feel *it* throbbing. Shawntay, he got off on violence, so I stopped fighting." Tessa stopped talking. She felt

frozen, as if she was once again pressed face down on her drier, waiting for something awful to rip her world even further apart.

“Tessa?” Shawntay gently prodded.

“He raped me.” Tessa began to cry again, but she spoke between sobs. “It felt like a knife, inside, and he kept at it and at it. He pushed into me so hard he knocked the drier all the way against the wall. As soon as he came, he pulled his clothes out of the drier, put them on and left.”

“And you never reported him?”

“That’s the thing I’m truly ashamed of,” Tessa said. “I should have called the cops. But I was so humiliated. I scrubbed myself with soap and water as soon as he left. And I stopped seeing men.” Tessa thought about David, and made a small correction. “At least face-to-face.”

Tessa,

I'll be in New York for business next week. How about meeting someplace for a drink? Wine. Coffee. Gatorade...whatever. I really enjoy our email chats and would love to meet the person behind the computer. What do you say?

David

PS: no pressure : -)

Tessa read the email a second time. If the mouse in her hand had been an animate object instead of

plastic and microchips, it'd be dead now, strangled by the white-knuckle grip of the very nervous woman holding it.

Since meeting men in the 'real world' was way out of Tessa's comfort zone, and walling herself away like a celibate nun was incredibly lonely, Tessa dipped her toe in the brave world of online "dating." In the last six months she "met" a lot of men and like Goldilocks, had little success until she found David, who seemed to be 'just right.' He was smart and funny and the perfect blend of interest without pressure. They had

mutual interests in movies, books, and travel. *Wouldn't it be great if we met in Rome,* David had once said. *Trevi Fountain,* Tessa replied, though even as her fingers typed, her head told her she'd never have the nerve to follow through.

Tessa smiled, thinking of the ways that David seemed perfect, from little things like a shared distaste for cauliflower, to big things, like their take on politics. They had their differences, of course, but those, too, made Tessa smile. Tessa had tried to convince David that her alma mater, Northwestern University, was an

athletic powerhouse with many conference titles under their belt. David countered that the measure of true college athletics was America's Passion: football. And on that score, Northwestern had one of the worst collegiate records. His alma mater, on the other hand, was a football powerhouse, boasting a glowing record and an impressive list of superstars.

Like OJ Simpson Tessa had countered, grinning mischievously as she typed her reply.

Touché, David had responded almost immediately, though he later asserted it was unfair to judge

a century old football program on one bad apple.

Tessa reread David's latest email. Another read-through and she'd have it memorized, word for word. After her last phone follow up, Tessa had begged Shawntay to act as her therapist.

"Oh no," she'd said. "I'm not qualified. But stay with me, girl. I will find you the right person."

"Half mother and half drill sergeant," Tessa had told her. "I need tough love. Someone like you."

Shawntay had promised to

explore “less traditional” therapy, if that’s what Tessa wanted.

As Tessa stared at David’s invitation to meet, she wished she had a therapist. She needed that combination of insight and tough love to get her head straight. And she desperately wanted her head straight before she screwed things up with David.

David,

I’d love to meet you. Unfortunately, I’ll be out of town most of next week, she lied. Please, please say you’ll give me a rain check.

Tessa

PS: pressure for a rain check : -)

Tessa was finishing a sketch when the call from Shawntay came.

“Sorry to bother you during work hours. Can you talk?”

“Just a minute.”

Tessa shut her office door and took a seat behind the smooth, mahogany desk she and Mark had picked out five years ago. She pushed aside fabric swatches and design images that had consumed her only moments ago. She shifted

her focus to the phone in her hand. Shawntay respected Tessa's concern about privacy at work. She wouldn't have called the office if it wasn't important. "Okay. What's up?"

"Can you meet with me after work tonight? I have a resource you might want to consider, but it'll take some explaining."

Tessa bit her lip. A referral that requires explanation? Trying for lightness she didn't feel, Tessa said, "I suppose Season Seven of NCI can wait."

"Seven?" Slight pause. "Tony faces the screwed up relationship

he has with Senior, Gibbs faces his former mother-in-law and the rift between them over the death of Shannon and Kelly, and Vance faces the strange relationship he has with an old nemesis, who happens to be an assassin." Shawntay took a breath, then added, "See, Tessa, even fictional people have relationship issues. We need to get together to talk about addressing yours."

Tessa couldn't help herself. Despite the knot that was forming in her stomach, she smiled. They agreed to meet at Poppy's, a mom and pop diner seven or eight blocks

from Tessa's office. It served tall, thick milkshakes to customers seated in tall, thickly upholstered booths, which made it a great place for private conversation and a bad place to diet.

Tessa hung up and refocused on sketches and swatches. At 5:00, she turned off her computer and slid her sketch pad into her top desk drawer. It looked exactly the same as it had before Shawntay's phone call.

Shawntay was waiting in a back booth by the time Tessa arrived. "I took the liberty," she said, pointing to the milkshakes in the center of

the table. "They just got here, so your timing is perfect."

Tessa smiled. "Which one is mine?"

"I only ordered flavors I like, so either one is fine by me."

Tessa slid onto the booth bench and pulled the chocolate shake in front of her. Shawntay smiled and reached for the Oreo Cookies and Cream. "Ah, a traditionalist, you are. One of these days you'll have to step outside the box." Shawntay took a long sip, and then another.

"You can never have too much chocolate," Tessa countered, and

took a petite sip of her shake. Her stomach was dancing the Cha Cha, and Tessa didn't want to see what cha-chocolate looked like. She'd finish the shake when her belly was more stable.

"So tell me about a possible referral," Tessa said.

Shawntay blotted her lips with a paper napkin. "It's not a referral, Tessa, because it's waaaay out of the box. I can't put my seal of approval on it and I'm also not sure it's a good match for you. But since more traditional therapists weren't working out, I thought maybe you should know about it." She

shrugged her shoulders.

Tessa eyed the traditional chocolate shake in front of her, and wondered if Shawntay's choice of milkshakes had been some kind of a test. If it had, Tessa feared she'd already flunked.

Bull by the horns, Tessa thought. She said a two-word silent prayer to the God she wasn't sure she still believed in, and then repeated the prayer—now a plea: “Help me.”

Shawntay's dark brown eyes softened. “Tell me something, Tessa. The personalities of the two therapists I referred you to, were they cold? Hard to relate to?”

Tessa thought a minute. “No, not really. They both seemed capable and willing to listen to me, to help me.”

“Were they assholes?”

Tessa opened her mouth, not sure if she was about to laugh with abandon or gasp primly. It ended up a laugh, but her cheeks flushed pink.

“Well?” Shawntay said.

“No. They both seemed like decent, capable people. After a couple sessions, neither of them made me feel like opening up. I knew it would be a waste of money,

and worse, a waste of my time.”

“Kind of like your grief counselor. Before.”

“Yes. Though he did help me with some of my issues, I never let him in far enough to deal with the serious stuff.”

Shawntay nodded, and took another sip of her milkshake. “Ever have anything other than chocolate?”

“Sure,” Tessa said. “Vanilla. Once in a while, strawberry.”

“Would you feel unacceptably uncomfortable if you were pressured into Oreo Cookies and

Cream? Or Peanut Butter Banana?"

The milkshakes were a test, and the sinking feeling in Tessa's stomach told her she'd blown this 'out of the box' chance. Tessa thought about losing David, and all Davids after him, forever and ever. "If a Peanut Butter Banana milkshake is the path to finding peace and happiness, I'd drink one every day for the rest of my life."

Shawntay studied Tessa's face. "Alright then, let's talk milkshakes."

“I’ve heard about an institute that works only with women,” Shawntay said. “The institute doesn’t advertise, and it costs an arm, a leg and your first born child. It doesn’t take insurance and doesn’t accept new clients, except by referral. And I’d lose my job if I actually referred you to them, because my boss isn’t fond of this kind of therapy.”

Tessa was curious. What could be so revolutionary?

“From what I could find out,” Shawntay said, “their therapists are

extremely well-trained, but they aren't approved by the ABPN. In fact, they aren't approved by anyone, except the women they've helped."

Shawntay paused. When Tessa didn't flinch, she continued. She told Tessa she had learned about the institute from two different women. Both credited it with turning their lives around and then quickly added that the institute's methods were far from traditional, very 'intimate' and, one said, more than a little 'scary.'

"Scary?"

"Actually, she said it was *very*

scary. Wanna forget it now?"

Tessa shook her head 'no' so hard she nearly dislocated her neck.

"Alright then. You ready to hear more about Athena's Ground?"

"Athena was the Greek goddess of wisdom," Tessa said, feeling a little less queasy. How scary could a Peanut Butter Banana milkshake be if its goal was to lead you to wisdom?

Shawntay leaned forward and lowered her voice. As she spoke, Tessa felt the blood rushing to her face, setting her cheeks on fire. Her

hands began to sweat and she held her chocolate milkshake, hoping the coolness of the glass would calm her racing heart. It didn't.

"So, now that you've heard the details," Shawntay said, after a thorough description of Athena's Ground therapy, "would you like the name of another traditional therapist? I brought one with me."

Tessa was pretty sure of two things. First, she could not do the things Athena's Ground would require; hell, she could barely even stand to hear about them. But worse, by a long shot, was the second thing she knew: she would

not find a path to wellness with a traditional therapist, no matter how many association letters they had after their name. Between her grief counselor and the two traditional therapists Shawntay had referred her to, Tessa had been to the plate three times and struck out each time. She had a choice: she would do the undoable or she would end up in the ER again. And next time there would be no Maria-looking-for-her-wallet to save her.

Tessa nodded her head and Shawntay started to slide a business card across the table.

“No,” Tessa said. “Not that.]

want to try Athena's Ground."

Shawntay Green had one of the best poker faces Tessa had ever seen. Until now.

"Remember, this is not a referral. I'm simply passing along information a couple women shared with me."

"Got it," Tessa said, feeling immense gratitude that Shawntay cared enough about her to risk getting in trouble with her boss. "Whatever I decide to do, *I* decide. I'll tell Athena's Ground I heard about them from you, but only as a point of information. No referral, per se. You have no part in this,"

she said, waving the slip of paper
Shawntay passed her.

AUGUST

Tessa,

The boss is sending me to New York again, the end of this month. Here's your official rain check. Dinner? Or if that's too much for a first face-to-face, there's a great hotdog cart down the street from Patience and Fortitude. Can probably find some cold Gatorade around there too.

Tell me you'll meet me there!

David

Tessa smiled as she read the email, and frowned when she thought of the timing. Using Shawntay's name, Tessa had gotten an appointment with Athena's Ground but it was still a week away. Besides, you didn't magically get well by just making an appointment with a medical doctor, and the same was true for Athena's Ground, no matter how good they might be.

Tessa hit 'Reply,' and typed:

Ohhh, mannnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn, I am so sorry, but end of August I'll be out of

Her fingers stopped moving and tears started to gather in her eyes. I can't say no again, Tessa thought. I'll just have to keep it light until I get my head screwed on straight. She erased her message and started again:

I love hotdogs! You spring for the dogs and I'll bring the Gatorade. I hear this was a particularly good year for Orange, unless you only drink Blue, in which case I'm not sure if i can continue our friendship. Blue is just so...gauche.

Meet at the lions?

Tessa

Tessa hit send before she could chicken out and wished her appointment at Athena's Ground would hurry up. She had a life to get to and every minute she remained broken was a minute she wasn't really living.

The address was hard to read. The paper Shawntay had given her was wrinkled from too much

fidgeting. The street number was barely legible, the ink a smear of blue, thanks to Tessa's sweaty palms. To say she was nervous was an understatement bordering on the absurd. Tessa was terrified.

The street surprised her. It was a tree-lined road, filled with what had once been large, stately homes. As the city had grown, residents moved aside and boutique businesses claimed the former homes. The one Tessa was interested in was in the middle of the block. It was a two-story, brick building with grass green window shutters and a wide front door,

painted a rich cream. As a designer, Tessa approved of the aesthetic. As a potential patient, it reassured her...slightly.

A bronze plaque at the door said:

Welcome.

**If you have an appointment,
please ring the intercom.**

**If you do not, please call for an
appointment.**

No phone number was listed.

Tessa took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. She'd done what every woman since Cleopatra

had done in a crisis of courage; she'd dressed in 'armor': her best skinny jeans, a pink silk wrap-around blouse—one of her own designs, and her favorite Dolce and Gabbana jacket. She carried this season's Prada over her shoulder and wore last season's Jimmy Choo on her feet. And still she felt underdressed. Perhaps she'd have felt better in the Michelin Tire Boy suit.

Tessa pressed the intercom button and fought the urge to run.

"Good morning," came a cool voice from the intercom speaker. It was female. "What is your name,

please, and what time is your appointment?"

"My..." Tessa stopped to clear her throat. Her voice was shaking like a runaway train on very rough track. "My name is Tessa Donovan. My appointment is at 9:00."

There was silence. An eternity passed—several seconds—and the intercom voice returned.

"Please come in," the woman said. This time, her voice was melodious and warm. An obnoxious buzz signaled the front door was now unlocked. Tessa pushed herself through the door. The first thing she noticed was a

large mahogany desk. It reminded her of the desk Mark had insisted they buy for the business. This desk was different though: it was staffed by a beautifully coiffed blonde.

The woman motioned for Tessa to sit. “That’s a lovely name, Tessa.” She said it with a warm smile and her soft green eyes sparkled.

Tessa realized every client must walk through that door petrified, and this woman, this receptionist, was doing her best to put the client at ease.

The receptionist, who introduced herself as Diane,

offered Tessa a cup of tea. “We have herbal,” she said softly.

Tessa declined the tea but accepted the stack of forms Diane handed her.

“Please fill these out. There’s a desk in the sitting room. It’s private, and comfortable.”

Diane pointed to a small room painted in a soft shade of green, trimmed in the same cream as the front door. It held a plush cream loveseat and a small writing desk.

The first few forms were similar to what anyone would see at a new doctor’s office. They required a

detailed health history and a medical record consent to release a copy of all of Tessa's medical records to them. There was a statement of financial obligation, spelling out that Athena's Ground did not accept any form of insurance. Shawntay had prepared Tessa for a major expense, and the About Costs handout was both cryptic and astonishing. Tessa would definitely need a more comprehensive explanation before she handed over her credit card.

If About Costs frightened Tessa, it was nothing compared to the next section of forms. They

were a different color, pale green like the walls of the sweet little room she sat in now. But these forms were not just stapled together, they were also sealed. What could be so private that even the questions were sealed?

The cover sheet read:

Athena's Ground Goal

To help you understand and let go of your past,

To fully experience the present—the good and the bad—as we work toward...

Your future, characterized by freedom, love, and peace.

At the bottom of the cover sheet, a disclaimer read:

Confidential and Binding:

Athena's Ground holds ALL of the information you provide in strict confidence. Please be assured the information you provide on the following Green Sheets will be kept in utmost privacy and shared ONLY with those who will be working directly with you.

In order for Athena's Ground therapy to be effective, it is vital that you complete these Green Sheets fully

and honestly.

Athena's Ground agrees to hold this information confident.

I _____
(sign here) agree to provide complete and honest answers.

Tessa looked at the Confidential and Binding notice, and wondered if it was too late to slip out the front door. Instead, she slid her pen under the seal, broke it, and turned to the first Green Sheet.

“It’s nice to meet you. My name is Carmen.”

Tessa nodded but said nothing. Her face was pale and she entered the room with her arms folded across her chest, like a plate of armor.

“This probably is a bit overwhelming,” Carmen said, smiling. “Please, sit down.” She gestured at two lushly upholstered chairs. A small round coffee table sat between the chairs, and a silver tray with tea and scones provided an invitation to relax.

Tessa settled into a chair while Carmen poured two cups of tea. "Milk? Honey? Sugar?"

"Honey, thank you." Tessa didn't think her stomach could handle a scone, but some warm tea with sweet honey might be soothing.

After a few quiet sips, Carmen broke the silence.

"You read our Description of Services and Therapeutic Mission?"

It was the first page of the sealed green packet and Tessa had indeed read it. In fact, she'd almost grabbed her bag and run for the

door. Only the thought of another trip, a final trip, to the ER stopped her from bolting.

“Yes.”

“What questions do you have?”

Where to begin? Should she start alphabetically, with ‘Are you freaking kidding me?’ or cut right to the chase, with ‘Is sex therapy even legal?’ Tessa opted to cut to the chase.

“Is what you do here legal?”

Carmen sat her tea cup down and looked into Tessa’s eyes: direct, unwavering and serious. “Nearly all of our clients ask us this, so forgive

me if my response seems a little practiced.” Carmen leaned back into the plush cushion of her lavender chair and began the story of Athena’s Ground. She told Tessa that it was established by two women whose lives were both very unlike each other’s and also, very much the same. Like Tessa, they had crushing emotional and sexual experiences and found traditional counseling less than effective. “Our founders were women of financial substance, and they used their resources to create a safe place for women to explore their emotional and sexual needs.”

It sounded wonderful, to Tessa, but it didn't answer the question, and she softly said as much to Carmen, who smiled in response.

"You would be paying for talk therapy, some held in a clinical setting and some not. You would be paying for transportation, accommodations and miscellaneous costs, such as food and entertainment. You would be paying for the *t i m e* our field therapists spend with you. No one, not you and not any Athena's Ground client, ever pays for sexual activity per se. While we encourage sexual activity, we charge the client

for the time spent, not the activity that occurs: if our client declines to participate in the sexual aspects of therapy, that has no effect on the costs incurred."

Carmen locked eyes with Tessa. "Let me be very clear. Our field therapists are not prostitutes. They offer their physical expertise and their emotional intelligence as part of a therapeutic plan to help our women overcome sexual issues. Clients are free to take advantage of it, or not." Carmen's voice was calm, but stern. Tessa thought, *part mother and part drill sergeant*.

"I meant no insult," Tessa said,

surprised that her voice no longer shook. "I understand, then, that my field therapy may become physical, if I allow it to be. Otherwise..."

Carmen nodded. "Before that point, we'll have spent a good amount of time in a more traditional therapeutic setting and mode. You and I, if you decide to join us, will spend time, right here in this office. I'll get to know you, and you'll learn about me. You'll come to understand what makes Tessa tick, emotionally and sexually. I'll learn the same, and with that knowledge I will design a field therapy plan." Carmen's eyes

softened, and the part mother emerged. “Tessa, I will assign field therapists that have the skills and personality best suited to challenge, but not overwhelm, you. The goal is to push you to discover your emotional self and physical sexuality, in a healthy way.”

Tessa had spent months with a grief counselor and had several sessions with various psychiatrists. She understood traditional talk therapy. What she didn't understand, and what still scared the bejeezus out of her, was 'field therapy.'

“Okay, but I'm not completely

clear about the field therapy part.”

Carmen explained after their office sessions Tessa would be sent on a trip. To Tessa’s friends, family and co-workers, it would look exactly like a vacation at some fabulous resort, and in some ways, that is what it would be. However, during this ‘vacation’ Tessa would have sessions with several different field therapists. Those sessions would target specific sexual issues and, if successful, Tessa would leave with positive sexual experiences and, more important, more freedom from her painful past.

Tessa thought it all still sounded scary, but the last part was the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. If she could be free of her past trauma and hang-ups, she could be free to find love again, with someone who honored her in a way that even Mark had not. With David, perhaps, or if not him, someone else. And even if she never found love, she would at least be at peace.

But Carmen brought up an interesting question.

“You said therapists, plural. Why more than one?” Tessa asked.

“At this stage clients are still

discovering themselves, and therefore still quite vulnerable. We learned that it is too easy for a client to become emotionally attached to the field therapist, so we limit exposure to one set of sessions."

"Set of sessions?"

Carmen smiled again. "Think of a set of sessions as a prolonged date. Maybe you meet for breakfast, then again for an afternoon at the beach, then again for a late evening dinner. Like that."

When put that way, it didn't sound so intimidating. "If I choose to have sexual activity with field

therapists, how can I be assured there is no danger of sexually transmitted disease?"

"Immediately prior to your field therapy, all parties will be tested. This will include you. Although you didn't mention it, we will also ensure you are protected against pregnancy. You signed a medical records release, but I won't have them for a few days."

"I don't currently take the pill," Tessa offered. "It seems pointless."

Carmen nodded. "We'll address a mode of birth control for you during our clinical sessions in the office. Additionally, our field

therapists are prepared to use condoms unless exempted by you and by the field therapy plan."

The whole thing was cosmic stupidity. Possibly immoral. Legally tenuous.

"When do we start?" Tessa said. And her voice was clear and strong.

SEPTEMBER

Happy Labor Day, Tessa! I still can't believe the summer is gone and we never got together. Can I say again how sorry I am I had to cancel hotdogs and Gatorade? May I repeat that it was my miserly boss who decided a trip wasn't necessary? Arggg...who would have thought two such lowly foods (do either actually qualify as food?) could be so warmly anticipated.

Speaking of the Miser, my boss has given me a new department to manage,

hence the sudden cancellation of my NY trip. The bad news is the new department doesn't have a major division in NY for me to check up on, so I won't have as many opportunities to look you up. : - (The good news is I'll be doing more international travel. Just think; instead of hotdogs and Gatorade on the streets of New York, maybe we'll meet over pizza and Chianti at Trevi Fountain. You bring the Chianti, I'll get the pizza. (I can dream, can't I?)

I hope summer has been kind to you. Thanks for understanding about the cancellation and for even sending me a link to that baseball article. Still,

I would be remiss if I didn't remind you that it is football—not baseball, that really matters. Go SC! ; -)

Fondly,

David

Tessa shut down her laptop with a smile. She'd been given the gift of time, compliments of David's 'miserly boss.' And she needed that time; she'd barely begun her therapy sessions with Carmen at Athena's Ground, and so far the only thing she had learned was that she had a lot of ground to cover.

Carmen spent their entire first session going over Tessa's Green Sheets. Every single line became a short conversation that involved relentless probing (Carmen), massive embarrassment (Tessa) and, occasionally, an epiphany (Tessa). The pattern sounded like:

Carmen: "You indicate that you are most comfortable with missionary position and least comfortable with..."

Tessa: "Everything else."

Carmen: "And you're happy with that?"

Tessa's epiphany (one of many

Ah Ha Moments): “Not really.”

Carmen relentlessly homed in on Tessa’s feelings about sex. They didn’t resolve anything, of course, not in one ninety minute session. But by the time Tessa left that first day, Carmen had a laundry list of topics for “further discussion.” The second session had whittled that laundry list down to core issues. “We’ll face an issue together until you identify and understand its root. Then you get to decide whether you want to modify your feelings and behaviors toward that issue, or keep it is as part of your sexual makeup,” Carmen had said.

“You pick who you are, sexually. My job, and your field therapists’ job, is to help you become who you choose to be.”

Sounded about as easy as leaping tall buildings in a single bound, and yet here she was, ready to leap the tallest building she could imagine: the building called Tessa.

She rang the intercom.

“Hi Diane. It’s me, Tessa. Here for my 5:00 appointment with Carmen.”

“Hi Tessa. Come on in.” Diane buzzed her in, and Tessa stepped

through the door.

Tessa and Diane exchanged pleasantries and Tessa seated herself in the waiting room. Five minutes later, Carmen retrieved her for their session. She pointed at the small table with hot tea and chilled bottled water. "You'll want some tea or water, Tessa. It's going to be a great session today."

Carmen's way of saying 'fasten your safety belt; we're in for a rough landing.'

And boy, was it.

LATE OCTOBER

“What’s that?” Carmen said, as Tessa pulled her hand from behind her back.

“Happy Halloween!” Tessa said, waving her hand like the Stars and Stripes at a 4th of July parade.

Carmen took a closer look at the bright orange satin string dangling from Tessa’s fingers and started to laugh. “That’s either the world’s sexiest shoestring or it’s a string of a different nature.”

Tessa giggled. “It’s my very first

G String."

"An A on your first homework assignment, then."

The prior week, Carmen had given Tessa several tasks to accomplish before today's session. The first was to walk into a sex shop and buy two 'personal items.' Fortunately, Carmen had given Tessa a list of upscale shops that were, dare she say, wholesome. The sales clerk that helped Tessa, in a soft cashmere sweater and a string of creamy white pearls, looked more librarian than lap dancer and her demeanor was overtly matter-of-fact, as if choosing a vibrator was

really no different that selecting a new hair drier. Tessa was sure she had turned beet red—her face felt as hot as a fireplace ember—but she stayed with the clerk as the woman demonstrated various devices on her own forearm. Tessa left the shop with a top of the line Lelo, so sleek and refined she'd never have guessed the device's function without proper tutelage. And because it was October, Tessa also picked up a bright orange G String, which she proudly dangled in front of Carmen now.

“How did your second homework assignment go?”

Tessa slipped the G String back into her purse and pulled out a pink plastic case.

“Very good,” Carmen said, “And you had a comprehensive conversation with your gynecologist before settling on the pill?”

Tessa nodded.

“Well, that’s two for three. How did you do on the last task?”

That one had been harder, and the excited glow on Tessa’s face evaporated.

“I tried. I failed.”

“It takes practice. Your job is to

keep at it until you finally succeed. Did you add visualization? Fantasy?"

Tessa shook her head.

"Ah, I suggest you do. I believe you'll find it much less clinical. You know, the brain is the most powerful sex organ we have."

For the rest of the session, they talked about Tessa's physical and emotional hopes and dreams, as well as some of her fear and pain. She left the session with two assignments. The new one was to imagine a perfect sexual encounter: what would happen and who would it be with? The second assignment

was to turn last week's failure into a success. Tessa slipped out of the office, wondering if using her new Lelo was cheating.

Tessa's mother, God rest her soul, used to say that when it rained it poured, and that's just what Tessa was thinking. Her work with Athena's Ground was going well. She still had a lot of healing to do, but for the first time in a long time she was beginning to feel like a whole person. All it took was time. Money. And more time. Lots of it.

And there was David. Tessa smiled, despite her fatigue. Their periodic emails had grown to include frequent phone calls and

texts. They still hadn't worked out a face-to-face, unless you counted Skype, but their connection grew every day. The time would come for them to meet, and Tessa had begun to look forward to that day with joy, not fear.

Tessa glanced at her watch. It was 9:00—at night—and she was still working to turn samples—the fun, creative part of being a designer, into the rigidly exact patterns and designs required by her manufacturer. Mark had always excelled at that, and Tessa missed him as she pored over her work. For some inexplicable reason, Tessa's

summer line had been an unusually big hit with Saks and Nordstrom. Tessa looked at the pile of work before her. She was drowning in bikini patterns and fabric, and all she could think about was David... and some of the evolving attitudes she'd been working on at Athena's Ground.

Tessa was wrapping up when she heard the chirp announcing a text. She grabbed her phone, read the message, and smiled.

Call me when you have some time to talk. I'll be up until midnight your time.

Tessa was curled up with her

phone, well before midnight.

“What’s up,” Tessa asked as soon as she heard David’s deep, warm voice.

“Tessa! How’s my favorite New Yorker?”

“Working late.” She told David about the unexpected splash her summer line had made. “More pressure, now, but a chance to really make an impact in the market.”

“Sounds like good pressure, yes? I mean, doesn’t it feel good to have your business take off?”

Tessa laughed. “Absolutely. I

just wish I had a dozen more hands right now. But enough about your favorite New Yorker. How's my Chicagoan?"

"Cold. Got an early snow today, which made me think about warm beaches...and..." David's voice got quiet. "And you. This might be presumptuous. Or stupid. But, I was wondering..."

Without worrying she might make a fool of herself—was that Carmen's insistence that she ask for what she needed with no apologies?—Tessa said, "If you're wondering whether I'd like to meet up with you, the answer is yes.

Once I've got my work obligations squared away."

David exhaled hard enough to blow Chicago's storm all the way to New York. "I can't tell you how happy that makes me." The relief in his voice made Tessa's toes tingle.

After wistful discussions about the Caribbean, Hawaii, and the Mexican Riviera, the consensus was late December. Somewhere warm.

"I'll start searching," David said. "That's less than two months away. I know you're working hard now, so I'll email links to the best deals I've found. When you have time, you can peek at them."

Tessa had trouble sleeping after talking with David. Between visions of a warm, sandy beach and a warm, sweet David, even an exhausted body was no match for her active mind. With a silly grin on her face, she pulled open her nightstand drawer. "Come to Mama," she whispered to Lelo. Maybe tonight would be the night.

"It's time, Tessa. I believe you're ready," Carmen said. Her eyes sparkled as she handed Tessa

a thick packet of papers.

“I hope this isn’t my bill,” Tessa said, joking.

“It’s your field therapy. All the arrangements have been made; I used the cost containment parameters and time frame you gave us back in September. Go ahead, open the packet.”

Tessa’s heart was wedged where her Adam’s apple should have been, and it was beating wildly as she flipped through the stack of papers.

She was going to Australia.

She was staying at one of

Sydney's nicest hotels, a stone's throw from the harbor and the opera house.

She was assigned to work with Jason Tate, Ben Larsen, and Russel Thompson. Their pictures were included. Not one of them was even a little hard to look at.

She had a flight from JFK to Sydney, via LAX. Business class.

She was leaving on December 20 and returning January 4.

She was...supposed to be on a beach with David at Christmas and New Year's.

Carmen saw Tessa's face go

from anxious excitement to disappointment. "Is there a problem?" she asked.

Tessa told her about David's recent invitation. "We set this up, just a couple nights ago. I'd totally forgotten I'd given you those dates for field therapy. I was so happy David wanted to get together, I wasn't thinking about anything else." Tessa frowned. "Every time we've made a date, something has come up. He'll think I've gotten cold feet and don't want to see him. And that's so not what I want!"

"I'm sorry, Tessa. You had specified that time period for field

availability and never indicated a change in plans. I booked based on the time you gave me. I'm afraid it would be quite expensive to change those dates now, but I'll see what I can do if that's what you'd like."

Paying re-scheduling fees wasn't the only problem. Tessa didn't have time to do a vacation with David and a field therapy 'vacation.' Her brand was beginning to blossom and Tessa needed to be back at the drawing table in January.

"I'll tell David we'll have to meet another time." Tessa looked ready to cry.

“Have you told David anything about your therapy?”

Tessa shook her head.

“What are the two most important things you’ve learned so far, Tessa?”

“Ask for what you need and give what you can.”

Carmen smiled. “So use this as an opportunity to practice both of those things.”

Tessa thought about it. “I’ll tell David I’d forgotten I had an obligation that means a lot to me and that I have to reschedule our vacation. I’ll apologize, hell, I’ll

grovel because I feel that bad. I really do value him and want to meet him, and I'll tell him that." Tessa considered her workload and schedules. "I can't take a lot of time off this winter, because of work. But I'll ask him what long weekend he'd like, and I'll make that date work no matter what it is."

"Sound reasonable to me." Carmen leaned forward, and touched Tessa's hand softly. "If you want to create a genuine relationship with David, you're going to have to open up to him. That means telling him at least a little bit about your issues, and

your commitment to therapy. You owe him a glimpse of the real Tessa."

"The brave, the bold, the damaged and the scared shitless."

Carmen laughed. Up until that moment, she would have sworn Tessa's lips couldn't even pronounce the word shitless.

DECEMBER 19

Three bathing suits. Two pairs of jeans. Several pairs of shorts. A day dress. An evening dress. A light jacket. Tessa eyed her suitcase and the pile of clothes on her bed. A thick stack of tee shirts. Underwear. Bras. Socks. Sandals. Tessa began to wonder how she could manage with just one checked bag. Day cream. Night cream. Sun cream. And a bright orange G String, just for luck. She

was wondering if there was room in the suitcase for Lelo when the phone rang.

“How’s the packing going?”

Tessa smiled at the sound of David’s voice, and at the fact he’d forgiven her for breaking their Christmas and New Year’s date.

“It’s amazing how much stuff I think I need. I’ll be lucky to squeeze it all in, and even luckier if it doesn’t weigh over fifty pounds.”

“I’ve been checking out New York hotels on line. Before I book one, can I just have that cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die promise that

you'll be mine over the President's Day weekend?"

"Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night could keep me from spending that weekend with you David."

"I'd feel a lot more assured if the Post Office wasn't going out of business."

"Hmm. Try this then: Yes."

"Sounding good. But there's still room for improvement."

"How about, I'm crazy about you and, unless you turn out to be a serial killer, I can't think of a better way to spend a long February

weekend.”

“Sounding better, except for the serial killer part.”

Tessa laughed. “Okay, let me take one last shot at perfection. There is no one I’d rather get to know than you. I’m sorry I messed up our Christmas and New Year’s. I promise to make it up to you in February.”

“Sounding...best,” David said. There was a moment of silence, and David spoke again. “I don’t completely understand how a vacation in Australia is therapeutic for you, Tessa, but I believe that you believe it is.”

“I just need for you to accept that it is, and trust that it’s something I have to do.” Tessa took a long breath and thought about her words very carefully. “I care about you David, and I want to see if there’s anything more than friendship. But I can’t do that until I’ve dealt with some personal issues, issues that I’m getting help with in Australia. I know that sounds...cryptic. But it’s true.”

“And you’ll be ready after Australia?”

“Yes.”

“Then you better get packing. You have a plane to catch.”

Tessa thought she was prepared for a long flight. She'd been to London and Paris, significant flights, but not really that bad. She'd managed an eleven-hour flight to Buenos Aires once, and conceded that by the time the wheels touched the tarmac she was thoroughly ready to be off the aircraft. But Sydney? Apparently, it was not just on the other side of the world, it was in another world altogether. That her field therapy was so far away was her own fault;

she had told Carmen that she wanted to go someplace warm and far from New York. Carmen had certainly delivered.

Twenty-one hours after boarding a 747 at JFK, Tessa touched down in Sydney. She'd slept very little, despite the relative space in business class, and she felt grubby and disjointed, as though her brain had been ejected somewhere over the Pacific. She emerged from customs weary and worn, relieved to see a limo driver holding a large sign that read, *Tessa Donovan*.

"Let me get your bags, Ms

Donovan.” The driver had a warm Australian accent and Tessa perked up. She handed over her carry on and forty-nine pound suitcase and settled into soft backseat leather while the driver loaded her bags into the trunk.

“You’re staying at the Westberg?” The driver was behind the wheel and preparing to merge into traffic.

“Yes. I can find the street address if...”

“No worries, ma’am. I’ve got it.” The driver glanced into the rear view mirror and caught Tessa’s eyes. She had not handed over all

her bags; there was one under each, puffy eye. "Long flight, eh?"

"I don't think the moon flights are any longer. I'm happy to have my feet on the ground and a shower and bed sound really good right now."

"I'll have you there before you know it."

As much as Tessa wanted to take in the sights of one of the great cities in the world, she was snoring by the time the driver pulled up to the Westberg. With the assistance of the bellman and a very pleasant desk clerk, Tessa was settling into

her room on the 22nd floor before she was even fully awake.

“You’ve got a great view of the city,” the bellman said, as he opened the blinds to reveal a breathtaking view of Sydney. “You can see a corner of the harbor,” he pointed to a patch of dazzling blue. “In fact,” he walked from the window towards the bathroom, “you can even enjoy your view while soaking in the tub.” The bellman pulled a drape from inside the bathroom and Tessa laughed. The wall between the bedroom and the bath was glass. The oversized tub was positioned against the

glass wall so that one could gaze at the Sydney skyline while soaking in the tub.

“That’s...convenient,” Tessa said, smiling.

The bellman pointed out the welcome tray of fresh fruit, cheese, crackers and wine. He gave her a quick rundown on the hotel’s other amenities and location. “You’ve chosen a great hotel for your visit. Just let us know if you need anything.”

Tessa tipped him, locked the door and stripped off her grimy travel clothes. The hotel had also supplied her with bubble bath,

which she poured under the hot, running water. Tessa climbed into her tub with the view of Sydney and before she knew it, was snoring once again.

The bath water was cold when Tessa woke to a voice at her door. "Hotel concierge," the voice announced, followed by a few gentle knocks. By the time Tessa wrapped herself in a towel and stepped to the door the concierge was gone, but a small creamy white envelope lay on the floor at her feet. She recognized the seal.

Welcome to Sydney, Tessa. Please

take this evening and tomorrow to rest and acclimate yourself. Jetlag is a bear! I'll call you tomorrow evening to introduce myself and tell you about the day we will share on Wednesday. If you have problems, please feel free to call me. Also, Carmen is available to you any time, day or night. Our cell numbers are below. Looking forward to meeting you Wednesday. Jason Tate.

The envelope shook in Tessa's hand, and it wasn't because of sleep deprivation or travel fatigue.

WEDNESDAY

Good morning, David. The sun is rising here, and from my window I can watch the harbor water as it turns from Dawn Gray to Hello Sunshin Blue. This place is amazing. I was too wiped out from the flight to do anything until yesterday afternoon. I took in the sights around the hotel and even walked the mile to the Opera House. What a sight!

Tessa paused, her fingers hovering over her laptop. Should she be a little daring? Why not, Carmen had suggested she begin to open herself up more to David, and besides, she was the Daring New Tessa now that she was ready for field therapy.

But sights abound in Sydney, and even this hotel. The wall between the bedroom and bath is glass. I can (and have) laid in the tub and gazed at the view outside: tall buildings, both old and new, and even a small piece of Darling Harbor. From the bathtub Amazing.

Today I begin some of that personal work I came here to do. I don't mean to be mysterious or sound weird. It's just that it's...very personal, and for now, not something I can share. Just know that it's important to me and will help me become a happier person, better able to (as the poster says) 'live, love and laugh.'

I hope everything's good in Chicago. Stay warm!

Fondly, Tessa

Tessa shut down her laptop and headed for a shower. Room service

would deliver a light breakfast soon. And at 8:00, Jason Tate would knock on her door.

He was tall, with sandy brown hair, broad shoulders and a quick, easy smile.

“Jason Tate. Nice to meet you Tessa.”

Tessa held out her hand, for a shake, and immediately felt stupid. This wasn't exactly a business meeting, though Jason was here for business.

Jason took Tessa's hand, shook it gently, and said, "Have you thought of any questions?"

She and Jason had spoken on the phone the evening before and Jason had encouraged her to ask anything. She had been too shell-shocked to know what to say. She was no better today.

"I've never done anything like this before. In fact, I've never even fantasized about doing anything like this. So, I'm trusting Carmen and you, and if something comes up that I don't understand or don't like, I'll speak up."

"Good! Carmen's First Theorem

of Love and Sex is ‘ask for what you need.’ And actually, that’s going to be the focus of our time together.”

Tessa wasn’t sure if that was good or bad. She’d never been comfortable asking Mark, especially if she thought it was something he didn’t enjoy. And the only other sex she’d had was rape, and though she’d pleaded with Kent to stop, it had fallen on completely deaf ears. So her ‘asking’ track record was pretty dismal. Add to that the fact that she’d known Jason all of sixty seconds, and...wow. Could she do this?

“Shall we go, then?” Jason said.

Tessa nodded, grabbed her purse, and allowed Jason to open the door for her.

“Are all Aussies such gentlemen?” she asked, smiling.

“We’re a pretty nice bunch down here, if I say so myself. And most of the time, you’ll find me to be very gentlemanly.”

“Most?”

Jason hit the call button for the elevator. “There will be times when being a gentleman will be far from my mind. But,” he said to Tessa’s quickly darkening eyes, “I will always be a gentle man with you,

unless you ask me to be otherwise.”

“I can’t imagine wanting anything other than a gentle man,” Tessa said, when she saw there was no one else in the elevator.

“That’s what you’re here for, Tessa, to imagine the unimaginable. I know this metaphor needs some work, but think of it this way: you’re about to dine at a fine buffet, where you’ll be asked to try the escargot even if you’d always thought you would hate it.”

Tessa couldn’t help herself. She laughed, full-out.

“I told you it was a terrible metaphor,” Jason said, smiling. He leaned so close to Tessa, she could smell the fragrance of his shampoo. “Today will be about me gently pushing you to that buffet table. I’m going to put things on your plate and urge you to try them, even if you think you’ll hate them. But the final decision will always be yours. You’ll look at everything I put on your plate, and learn to ask for what you need.”

Good thing Tessa was leaning against the elevator wall. She might have passed out otherwise.

They spent the first hour

sightseeing. Jason drove, pointing out highlights as he negotiated traffic. "Our first stop," he said, squeezing his Mazda into a parking space.

"This?"

Jason took Tessa's hand and led her into a small café. He nodded to the waitress behind the front counter and she gave him a smile. "Hi Jason! What do you want today?"

"The usual."

"Coming up."

Jason led Tessa to a small table in the corner of the back room. The

café was quiet and the light from the front windows did not reach them. It was dim, but not dark. Jason held Tessa's hand lightly. It felt like the warmth of a friend, not the passion of a lover. It put Tessa at ease instantly.

When the food arrived, Jason slid all of it to his end of the table.

"Our first exercise in asking for what you need," he said.

"You want me to ask for my food?"

"Yes. One item at a time. What do you want to start with?"

Tessa eyed the choices. Bagel.

Scrambled eggs. Bacon
Strawberries. Her throat felt tight
and her stomach was nervous.

“Eggs.”

Jason slid the plate of eggs
toward Tessa, and she reached for a
fork.

“Uh-uh,” he said, gently taking
the fork from her hand.

Jason scooped a small bite of
eggs onto the fork, leaned into
Tessa until she could feel his breath
on her cheeks, and steered the fork
toward her lips. When Tessa
opened her mouth, he slid the fork
into it and held it there.

“Slowly, Tessa. Feel the texture Taste the salt on the eggs.” Jason slowly pulled the fork away. Hypnotized, Tessa swallowed without chewing, which made her cough. Jason handed her a glass of water. “Alright?” he asked, after she took a sip.

Tessa nodded, embarrassed. She was sure she would be the most inept ‘student’ Jason had ever been assigned.

Tessa asked for food from each of the remaining plates. When Jason fed her bagel and bacon, he used his fingers. On the last one, the bacon, he kept his fingers at

Tessa's lips long after she had swallowed. "Bacon has a bit of slip to it." He wiggled his index finger, "a bit of grease. That's what makes it so tasty, don't you think?"

He was hypnotizing Tessa again, and she simply nodded.

He rested the tip of his finger on Tessa's lower lip. "Get the best of it Tessa, what do you say?"

Tessa tentatively placed her tongue on the tip of Jason's finger.

"Don't you really want it all?" Jason's voice was low and husky.

How did he know? Tessa had never brazenly sucked a man's

finger in a public place before. But she wanted to now, and not just for the bacon grease. Tessa nodded and he slowly parted Tessa's lips and rested his finger on her tongue. Tessa began to suck, slowly and softly, and a strange thing happened. For the first time since forever, she wanted more.

Jason saw it. He leaned against Tessa, full length body contact. Tessa felt like she'd been hit by a bolt of electricity. "Would you like a strawberry?"

Tessa nodded, without releasing Jason's finger.

With his left hand, Jason

brought a strawberry to Tessa's lips. She opened her mouth; he slid his finger out and inserted a large, red berry. With his index finger, still wet from Tessa's mouth, he slowly, lightly traced a path down Tessa's bare arm, past her waist, to her hips.

Tessa's eyes opened wide, and she began to suck on the strawberry.

"The strawberry is ripe, isn't it?" Jason said softly, his lips brushing against Tessa's ear as he spoke. His trailing finger wound slowly across Tessa's belly and came to rest on the zipper of her

shorts. "What else is ripe, Tessa?" His finger traced the path of the zipper and rested at its lowest point, just above the spot where Tessa had begun to feel small pinpricks of anticipation.

"Ask for what you need Tessa," he said, pulling the uneaten strawberry from her mouth.

Tessa was silent. She was ten thousand miles from home with a man who was here to help her escape; to help her become a woman who took risks, who could open up, emotionally and sexually. *Ask for what you need*, Tessa thought. But what was that?

“I want...I need...” Tessa took her eyes from Jason’s face and glanced around the café. “This is a public place.”

“Yes. But I’ve made arrangements with the owners. No customers will be seated back here until we leave. It’s a private public place. Now, ask for what you need.” Jason pressed the finger that rested on her zipper, and smiled when Tessa’s eyes returned to his.

Tessa’s homework had never been like this. When she touched herself, it did nothing. But this...

“I need you to touch me,” she said, so softly Jason could barely hear her even though his face rested against hers.

“Where?”

“You know. *It*.”

Jason kissed Tessa’s earlobe and whispered, “To ask for something, you must name it. You can call it anything you like. Some women prefer the proper terms, like clitoris or clit. Others prefer something more romantic, like sweet spot or honey pot. Some enjoy rougher words, like pussy. Whatever you’re comfortable with. But you must name it to ask for it.”

“It...”

“It is?”

Tessa gave in. The gentle pressure of his finger over her shorts made her feel faint and supercharged all at the same time. “Clitoris. Or clit. Touch it.”

“Where?”

Really? A man who helped women overcome sexual issues for a living didn't know where a woman's clitoris was? Tessa started to explain, and Jason touched her lips with his free hand.

“This, I know. What I want to know is whether you want my hand

here,” and he gently placed his hand on Tessa’s crotch, “or here.” Jason slid one finger underneath the top of Tessa’s waistband and gently touched the top of her panties. “Which place?”

Tessa felt her face get hot and she wasn’t sure whether it was sexual energy or embarrassment.

“Outside.”

Jason moved his hand to rest on top of Tessa’s shorts. It took him only moments to find the exact spot that begged for attention. He moved his fingers firmly up and down, slowly, stopping to gently probe or press.

“No,” Tessa said, and Jason’s fingers stopped moving.

“I made a mistake. I want you to touch me under my shorts.”

Jason unbuttoned Tessa’s shorts and slid the zipper all the way down. “On top of your underwear, or skin to skin?”

Tessa’s eyes darted around the room, once again. There was no one else in this dimly lit back room. Just Jason and an ache so strong Tessa thought she would burst.

“Touch my skin.”

Jason took Tessa’s chin and turned her head slowly until it

rested on his shoulder, nestled along his jaw. His lips placed butterfly kisses on her temple as his hand slowly inched under the waistband of her panties. His index finger found her clitoris and he began to stroke. Tessa shivered.

“It’s swollen and warm.” He kept stroking, slow...fast...slow. When Tessa shivered again, he slid his fingers a little lower and gently pressed against the lips of her vagina. Tessa tensed.

“I’m not going to do anything you don’t want me to. I just wanted to see how excited you are. Okay?”

Tessa nodded.

“You’re wet,” Jason whispered. “Your body says you want more. Do you?”

Tessa nodded, again.

“Ask for what you need.”

“I want you to touch my clit, and whatever else you touch, to... you know...”

“To make you come?”

Tessa shook her head and thought of years of marriage and months of her own “homework.” “I can’t come. But I want you to make me feel good.”

Jason kissed her forehead. “Because you’ve never had an

orgasm doesn't mean you can't." Jason began to massage her swollen clitoris. "Shall we just see what happens?"

Tessa's response was to shift her bottom to put Jason's fingers at the perfect angle.

"That a' girl."

Jason focused on pressure and pace—fast and slow—until Tessa began to squirm, eyes closed, lips slightly parted. She pressed her hips to meet Jason's fingers and her breathing became rapid. But she plateaued, and the grimace on her face told Jason she was frustrated.

Jason slid his free hand under her bra and began to knead Tessa's breast. Tessa groaned. He dipped his finger in Tessa's wetness to lubricate her throbbing clitoris and stroked and massaged with a pressure unlike any Tessa had ever felt before. When he sensed she was right on the edge, he pinched Tessa's nipple, bringing her almost to the point of pain, and taking her exactly where she longed to go. Tessa began to spasm. It wasn't powerful, but it was.

When Tessa stopped quivering, she opened her eyes and looked at Jason.

“Was that what I think it was?”

“Congratulations.”

“It was...” Tessa struggled for words. “It was nice, but not exactly fireworks. Is there something wrong with me?”

Jason pulled his hand out, wiped it on a paper napkin, and pulled Tessa into a hug. “There is absolutely nothing wrong with you. Most firsts aren’t fireworks. But now that you’ve opened yourself up to it, and your body is relaxed and receptive, I think it’s safe to say fireworks are in your future.”

Tessa cried while Jason held

her. After a few minutes, she pulled herself together, Jason paid the bill, and they headed back to the Westberg. Jason used the time in the car to further educate Tessa. He began with an explanation of a woman's orgasm. It was something Tessa had read about, part of her homework, but Jason's explanation seemed easier to understand. Then he asked Tessa how she had felt, both emotionally and physically. "That wasn't a rhetorical question," he said when Tessa didn't immediately answer. So she thought about it, and answered.

"First I was appalled at myself

for letting a man I don't know touch me there, and in a public place. At first, I was so nervous I thought I might throw up. Then I started to feel something, a little spark. After that, I didn't care about anything. I just wanted to feel *it*."

"And how did you like your first orgasm?" Jason asked. A grin played at the corners of his mouth.

"It felt nice. But mostly it felt like relief." Tessa's eyes started to water. "I really thought I was defective."

They had just come to a stop light, so Jason turned to face Tessa

full-on. "You are a beautiful, complete woman. You just need a little help finding your way, that's all."

"I need a lot of help finding my way," Tessa said. But she smiled now.

"Lucky for you, the Aussie Team is the best there is." When they pulled up to the Westberg, Jason said, "We're going to the beach this afternoon. Have a rest and a bite to eat. Bring a swim suit. I'll pick you up at 2:00."

David, just a quick report from Australia! Had breakfast out this morning and saw some sights. Sydney is far more complex than I ever knew. It's an interesting mixture of cosmopolitan and down-home. The weather is great...hate to rub it in since the weather report on line says Chicago is 36° and overcast. Sorry :- (

I'm going to the beach this afternoon. Have to leave in a few minutes. I'll write more when I have time.

Yours, Tessa

PS: thanks again for

understanding

“I thought Bondi Beach was the main beach in Sydney,” Tessa said.

“It is the most well-known, and it is beautiful. But Bondi won’t provide quite the experience I’m looking for, so...” Jason held Tessa’s hand as they stepped off the ferry, “welcome to Watson’s Bay.”

Tessa looked around. “Where’s the beach?”

Jason laughed. "Patience, patience. And follow me."

Jason led Tessa through a place called Camp Cove, up some stairs and past some old gun emplacements. "They were erected during the war," Jason explained. After a few minutes, they arrived at the top of another beach.

"Welcome to Lady Jane Beach," Jason said, smiling. "It's a great place for some sun, some beautiful swimming, and freedom."

Tessa understood the first two things. Sun and swimming; who wouldn't want that at a beach. She was about to ask for an explanation

of the third when her eyes found the answer to the question forming on her lips.

“Jason! This is a nude beach.”

“That it is my lady. Shall we?” Jason motioned for Tessa to step ahead. “It’s the middle of the week, so not as crowded as it could be, though lots have the time off for holiday. Still...” Jason pointed to a spot. “Over there. Not too crowded.”

Jason unfolded a large blanket and motioned for Tessa to sit. “I have cold water and diet soda and sunscreen. Don’t want to burn those sensitive spots that aren’t

used to seeing sun." His smile was wicked and Tessa blushed.

"I will not be taking off my clothes." She looked around at the naked buns and naked boobs, not all of them particularly pretty.

"Suit yourself." Jason stripped off his tee shirt. "How about you help me out here?" He handed Tessa the sunscreen and turned his back to her. "I'll do the same for you. If. You. Ask. For. It." He winked.

After they'd both slathered up in sunscreen, Jason invited Tessa to a swim. "The water here is wonderful. Come on."

Tessa waded waist high into the blue with Jason right behind her.

“This is great,” she said, taking in the view. “Your country is beautiful.”

Instead of an answer, she felt Jason’s arms slide around her waist. He pulled her gently against him and rested his chin on top of her head. “It’s not the only thing of beauty here. This morning was getting-to-know-you. This afternoon is about taking it the next step. Why do you think I took you to a nude beach, Tessa?”

“Because you want to get me naked?”

Jason squeezed her a little tighter. "Getting naked or not is totally up to you. That wasn't my reason. Try again."

Tessa turned her head back toward the beach. Old. Young. Men. Women. Skinny. Not so skinny. All kinds and colors and genders and, from the looks of it, sexual orientations. The only thing that was common to all of them was that they seemed relaxed just as they were; naked and no big deal.

"You want me to see that normal people can be comfortable in their own skin."

"Bravo. You get an A. Tessa,

you are at a free beach with a man who will not judge you, who will do whatever you tell him you need, as long as it doesn't endanger life and limb or get me tossed in jail." He slid one of his hands into the water. A moment later, it came to rest on Tessa's belly. A finger wiggled underneath the top of Tessa's bikini bottom. He tickled the skin just below her belly button. "Ask for what you need."

Tessa felt everything at once. The cool ocean water that lapped above her waist. The tease of Jason's finger, under the water and skimming just under the top of her

bikini bottoms. The growing heat in what she'd begun to think of as her sweet spot. The feel of Jason's growing physical response to her, hard against her bottom. *Ask for what I need*, she thought.

"I'm not ready to show my naked self to the world," Tessa said, "but I'd like to feel the ocean on my bottom."

"Be more specific in your request."

Tessa stepped on Jason's foot.

"Ouch!" He playfully pulled on her hair.

"I want you to slide my bikini

bottoms off.”

“Just so you can feel the ocean? Or is there something else you’d like to feel?”

He was going to make her ask. Damn it.

“The ocean, yes. But not just the ocean.”

“Tess-Ah...ask for what you need.”

“What you did this morning was really great. I want more of that. But I also want to know what it feels like if you go inside. With your fingers!”

“You’ve not experienced that

before?"

Mark had done a little of that, but when Tessa failed to become excited by it, he gave it up. For the majority of their marriage, he simply got hard, got in, came and got out. Tessa wanted more than that now.

"My husband didn't get a great response from me in the first year we were married. So he stopped trying."

Jason's hands were already sliding Tessa's bottoms off. He held her steady while she lifted each foot free and then he tucked her bottoms in the waistband of his

trunks.

“Relax, Tessa,” he said as he pulled her close to him. “Just look straight ahead at the beautiful water. Feel me against your backside?”

She nodded.

“I will keep you steady. Don’t worry about the waves or the sand under your feet. Don’t worry about anything. Let yourself go. Trust me.”

“I do,” Tessa said. Even though she’d only known Jason a few hours, she did trust him. Of course, she also knew Carmen would never

entrust her to someone who wasn't worthy.

Jason nudged Tessa's feet into a wider stance. "Feel the water cooling your heat? I'm going to put a stop to that now." Jason kept Tessa steady with one arm while his other plunged underwater. His hand found Tessa's mound and began caressing it. His finger slid up and down her slit, teasing her, until it settled on her clit. He began drawing circles around it with his finger, pressing harder and harder until he heard Tessa's breath change.

"Feel good?"

“Mmmmm,” Tessa said, softly.

After a few minutes with Jason’s magic fingers, Tessa thought she might explode, like at the café, except better. She couldn’t explain it, but it felt like the ocean had climbed inside her. She was beginning to feel waves, small but growing. It was nice, but something was missing.

And then Jason supplied it.

“Lean back against me and wrap your arms around my waist, if you can. I need both of my hands free.” Jason nudged her legs further apart and spread her lips apart with one hand while the other

continued to stroke her clitoris. "Relax now," he said, as he gently pushed a finger past Tessa's lips. He stopped just an inch inside and said, "Okay?"

Tessa nodded. She could feel herself defensively tensing, and she hated that the talk therapy she'd done for so many months—all those 'ah ha' moments she thought she'd committed to memory, hadn't become part of her muscle memory.

Jason continued to stimulate Tessa's clitoris, focusing on the powerful pleasure it brought to her. He listened to her breathing and

felt her hips rise to meet the pressure of his fingers, like two partners dancing. While Tessa remained focused on the building sensation, Jason slowly, steadily pushed his finger deeper inside her. When the full length of his long, muscular finger was inside, he whispered into her ear.

“How do you feel?”

Tessa murmured something. It could have been English or Esperanto for all it mattered; the word was unintelligible, but the passion behind it was clear.

Jason began to move his finger in and out, careful not to disrupt

the dance between his fingers and Tessa's clitoris. As she responded, he drove his finger into her harder and faster. She moaned and wiggled, grinding her pelvis at Jason's fingers.

"Oh God, please don't stop," she cried.

Jason whispered that he would not stop until she had come. "Stay with the sensation, Tessa. Stay with it." Her eyes were closed, so Jason couldn't judge her excitement by pupil dilation, but her breath was rapid and the cleavage above her bikini top was a rosy flush. She was close.

He tipped his head down and kissed Tessa's breast, just above her bathing suit top.

"Oh! That's so good!"

"Stay with it, you're almost there."

And almost before he finished the sentence, she was. Tessa's vaginal muscles clamped around Jason's moving finger and she began to spasm so violently there was no question. For the first time in Tessa's life, she didn't care how improper it might be or who might overhear her.

"Ohhhh ... my... God," she

shouted between pants.

Jason held her firmly until she stopped panting and opened her eyes. When she did, he playfully tousled her hair. “And that, Tessa, is fireworks.”

Tessa held onto Jason's shoulder while he slid her bikini bottoms back into place.

"Do you feel like a little swim?"

"A very little one. I'm surprisingly...tired."

Jason laughed. "You worked for it. Was it worth it?"

Tessa smiled. "Is the Pope Catholic?"

The two floated in the cool water for a few minutes and then made their way back to the blanket. On the walk back, Jason wrapped

his arm around her and rested his hand on her backside. When she didn't object, he slid part of his hand under her bikini bottom and gently stroked the smooth skin of her left cheek until they reached the blanket.

"How about a cold drink?" Jason said, lifting a bottle of water in one hand and a Diet Coke in the other.

Tessa asked for the soda. Jason twisted the cap off with a flourish and handed her the bottle.

"Such a gentleman," Tessa said. "And a gentle man."

Jason actually blushed.

They sipped a cold drink and Jason talked about Sydney. "I've been to the States once," he said. "L.A. But I suppose that's a lot different from New York."

"Yes. Did you like L.A.?"

"Very much. I'd like to visit more of America someday. There's a lot to learn by traveling."

Tessa thought about what she'd learned over the past six hours, and grinned. "Yeah. I had to come all the way to Australia to..."

"Come."

They both laughed.

“If I can be serious for a minute,” Jason said, “I want to talk about what happened out there in the ocean. I think we just demonstrated there is nothing wrong with your body. It knows how to respond to the right stimulus. The trick is to get the right stimulus and stick with it while your body opens up to it. That’s another way of saying...?”

“Ask for what you need.”

Jason lifted his bottled water as if toasting Tessa.

“Tonight, we will have our last session, you and I.”

Tessa frowned. She was really beginning to trust Jason.

“No frowning allowed!” he said playfully. “It will be a great session, still focusing on asking for what you need. It will be more intimate, so I want to prepare you for that.”

“Intimate as in...?”

“Carmen’s therapeutic plan has several goals. We achieved the first one, out there in the beautiful Pacific.”

Tessa blushed, but smiled too.

“But I understand there is an issue you need some closure on.” Jason looked into Tessa’s eyes and

dropped his voice to almost a whisper. "You told Carmen what your husband died doing, with another woman. You seemed to feel it was, in part, your fault because you never allowed him to do that to you."

Tessa's blush deepened, and she lost her smile.

"I'm sure Carmen tried to get you to let yourself off the hook there. Because you didn't give it didn't excuse his getting it elsewhere. That was a mega breach of trust."

Tessa nodded. She knew that, in her head. Her heart, on the other

hand, wasn't so sure.

"I understand that you've been working hard these past few months, and that you've realized you aren't satisfied with the narrow sexual definition you've lived with all your adult life."

"I used to think that practically anything other than simple missionary position was either twisted, gross or beyond my ability to do. I don't think that anymore. But I don't know which things are right for me, and which aren't."

"That's what you've come to Australia to discover." Jason stroked her arm gently with the

finger that, minutes ago, had given Tessa the most sexual pleasure she'd ever experienced. "Tonight I will press you to try two things. I will always respect your right to decline, but I'm going to put some pressure on you, based on what you *said* you wanted in therapy."

"That was back in the safety of Carmen's office," Tessa said. Though her voice was light, she wasn't entirely joking.

"But you'll be in the safety of Jason's arms," he said, lightly, but also not joking. "Don't forget that."

"What two things? Or is it better if I don't know?"

Jason scooted closer to Tessa and gently stroked the inside of her thigh. "I'm going to show you how pleasurable it is to let a man kiss your clitoris."

Kissing it didn't sound so bad, Tessa thought, but she knew there was more to it than that.

"Just kiss?"

Jason's eyes twinkled. "Nailed me on that one, didn't you! They'll be sucking and licking involved. And if you're up to it, maybe a gentle nibble or two."

Tessa laughed, but it didn't disguise her nervousness.

“What’s the second thing?”

“Let’s leave that a surprise, okay?”

They gathered their things and headed back to the ferry. By the time Jason pulled up to the Westberg entrance, Tessa was a mixture of fear, joy, anticipation and dread.

“Dinner will be in your room at 8:00. I’ve already made arrangements with room service. Have a rest and see you in a few hours.”

Tessa, the report from Australia sounds good! I'm jealous that it's beach weather there, though if this keeps up we'll have a beautiful white New Year's (even if it's a beautifully COLD one :) I did a quick Google and read that in Australia you can get a pretty good sunburn in less than fifteen minutes. Soak in some sunblock before you head to the beach! Well, lunch break is over so back to work.

Yours, David.

Tessa smiled and hit reply.

Hey David! Thought of you in 36° weather this afternoon as I waded into the Aussie side of the Pacific. I slathered on the sunblock, but still got a little pink...

Tessa paused, and chuckled. She'd gotten very pink, but not from sun exposure. David didn't need to know that.

...but nothing bad. In fact the afternoon was a success. The ocean is a good place to be reminded that there's a big world out there. When I remember that, as I did this afternoon,

my problems seem a whole lot smaller. I'm doing some more reflection and work this evening, so probably won't get a chance to email you until tomorrow.

Have a good night. Sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite. (If they do, I suggest Terminix.)

Tessa.

Tessa scanned her work email. No emergencies, thank goodness, but lots of activity. Her staff had already taken calls from buyers at Macys and Dillards; they wanted to know whether Tessa had plans to

add accessories to her line. Dillards also wanted to know if Tessa would be interested in creating a group or single design each season for them, on an exclusive basis. Tessa's business was certainly heating up and it felt good, if a little overwhelming. It was clear she'd be putting in some long hours when she got home.

Tessa turned off her laptop and slid it away from her. The first thing she'd done when she got back to the hotel was take a long, warm shower. She shampooed her hair, lathered every inch of her skin, twice, and shaved her legs (again).

She towel dried her hair, moisturized herself from nose to toes, and decided to take a quick look at email before getting ready for her appointment with Jason. Since the appointment was here in her room, which scared her more than a little bit, she had plenty of time to get ready. She stretched out on top of her king sized bed and mentally went through her closet. Was the green dress trying too hard? Were the white capris with the simple pink tunic too casual? The sun and sand, added to the stress of her 'water aerobics,' resulted in one tired woman. *Just*

for five minutes, Tessa thought, as she closed her eyes.

Tessa opened her eyes again when a loud knock on the door jolted her awake.

“Tessa?”

Tessa turned toward the bedside clock and squinted. It couldn't be right. It read 8:02.

“Just a minute,” Tessa adjusted the hotel bathrobe she'd fallen asleep in and belted it tight. “I'm coming...”

Jason smiled when he saw Tessa peek out from behind the door. “I would say you already did, but for all I know you were doing

more homework in there, and might be coming again."

Tessa felt the blood run to her face. Added to a bit of sunburn, it would be flaming red now.

"I fell asleep. I'm not ready. I'm sorry."

"Can I come in?"

Tessa swung the door all the way open and Jason stepped in. He looked her up and down and his eyes twinkled with amusement.

"The natural look, I see. If anyone can pull it off, it's you."

Tessa glanced at the mirror outside of the bathroom door. Her

hair had dried while she slept; it looked a little like the 'before' Sandra Bullock in *Miss Congeniality*. She'd also fallen asleep with her face on the sleeve of her chenille bathrobe and it left a red crease mark from the top of her cheekbone to the cleft of her chin. Charming.

"I look terrible. I am so sorry Give me a few minutes and I'll pull myself together."

Tessa turned to head into the bathroom but Jason grabbed her hand. "Hold on a minute. I think you look adorable."

Tessa looked into his eyes for

sarcasm. There was none.

“I need to comb my hair. At least,” she said.

Jason let go of her hand. “Do whatever will make you feel good. But, Tessa, seriously, the bathrobe is fine.”

Tessa was alone in the bathroom, brushing out her hair, when the possible meaning of Jason’s comment hit her like an eighteen-wheeler doing ninety. She blushed. She was deciding whether to stay in her robe or change into a dress when Room Service knocked on the door. Tessa let Jason handle it while she considered her options.

Dress, and experience the undressing that she was sure would come sometime after dinner, or, be comfy in her robe and make the undressing less dramatic.

Tessa emerged from the bathroom in her robe.

"I hope you like what I ordered," Jason said, lifting metal plate covers and arranging the plates of food. "Part of the pleasure of food is its appearance, yes?"

Tessa smiled. There were half a dozen plates of exotic food.

"Ladies first," Jason said, with a wave of his hand. Tessa allowed

Jason to pull the desk chair out and seated her in front of the food. "Have you eaten oysters on the half shell before?"

Tessa shook her head. "The texture is a bit...slimy...for my taste."

"We'll see," Jason said, his green eyes twinkling. "Sometimes slimy is very, very pleasurable."

Once again, Tessa felt a flash of heat on her face. "That looks good!" She pointed to a plate of pasta, maybe because she was suddenly famished and maybe because it smelled heavenly.

“It’s a specialty, a little something the chef agrees to make for us.”

“Desert?” Tessa said, pointing to a plate with fine, dark chocolate.

“Yes. Do you like asparagus?”

Tessa nodded. “And avocado.” She nodded toward a plate with finely sliced wedges arranged around a center of what looked like salsa.

Jason lifted an empty wine glass and filled it with dark, red wine. “Australian. So you know it’s the best,” he said, handing it to Tessa.

“I bet the vintners in Napa

Valley would have something to say about that." She raised the glass, in salute.

Jason pulled up a chair and settled in. "Let's begin with the oysters, shall we?" He picked one up, brought it to his lips and said, "When texture is a problem, the trick is to take it in all at once and simply swallow." He slid the oyster meat into his mouth and swallowed.

Tessa wondered if he was talking about oysters or 'something else.' She hadn't sipped enough of her wine to ask.

"These are expertly prepared.

May I?" Jason lifted an oyster and leaned next to Tessa. "All you have to do is open your mouth and swallow."

Tessa hesitated. The gray things were slimy. They reminded her of...

Jason smiled.

Could he read minds, Tessa wondered.

"This was something you told Carmen you wanted to work up to. I'm just priming the pump here."

Before she could back out, Tessa closed her eyes and opened her mouth. The moment she felt the oozy mollusk on her tongue,

she swallowed. Jason handed Tessa her glass of wine, and she chased the oyster down with a large gulp of wine.

Tessa quickly recognized that each plate had a purpose. Though she didn't know about the pasta, since she didn't know what was in it, all the other items on the table were aphrodisiacs. And Jason fed them to her, one by one, some efficiently, some erotically.

"Asparagus is my favorite," he said, lifting a spear from the plate. Tessa opened her mouth to receive it, and Jason shook his head. "Let me demonstrate."

Jason slowly inserted the spear in his open mouth, withdrew it part way, and guided it back in, sucking it as it entered and left his pursed lips. After several nearly obscene passes, he nibbled the head of the tuber. "Not all things sucked in this way should ever be bitten."

Tessa reached for a spear and Jason gently slapped her hand away. "I guide it in, and you take as much of its length as you can without gagging."

Tessa did, but she knew she'd never again eat asparagus without thinking she was 'priming the pump.'

The pasta had been excellent, filled with interesting herbs and spices and covered in a light, but rich, cream sauce. But the best was the chocolate. Jason had fed each piece to her, asking her to lick his

fingers after each delicious bite.

Tessa didn't know if it was the wine or the pasta and chocolate, but by the time dinner was over, she was feeling warm and dulcet. Jason placed the empty dishes in the hall outside of the room.

"Feeling good?" he asked.

She nodded.

Jason held his hand out to her. Tessa took it and allowed him to gently pull her to her feet. He led her to the full length mirror just outside the bathroom and stood directly behind her.

"I see a beautiful, sexy woman.

What do you see?"

"A mess!" Tessa said. "My hair is still a nightmare. I've no makeup. And this robe is not the most flattering."

"You are correct on only one count, and I can fix that."

Jason tugged at the belt and the robe fell open. Tessa reflexively pulled at it, and Jason stilled her hands.

"How will a man appreciate your body when you do not? We just enjoyed the feel, the texture and the taste of some very erotic foods. Now we will do the same

with your very erotic body.”

“It’s not...” Tessa’s eyes began to fill.

“It’s not what?”

“It’s not sexy.”

“Why?”

Was he really going to make her state the obvious? Jason stood still, holding Tessa’s robe open, appraising its reflection in the mirror.

“My breasts are small. My hips are big. My belly is round, not flat.”

Jason slowly placed one hand on Tessa’s left breast. “It fills my hand. It’s soft and supple.” He

touched the nipple, almost reverently. "Look at your nipple. It's beautiful." He began rubbing her nipple between his thumb and finger. "When it's caressed it deepens in color and grows in size."

Tessa might have been mortified to have a man she barely knew touching her, assessing her. But his touch sent small electric waves down her belly.

"Your hips," Jason continued, "are magnificent." He slid his palm along Tessa's curves, from her waist to her knee. "Don't you see how incredibly sexy they are?"

She didn't, but she liked the pressure of his hand on her skin, especially when he slid his hand to her rear and kneaded her right cheek.

"Now, about that belly," he said, as if he was going to agree with Tessa's criticism. "There is a sweet little rounding, isn't there? Let's have a look."

Jason moved out from behind Tessa and kneeled in front of her. He traced the curve of her tummy, from belly button to the top of her dark pubic hair with a slow, lazy finger.

"It has a delightful womanly

shape; not too much, not too little.”

“It looks frumpy in a bikini.”

“Perhaps on closer evaluation...”

Jason placed one hand on the back of each of Tessa’s cheeks and held her firm. He leaned forward and began to swirl his tongue in her belly button.

Tessa giggled. “That tickles.”

“Hmm. Not what I was going for. Let’s go to Plan B.”

Jason’s tongue began a slow, southern stroll. Occasionally, he gently nipped a bit of flesh, sending goose bumps up Tessa’s

arms. When he reached the edge of Tessa's mound, she stiffened. Jason increased the hold he had on her backside.

"Ask for what you need, Tessa," he said, looking up into her eyes.

Silent tears filled her eyes. "Good girls don't."

"Good girls enjoy the body God gave them with partners who appreciate them for who they are."

She wiped a tear away. "Isn't it...gross?"

Jason shook his head. "Ask for what you need."

"What if I don't need it, but I

want it?"

"Ask for it."

Tessa stood, frozen. She could still hear her mother's voice, whispering about the dirtiness of that part of her body. All those years, Tessa told herself that any man—even Mark—who wanted to put his mouth *there* was a little twisted. All the while she ignored, hell she buried, her longing to find out what it felt like.

Jason apparently knew what she was thinking. He touched her mound, right above her clitoris, as if to remind her of the pleasure that waited. That nudge pushed her

over the edge.

“I want you to do it.”

Jason increased the pressure with his finger and watched Tessa jump, as if she'd been touched by fire. “Do what, Tessa. Name it.” He began to stroke her slit.

“I want you to give me oral sex.”

“It will be my pleasure. Watch in the mirror. Watch as I make you come.”

Jason nudged Tessa's legs further apart and sat cross legged on the floor. He spread Tessa's lips so far apart she could feel the cool

air on the entry to her womanhood. That coolness lasted only a second, as Jason's hot, rough tongue massaged Tessa's most sensitive skin.

Tessa gasped. It wasn't at all what she'd expected, though she had never been clear about what to expect.

Jason held her steady as he worked his tongue up and down her slit, exploring every nook and cranny. Each pass felt better than the last, and when he suddenly plunged his tongue inside her, she squealed.

Jason's hand released Tessa's

cheek, found her clitoris and began stroking. "I need my hands, so you're going to have to be steady on your feet, okay?" His fingers were making her clit swell. "Remember the ocean, today? I'm going to suck your clit and when you think you can't take anymore I'm going to send you over the edge with my finger inside you. I'm going to give you all I think you can take. Are you up for that?"

Tessa nodded, still focused on the throbbing in her sweet pot, begging for more. More of what, Tessa wasn't sure...but she trusted that Jason was.

Tessa discovered that Jason had only been warming up. Now his tongue was circling Tessa's clit, his lips sucking on it so hard she thought she would melt, pressing her throbbing nub flat and then pulling it back up between two firm lips. Gentle nibbles and rough licks, around, deep, hard and fast. Tessa was so lost in the sensation she hardly noticed when Jason's index finger plunged into her wet vagina, so ready for entry there was no resistance. While his tongue kept Tessa's attention on the fire in her clitoris, Jason took the opportunity to slide two fingers

into her vagina.

Tessa began to rock forward, pressing her mound against Jason's face, begging him to take all of her.

Jason plunged his fingers in and out of Tessa's wetness, harder and faster in time with the demands his tongue made on her clitoris. Instead of recoiling from the pounding, Tessa ground her hips into Jason's hand. She fisted his hair and pulled his mouth against her mound with such intensity there was no mistaking what she wanted.

Jason worked the inside of Tessa's vagina with a well-trained

finger, angling for her G Spot; at the same moment he wrapped his lips around Tessa's engorged clit and sucked as hard as he could.

Waves traveled from Tessa's clitoris through her belly like shock waves in a major earthquake. It felt like minutes before they stopped, and when they did, they were replaced by spasms in her vagina that felt like delicious twitches. When everything stopped quaking and convulsing, her toes curled. Tessa was still hanging onto a handful of Jason's hair when he removed his fingers from her wet core and stood.

“I could feel your contractions,” he said, wiggling his dripping fingers. “That was quite an orgasm.” He tipped her chin up, to look in her face, and Tessa began to sob.

“It was...so...awesome!” she said, between great, heaving sobs. “Why didn’t I let my husband do that?”

Jason held her as she wept and then swept her up in his arms and carried her into the bathroom.

Jason ran warm water into the oversized tub and added bubble bath from the hotel's spa. Warm scents of ginger mingled with wisps of steam until the bathroom became as comforting as a womb. He settled Tessa into the tub.

"I'll be right back," he said, disappearing into the bedroom.

Tessa sunk back into the warmth of the sweet water. Her vaginal lips were still swollen and, as the old saying went, she felt like she'd been 'rode hard and put away wet.' But what a ride it had been.

When Jason returned, he was carrying a large, delicate loofah.

“Where...?”

“Like the Boy Scouts, I come prepared.” He kneeled on the floor near the tub, dipped the loofah into the warm water and squirted it with moisturizing soap that also smelled like ginger. “Lay back.”

Tessa laid back into the water, resting her neck and head on the gentle slope of the tub. Jason softly ran the loofah across her breasts and down her belly. He put his hand into the water and nudged Tessa’s legs further apart.

“What?”

Jason understood. “There is more than one kind of sexual intimacy.” He waved the loofah. “This is intimate too, and it’s sexual. But its purpose is to calm and relax, not stimulate.”

Tessa nodded. She closed her eyes while Jason gently bathed the intimate places he had so expertly ignited. When he was finished, he patted Tessa dry and walked her to the bed. Tessa climbed in, exhausted and relaxed, though small sparks of anticipation began to quicken her pulse.

Jason settled Tessa in the big,

comfortable bed and leaned over her, his face just inches from hers.

“You’re a beautiful lady with a wonderful spirit,” he said, softly brushing Tessa’s cheek with his fingers. “It’s been a pleasure working with you. Now, get some well-deserved sleep.”

He kissed Tessa softly on the cheek and left.

David,

It's late and I'm exhausted, but too wired to sleep. I'm twenty-two floors up and higher than the moon, high because I finally let go of some of the baggage I've carried for way too long. I know you understand what I mean, because we all have baggage. If we're lucky, we carry bags that aren't heavier than what we can bear. Tonight, I lightened one of those bags and I am both elated and melancholy: elated to be one step closer to the me I want to be, but melancholy for all the time I wasted carrying such unnecessary weight.

Well, clearly enough of the philosophical! If I've half a brain i

will delete this message instead of sending it.

Thinking of you from the 22nd floor,

Tessa.

And before she lost her courage, Tessa hit send.

Tessa dozed off at dawn and awoke, still sleepy, at nine. On her way to the bathroom, she noticed the creamy white envelope on the carpet, just under the front door.

Carmen had told her there would be a day or two between 'sessions,' so she was a little surprised to receive instructions so soon. She slipped the note from the envelope and read:

Tessa,

It was my honor and privilege to spend time with you yesterday. You are such a lady, and everything Carmen said you would be. I know your journey will be a success. Remember the lesson of our day—ask for what you need—and face tomorrow with the same spirit.

Please enjoy a relaxing day today. Ben Larsen will meet you in the lobby tomorrow at 10:00. Dress tourist casual! By the way, Ben is excellent. I'm sure he will guide you to a conclusion that was as successful as ours.

*With warmest regards,
Jason*

Tessa held the note as if it were a precious gem, though she had to smile at Jason calling her a lady even after their session in the hotel room last night. Now she understood why Athena's Ground

limited each field therapist to only one set of sessions per client. It would have been easy to be swept away by strong but gentle Jason, and she assumed the others could pose a similar threat.

Tessa showered, not surprised that her lips and vaginal opening were tender. She hadn't had sex in a very long time and even when Mark was alive, sex had been mostly tepid and predictable. Because she wasn't terribly comfortable with it, Mark learned to get in and get out. He serviced himself quickly, because Tessa appeared to want it that way. The

thought of what could have been, if she had only asked, made Tessa want to weep again.

But she didn't.

Instead, Tessa Donovan decided to up her game. If Jason could teach her that her body wasn't heinous (though she still struggled to believe him on that one) and that it could produce unbelievable pleasure, then Ben surely had some wonderful experiences in store.

Tessa booted up her laptop. When constructing Tessa's field therapy package, Carmen had recommended some 'extras,' and

Tessa had declined. But that was pre-Jason, and pre-orgasm. *Carmen*, Tessa wrote, *I changed my mind about the extras. Is it too late to get them here before tomorrow?* Tessa sent the email and browsed the visitors' brochures on the desk where she kept her laptop.

One of the brochures caught her attention, because how could anyone go all the way to Australia and not see a kangaroo? Tessa threw on some walking shoes, grabbed her purse and headed for the Taronga Zoo. It was a short and beautiful ferry ride away, and while she enjoyed all the animals, she fell

in love with the koalas. Tired, but happy, she made her way back to the Westberg. A couple blocks from her hotel, she stopped for some Chinese take-out and a bottle of cold beer. On the way out, she passed a tourist shop with a display of colorful Aussie tee shirts. A big-eyed koala on a black tee made her think of David. Impulsively, she bought it, knowing that she wanted him to have it before she left Australia. It might cost an arm and a leg, but she would make it happen.

The concierge at the hotel was happy to help.

“Here’s the name and address,” Tessa said, as she scribbled David’s information on a hotel note pad. “I want this sent as fast as possible unless it’s so expensive I’d have to take out a second mortgage.” She smiled and the concierge nodded.

“It’ll be expensive, but I doubt you’ll need a second mortgage.”

Tessa borrowed the hotel note pad again and wrote a message to accompany the koala tee shirt:

David. The zoo in Sydney is wonderful, and the most wonderful creature there was this guy. I know. I

know. I went all the way to Australia and all you got was this crummy tee shirt :) Well, there's nothing crummy about the sentiment behind it...my favorite Aussie for my favorite Chicagoan. Tessa.

The concierge laid the note on top of the carefully folded tee shirt. "No problem. I'll pack it in a padded envelope." He looked at his watch. "I can just make the last pick up. Are you sure you want this sent express? It'll be pricey."

Tessa felt a powerful need to give David something *now*, even if it was a silly tee shirt. She thought

it had something to do with guilt. She wasn't in a 'relationship' with David, yet, and she knew, rationally, that she did not owe David her chastity until she was. But in some stupid way, it felt like she was doing to David what Mark had done to her, and it felt really bad.

"If it will cost more than a couple hundred dollars US, let me know. Otherwise, please just send it express. I want him to have it right away."

The concierge kept a poker face, except for the corner of his mouth, which tightened as if he was biting

his tongue. Tessa thought he'd go home tonight and tell the wife about the crazy American woman shelling out big bucks to express ship a stupid tourist tee shirt.

Tessa was eating her takeout Three Times Delight (a dish she picked because she hoped it prophetic), when her room phone rang. It was the concierge.

"I got your package out with the last Fed Ex pick up, Ms. Donovan. Kept it under your cost threshold and it should be delivered within twenty-four hours. Oh, and today seems to be your package day; one just arrived here for you. Would

you like us to deliver it now?"

For a moment Tessa was puzzled, and then she remembered her email to Carmen. "Yes, please."

When her package came, part of Tessa felt guilty for spending money on such things. Part of her felt guilty for even thinking about wearing such things. Part of her felt guilty thinking about what Ben would do to her while wearing such things. And the rest of her said to hell with feeling guilty. The To-Hell-With-Feeling-Guilty-Tessa finally won, though she still had to summon up the courage and actually put the stuff on for Ben.

Ask for what you need, she reminded herself. With the memory of Jason's tongue in her sweet spot and his fingers in her vagina, asking for what she needed seemed like a most worthy goal.

FRIDAY

Jason's note had advised her to dress 'tourist casual,' so Tessa set aside Carmen's beautiful 'extras' and donned a pair of white jeans, a sunny yellow knit top and cute, but comfortable, sandals. A simple hair style and light makeup had her ready with twenty minutes to spare. She used the time to check for email, and smiled when she saw there was one from David.

Tessa,

After reading your last email, I wish I could wrap my arms around you and give you a Triple A, First Class Hug. You're right, we all do carry some bags through life and I'm glad you've lightened yours. I must admit, though, now I'm curious about a load that could only be dropped on the other side of the world! Maybe someday you'll tell me about it. Until then, I'll just smile for your elation and share your sadness that you struggled with that burden for so long.

I'm sure you know I was disappointed that Australia got dibs on you. I'd hoped this would be our

time to finally meet face-to-face, but I understood. And now that I know you are finding what you needed, that you've gotten some peace (or resolution?), I feel better.

You said that if we're lucky, life gives us bags that are no heavier than what we can carry. Here's a second baggage-carrying bit of luck: that each person finds someone who can share the load until the burden is lighter or the person is stronger.

And if we're truly lucky, maybe life gives us both light loads and a partner who can help us carry. I'm wishing you continued progress and lighter loads.

Yours, David

Tessa wanted to write back, but knew David's heartwarming reply deserved a thoughtful response. It was 9:55 and she had to be in the lobby by 10:00. "Later, sweet David," she said out loud as she turned off her laptop and ran for the elevator. She made it to the lobby with a minute to spare.

"Tessa?"

Tessa turned toward the voice. It was deep and rich and more heavily accented than Jason's. It came from a very tall, tanned, blue-

eyed blonde, an in-the-flesh man far more gorgeous than the one in Carmen's photograph. Were they one and the same? Tessa prayed they were.

Luckily for Tessa, sometimes prayers are answered.

"Have you eaten?" Ben said as he led Tessa to his parked car.

"Yes, a couple hours ago."

"Alright. How about this: I take you to my favorite sight in Sydney and after, we have some lunch. Sound good?"

Tessa stared into Ben's bright blue eyes and thought anything

with him would probably be good.
“Sure.”

The ride was a short fifteen minutes. Ben parked at the harbor, took her hand and tugged at her playfully. “C’mon. Let’s go visit Granddad!”

Tessa’s mouth dropped open, which Ben hadn’t seen because he was excitedly leading Tessa forward. ‘Granddad’ turned out to be the Sydney Opera House, and Tessa was more than a little relieved.

“Ben, this place is breathtaking! The design is...I’m speechless.” Like millions of people, Tessa had

seen photographs of the famed Sydney landmark and when she'd first arrived in Sydney, she'd walked the harbor area and seen the famed landmark from a distance. But the up-close and in-person experience was wholly different. With the sun glinting off the sail-like roof, the place felt absolutely magical.

“Quite something, isn't it?”

“Oh yeah. But why did you call it Granddad?”

“Let's get tickets for a tour and then I'll introduce you.”

Ben practically trotted up to the

little building that sold tickets and Tessa wondered if Ben's grandfather was a ticket seller. But the seller turned out to be a middle-aged woman. "Over here," he said, holding their tour tickets in one hand and tugging Tessa with the other. They climbed the stairs of the Opera House and Ben led Tessa to a corner near the main entrance. "Tessa, meet Granddad... or at least a small part of him." Ben pointed to the stonework. "Granddad was one of twelve hundred men who built this amazing place. He used to take my dad here, point to this section of

the building, and say 'that's me.' I was little when he passed, so I don't remember him too well. But dad used to bring me and my brothers here on Granddad's birthday, pretty much every year. He'd take us to this spot and we'd all wish Granddad a happy birthday."

"What day is your Granddad's birthday?" Tessa asked.

"March 14."

"If I'm ever in Sydney on March 14, I'll stop by and wish him a happy birthday."

Ben pulled his eyes from the

stonework and focused them on Tessa's. "That's sweet." He brushed a soft, swift kiss on the tip of her nose and said, "Let's go catch the tour."

While the outside structure was the standout feature, the Opera House interior was no slouch. Everyone on the tour wore headphones so the guide could speak quietly and still be heard loud and clear. They saw some of the performing areas, heard about the history of the amazing landmark, and even got a peek behind the scenes. Tessa got a kick out of seeing the space where giant

doors opened to admit shipments, and limos carrying performing stars.

After the tour, Tessa picked up an Opera House tee shirt for herself and a postcard to send to the office. She'd probably be home before the postcard got there, but that was alright with her.

"It's a bit touristy, but if you love the Opera House, lunch outside is pretty good," Ben said.

"I'm a tourist and I'm not ashamed to look like one," Tessa said.

Ben led her to a table in the

busy corridor nestled below the Opera House. They ordered sandwiches and fries, and washed them down with ice cold beer.

“It sounded like your sessions with Jason went well,” Ben said, between bites.

Tessa felt odd discussing her ‘sessions’ with another man, even if it was another therapist. But Ben’s face was completely and utterly inscrutable, as if he had veiled discussions about oral sex and masturbation each day, and twice on Sunday. *Hell, Tessa thought, maybe he did.*

“They did, after I got over my

initial shyness.”

“Everyone is shy at first. That’s why we spend the first hour or two doing non-threatening things.”

“Like the sightseeing drive with Jason before breakfast,” Tessa said, and Ben nodded. “And the tour of the Opera House with lunch.”

“Guilty as charged,” Ben said. His face became serious and he dropped his voice well-below the noise around them. “I know your history, Tessa, and I know you aren’t sexually active. What I don’t know is your present. Do you date? Is there someone you’d like to have a relationship with?”

Tessa was grateful she had been chewing when he asked; it gave her a minute to decide how open to be with Ben. Her instinct was to play her cards close to the vest, and she quickly swept that idea away. By the end of the night, she'd surely have been naked with this guy. If she could open her body to him, why not her heart?

"I met someone online and it's turned into almost daily emails, texts and phone calls. We even Skype now and again. He's sweet and smart and I'd like to see if we could have something together."

"Does he feel the same?"

“Yes. In fact, he asked me to join him over Christmas/New Year’s break and I said yes...until Carmen reminded me I’d already obligated this time to therapy.”

“So you broke your date?”

“Yeah. I told him why, without telling him what kind of therapy.”

“Some blokes would get it, others...not so much,” Ben said smiling. “Okay, honestly, most guys wouldn’t get it at all, but a few would.”

Tessa laughed. “That’s what I thought too. That’s why David only knows I’d obligated myself to this

time in Australia to deal with some extremely important personal issues."

"Smart girl."

"I suggested he pick a long weekend in February, and he did. He lives in Chicago and he's coming to meet me in New York. I trust I'll have my...issues...resolved before I put our relationship on the line."

Ben took a long sip of his beer, sat the bottle down, and took Tessa's hand. "It took a while for your issues to develop and it'll take a while before they're resolved, even with the best Aussie therapy

team toiling by your side.” He winked at the Aussie team comment. “But if you give it your best effort, open up, and work the lessons, you’ll be in a lot better place when you meet...what’s his name—David?”

“David.”

“David’s a lucky man to have a chance with you.”

Tessa felt her face flush.

“You do blush easily. Am I going to be treated to a lot of that later?” His blue eyes were full of mischief.

“I hope so.”

They both laughed.

They strolled along the harbor for a while, hand in hand. Tessa wondered why Ben was spending so much more time 'bonding' than Jason had. She finally got the courage to ask.

Ben wrapped his arms around her and leaned into her, so close she felt his lips brush against her ear. "Because we increase the intimacy level today, Tessa, and it'll be easier for you if you're more comfortable with me. Feel like you know me, a little bit anyway."

Tessa realized the note Jason had slid under her door hadn't said

what Ben's therapeutic goal was. So she asked him.

"The first rule, the one you practiced with Jason, is to ask for what you need."

Tessa nodded.

"The second rule, and I think you and Carmen have had some long conversations about this, is to give what you can."

"Yes, I know that. But I don't know what that means, exactly, in terms of what you..." Tessa blushed again.

"It means that we're going back to your hotel. I'm going to ask you

to give me what you can, and together, we'll discover what some of your limits are."

Asking a man to do things to her, things that she wanted, was hard, yet Jason had opened her up to it. But that sounded like a walk in the park compared to the flip side: being asked to do something she might not really want to do. Apparently her thoughts were displayed on her face, just like the newsfeed crawler at the bottom of a CNN news story.

Ben said, "You won't have to do anything you absolutely don't want to. But I will try every trick in my

considerable bag of tricks to expand your sexual repertoire."

"Expanding my sexual repertoire shouldn't be hard, since I have none." Tessa didn't laugh because it was true.

Ben hugged her. "If you really want to be ready for a new relationship, whether it's with David or someone else, you have a lot of work to do." His eyes began to twinkle. "Our work is cut out for us, so let's get going."

All the way back to the hotel, Tessa wondered if she'd lost her ever-loving mind.

They were barely inside the room when Ben took Tessa into his arms. "Take a deep breath. It's just me, Ben, the Aussie goofball with a special talent for sexually empowering women."

Tessa's heart was racing, and Ben held her without moving for several minutes. When he did move, it was not subtle. Before she knew it, her sunny knit top was over her head and lying on the floor.

"Don't think, Tessa. Just stay with me. Only stop me if it truly

violates your morals or is painful. If you tell me to stop, I will. Are you with me?"

Tessa said she was, though she wasn't sure how he could hear her over her pounding heart.

Ben unhooked her bra, and it joined her top on the floor. He pressed her against the wall and dipped his head to her breasts. "Beautiful," he said, nuzzling her cleavage with his chin. "I want to suck your tits."

Tessa gasped a little. She hadn't let Mark use vulgar expressions for her body parts.

“Don’t like the word tits?” Ben said, and Tessa shook her head. “Most men don’t like cute or anatomical terms for the body parts of a woman they want to make love to. Kind of ratchets down the testosterone and shuts down the libido. Give what you can, Tessa. Can you hear the words I need to use to feel sexy, without flinching? Can you give me that?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now, back to my original question. I want to suck your tits. I want to knead them, stroke them, take your nipples between my teeth and bite them.

Can you give me that?"

"Yes."

Ben's mouth immediately fastened to one breast while his fingers kneaded the other. He wasn't gentle like Jason, but neither was he abusive. He behaved like a hungry man at an all you can eat pizza bar.

After the initial shock wore off, Tessa closed her eyes and gave in to the feeling. Ben's tongue teased her nipple and she was so wrapped up in the sensation she hadn't noticed his hand at her jeans. He'd unzipped her pants before she realized what was happening.

“Slide your pants off for me, Tessa,” he said, and returned his attention to her breasts.

Tessa did, and Ben steadied her as she kicked them off her ankles. “Now your panties.”

Tessa hesitated, and Ben added, “We can’t make much progress with your panties on.”

She slid them off, and they joined the rest of her clothes on the floor.

Ben stepped back and looked her up and down. Tessa wanted to melt into the wall.

“Tessa, you have a perfect body

for fucking.”

Tessa flinched at the word and Ben chuckled. “Still having trouble with the words most men think.”

She nodded.

“But you’ll give that to me, won’t you? Don’t want to rain on my testosterone.”

She nodded again.

“Thank you.”

Ben tugged his own clothes off. Free of his jeans and underwear, Tessa could see his penis was full and erect. It looked a little scary.

“See what your beautiful body does to a man?” He took Tessa’s

hand and placed it on his erect penis. "Can you stroke that for me?"

She could, and did.

Ben groaned softly. "You have a nice touch. Don't stop."

Ben slid his hand to Tessa's crotch. When he zeroed in on the space above her clitoris, Tessa groaned. He smiled. "It was warm today. Let's cool off a little." He took Tessa's hand and led her to the shower. They stood together under the warm water and Ben lathered Tessa with soap. He massaged her back and the crack between her buttocks. He turned

her around and soaped her breasts. Then he trailed his soapy hand down to her wet mound and began to massage. Tessa sighed and closed her eyes. "Spread your legs further apart for me, can you?"

Tessa did. She thought she knew what was coming, thanks to her lessons with Jason.

Ben rinsed the soap from her mound and kneeled. "I understand you like this," he said, and thrust his tongue past Tessa's vaginal lips. She quivered. "I see it's true. And do you like this?" He spread her lips and began to suck her clitoris. Tessa whimpered. "Another yes.

Give it to me Tessa, give me your sex."

Ben began to work Tessa's sex. Fast. Slow. Tongue. Fingers. Tess began to grind her hips against Ben's hand and mouth, moaning. And just when she thought she might come, he stopped.

"Not yet, Tessa. Today's lessor is about giving what you can. I wanted to be turned on by your sex, and you obliged." He made his point by placing her hand on his penis, which had grown even larger. It seemed a lot bigger than Mark's had, and Tessa wondered how it would ever fit inside a

woman.

Ben lathered his balls and his penis. "Wash me, like I washed you. Can you?"

Tessa's hands were shaking. She hadn't touched a man's private parts for a very long time.

"That's nice," Ben said softly "Wash my cock really well." Tessa heard the word but didn't flinch. Ben noticed and smiled.

Tessa began as though she was washing a dish. As his penis twitched under her touch, she found herself responding to it with strokes and massage.

“Nice,” he whispered. “But I’d like you to rinse the soap off now.”

Tessa did, and was surprised that he seated her on the side of the tub. When he turned to face her, his large, throbbing member was directly in front of her.

“Suck me off, Tessa. Can you give me that?”

She wasn’t sure she could. Mark had asked her, early in their marriage. It felt dirty, and after trying a couple of times, she began to refuse.

“You told Carmen you regretted not meeting Mark’s need; that it

might have contributed to his using another woman. You said you wanted to try this.”

Tessa nodded, eyes filling with tears.

“You just washed me. It won’t be gross.”

Tessa took his tip into her mouth and closed her eyes. With thoughts of popsicles, she began to suck and lick.

“Nice,” Ben said, and his voice sounded funny. He stroked her hair. “Now take my cock deeper into your mouth. You can do it. Just watch your teeth.”

It was huge. It was throbbing. And Tessa feared he would spew his cum down her throat and she'd gag. She almost stopped. Almost. Because a mental image of Mark with his face between the legs of another woman reminded her she wanted to offer a man more than fifteen minutes in the missionary position once a week.

She grasped Ben's shaft at the base, near his balls, to provide more friction and she drew his penis into her mouth until she nearly gagged. She slid her mouth back and forth over his penis, faster and faster, until she felt it begin to

quiver.

“I’m going to come, Tessa. Move away if you don’t want...”

Tessa froze. She didn’t particularly want a mouthful of semen but Ben’s penis was jerking inside her mouth like a trout on the end of a fishhook and her brain wasn’t moving fast enough to safely evacuate it. Two seconds of brain freeze was all it took; Ben groaned and his penis spurted with a force that shocked her. His penis was inside her mouth, there was what felt like a cup of slimy liquid at the back of her throat, and her brain was still frozen. Tessa’s autonomic

nervous system took over: it cleared the thick, salty liquid with one big swallow.

And then she gagged.

“I can’t believe you swallowed!” Ben said, as he handed Tessa a glass of cold water. “If you want something stronger, I’ve got wine.”

Tessa shook her head. She just wanted to wash away the taste of stomach acid and cum. Water would do.

“I’m really impressed,” he said, as Tessa rinsed her mouth.

Tessa gargled, spit, and said, “Don’t be. I hadn’t planned to swallow. It just happened.”

Ben laughed. “Whatever. If I had a merit badge for first time oral

sex, I'd pin it on you right now."

Tessa smiled. "You know, it wasn't bad until you came. If I could learn to work that out, I think I could actually enjoy it."

Ben raised his hand for a fist bump and Tessa obliged.

"You know, earlier I saddled you with the oral version of coitus interruptus. Would you like me to..."

Tessa shook her head. She was a little overwhelmed with the whole giant-penis-coming-in-the-mouth thing and just wanted to relax.

Ben shrugged. "Just trying to be

fair." He stroked her hair. "I can't believe you ate the whole thing."

They both laughed.

Ben stayed until he was sure Tessa was relaxed and fine. "I'm going to leave for a bit. Our evening starts at seven o'clock. I'll pick you up at the room. Wear something dressy." He wiggled his eyebrows like Groucho Marx and added, "Or something sexy."

After he left, Tessa took a long bubble bath. She washed her hair, ordered Room Service dinner for later, and set the alarm so she wouldn't oversleep this time. She laid down to rest and was out

almost immediately.

The alarm woke her at 5:45. As she examined the clothing Carmen had sent, she realized she didn't know where Ben was taking her. She supposed it didn't matter. Wherever it was, she would be dressed sexy.

Dinner came at six o'clock and she finished it off with white wine. She needed the liquid encouragement to don the garments she'd impetuously ordered yesterday. At seven o'clock on the nose, Ben knocked at her door.

"Wow," she said when she saw

him. He was wearing a dark blue suit, crisp white dress shirt and maroon silk tie. He was clean shaven and gorgeous.

“Wow, yourself!” he replied. He didn’t try to mask his stare: he couldn’t take his eyes off Tessa’s breasts. All of Tessa’s cleavage was on glorious display, compliments of the sexiest emerald green silk dress Tessa had ever seen and the bra she wore underneath it. The dress fit her like second skin and left little to the imagination. It hugged the curves of her hips without making them look big and the hem hit Tessa mid-thigh. The bodice, what

there was of it, was cut away to the point that without Hollywood Tape her nipples would have been playing peek-a-boo. The bra, clever as it was, covered only the sides and undersides of her breasts. The entire top of her breasts, including the nipples, were completely naked and the distinct outline of her nipples was obvious through the dress. The American Tessa would have been appalled. The Aussie Tessa appreciated that her Bs looked like Ds and were displayed provocatively on a silver platter. Except in this case, the platter was emerald silk. The look on Ben's face

was worth the exorbitant amount Tessa had paid for her new clothes.

“That’s going to be a problem,” Ben said, pointing to her dress.

Tessa’s stomach knotted. One blow job and she’d turned into a slut.

Ben saw her expression and took her hand. “No, no...not what you’re thinking. It’s absolutely the most stunning thing I think I’ve ever seen. The problem is...” he pointed to his slacks and the bolder in his crotch.

“Well that may be the nicest compliment I’ve ever gotten.”

Ben took her arm and escorted Tessa to the lobby entrance. She started to walk towards the parking lot when Ben tugged her back. "That's our ride." He pointed to a waiting stretch limousine. The driver opened the door and Tessa slid in. Ben slid in next to her and the limo pulled away.

"Where are we going?" Tessa asked.

"We're going to ride around a little while, enjoy the limo. Not every day you get to travel in one."

Tessa nodded, thinking of the New York subway trains.

“Let me save the final destination as a surprise, okay?”

Tessa slid closer to her door for a better view of passing Sydney. “This is such a beautiful city,” she said as the driver meandered through China Town.

Ben slid closer to her. Her focus was interrupted by his hand, which had found the soft flesh between her legs. It oriented to true north and began to travel.

“Relax,” he said, feeling her tense. “The driver has the privacy window up and he’s got the radio playing in the front seat.”

Tessa listened and heard the faint thud of bass.

“You can’t wear that dress and expect me to treat you like a nun.” His hand had reached her crotch and the surprise in his eyes almost made Tessa laugh. “Oh, we are really in trouble now.”

The panties—one of Carmen’s ‘extras’—were crotchless. Ben’s fingers explored Tessa’s moist passage without impediment, and Tessa relished Ben’s expert ministrations. Tessa abandoned sightseeing, laid her head back and closed her eyes.

“Give what you can and ask for

what you need, Tessa.” Ben slid Tessa’s bodice away from her breasts. The Hollywood Tape was no match for his determined fingers.

“Hey!” Tessa said. “Now my nipples are going to be popping out all night.”

“Excellent,” Ben said, as he studied Tessa’s bra. “Every woman in the world should have a bra like this. Support without interference.” He leaned over and licked Tessa’s nipple.

It felt wonderful and Tessa enjoyed Ben’s mouth and fingers. Her nipples were on fire and she

began to wiggle with electricity. Ben took her wiggle as an invitation. She was wet with anticipation and Ben plunged two fingers inside her vagina in search of Tessa's G Spot. If Tessa was on fire before, she was supernova now.

"Ask for what you need," Ben whispered in her ear. "I'll give it to you right now."

"I want to come," Tessa said, and corrected herself. "Oh sweet lord, I *need* to come." Her hips were swaying and her back arching as Ben's fingers plunged in and out.

He pushed Tessa's dress up to her waist and slid her around, so

Tessa was lying across the back seat on her back. He knocked twice on the window and the driver sounded the horn once. "We won't be interrupted for anything," he said, and at that moment, Tessa wouldn't have cared if they were being televised.

Ben spread Tessa's lips and his tongue worked her clitoris. She bucked to meet his touch, groaning like a woman in pain. He drove her wild with his lips, tongue and teeth while his hands freed his penis.

"Tessa, I want to make you come with my cock. Are you okay with that?"

Tessa nodded.

“Do you care if I don’t use a condom? We’ve all had blood tests, but I can have a condom on in a few seconds.”

Tessa knew she was safe and she didn’t want to waste even one more second.

“No condom. Make me come, now!” She moaned. “Please.”

Ben positioned himself over Tessa and guided the tip of his penis to her opening.

“You’re so wet,” he said. He held her hips in place and pressed cautiously, entering her gently and

not deeply. Tessa lifted her hips and pressed, and that was all the confirmation Ben needed. He gripped Tessa firmly and thrust with all his strength. Tessa moaned, widened her legs, and pressed harder against Ben's sex.

"I'm going to make you come so hard you scream."

Tessa was impatient. She began bucking against him.

"That's it Tessa," he said, and he drove into her with deep, fast thrusts. "Ride my cock. You can do it."

Tessa brought her hips to meet

Ben's thrusts and soon they were making loud, rhythmical music as their flesh pounded together. Tessa worked herself to a frenzy, but didn't climax. Ben lifted her hips, supported the small of her back with one arm and used his free hand to stimulate Tessa's clitoris.

"Oh God..." Tessa moaned.

She was so close. Ben shifted his weight over Tessa and thrust into her so hard he made the limo bounce beneath them. His hand continued to rock her clitoris. He claimed Tessa's breast with his mouth, and she arched her back.

He raked his teeth across her swollen nipple and Tessa grabbed his hair and screamed.

Ben gave Tessa exactly what she'd wanted, and not a minute later, he exploded inside her. They both lay spent, until the driver tooted his horn.

They'd arrived at their destination: they were back at the Opera House. Tessa felt grimy and spent and very, very good. She'd never had sex in a limo before. She'd never had a knee-knocking orgasm during sex before, although point of fact, she'd never had an orgasm of any kind during sex. Until now. She felt in control of her own sexuality, and if that made her a slut, so be it.

She knew that Athena's Ground had thoroughly tested them all for every known STD. And Tessa had

been faithfully taking the pill long enough for reliable protection. The only thing that worried her was the rather immense wet spot they'd left on the back seat of the limo. She hoped the driver had been well-tipped.

Ben held her hand and when *La Traviata* began, he put his arm around her. In the darkness, his fingers occasionally wandered to Tessa's nipples or clitoris, where he plucked at them lazily. Tessa was so spent from riding Ben in the limousine that his occasional wandering fingers produced a pleasant warmth, but no fire. By the

time Violetta died in Alfredo's arms, Tessa was wrapped in Ben's and nearly asleep.

"Nightcap?" Ben asked, as they settled back into the limo.

"I don't think so."

"How about ice cream?" He grinned like a ten-year-old. "Some killer chocolate?"

Tessa smiled. "I'm not hungry. For food."

Ben's boyish grin turned dirty old man. "What are you hungry for?"

When it came time to ask for what she wanted, Tessa suddenly

became shy. After a few starts and stops, she finally just blurted it out.

“You have mad sex skills Ben Larsen, but what I really want is to fall asleep next you, my head on your shoulder and your arms around me. Is that...permitted?”

Tessa knew her past was an open book to Ben, since he was part of her therapy team. He probably knew that it had been years since she'd fallen asleep in a man's embrace. She hoped he understood her ache for that connection.

“Do you also want to wake up with me in your bed,” he asked.

“It would feel a little sleazy if you just disappeared in the middle of night.”

“Agreed. So, what is rule number one?”

“Ask for what you need.”

“And number two?”

“Give what you can.”

“You asked for something that’s easy enough to give. Why would it not be permitted?”

Tessa laid her head on Ben’s shoulder. She couldn’t remember the last time she felt so at peace. When they pulled up to Tessa’s hotel, she was softly snoring.

Ben picked up a fresh toothbrush at the concierge desk before escorting Tessa to the elevator. As soon as they stepped into her room, he headed for the bathroom. A minute later, Tessa heard running bath water.

Tessa was bone tired. Was it the sex or the emotional roller coaster she'd been on since arriving in Sydney? Probably both, she decided, as she sat frozen in the chair she'd plopped in the moment Ben had entered the bathroom.

"The bath is drawn," he said, kneeling down in front of her. "You look beat. Are you feeling alright?"

"I feel good. Actually, very good. But I feel like every drop of energy has been sucked right out of me." She wiggled a shoe off, and then stopped, as if the process of removing footwear was exhausting.

Ben slipped the remaining shoe off and placed Tessa's foot against his thigh. He began to massage the balls of her foot. Tessa sighed.

"Part of giving what you can," Ben said, smiling.

Tessa leaned forward and kissed his forehead.

Ben gave Tessa's other foot a short massage and then held his

hands for her to stand. "C'mon, that's a girl," he said as Tessa hoisted to her feet. He turned her around and unzipped her dress. Tessa's hand flew to her chest, pinning the dress against her to prevent it from dropping to the carpet.

Ben gently pulled Tessa's hand away and the dress fell to the floor. "Trust me," Ben said. Then he unhooked Tessa's bra, and it fell to the floor as well. He slid the panty, what there was of it, over Tessa's hips. He freed her ankles from it, wrapped his arms around her naked back, and carried her into

the bathroom.

The scent of ginger filled the room and Tessa gratefully slid from Ben's arms into the waiting water. "What do you sleep in?" he asked.

Tessa told him where to find her nightgown and he disappeared into the bedroom. Tessa closed her eyes. When she opened them again, the water was not quite warm but Ben's eyes were.

"Didn't have the heart to wake you. Though you do snore, you know."

"Do not."

He smiled. "Feeling a bit better

already, are we?"

"We are. But I'm still pretty wiped out, and..." she repositioned her bottom, "a little sore."

"You rode Big Ben like a champion bull rider, and after a few years of inactivity..." he shrugged his shoulders.

"Big Ben?" Tessa laughed. "A great name for a really big clock in London."

"And for a really big cock in Sydney. Besides," Ben said with mock annoyance, "I heard no complaints from the back of Tom's limo. What I did hear was a certain

young woman begging, no demanding, me to make her come.” Ben flashed Tessa a megawatt smile. “And I did.”

“That you did.” The playful twinkle faded from Tessa’s eyes. “I’ve never even come close to anything like that before. It was amazing. Thank you.”

“You did your part too. It was team work. It’s always team work.”

“Yay team.”

Ben soaped Tessa’s back and massaged her shoulders. When she reached for the loofah, he held it out of her reach. “Let me.” Ben

circled each breast with the soapy sponge. After splashing them with water, he reached forward and stroked each nipple with his fingers, slowly and thoroughly. "It's important to get all the soap off," he said.

"No soap on them that I can see," Tessa said.

Ben smiled. "That's because I carefully removed it! Look, they've woken up."

Damn if Ben wasn't right. Her whole body ached with exhaustion, but Tessa's nipples were standing at attention.

“You’re incorrigible!”

“When I carried you in here, you looked beat. Now see how perky you are? You call that incorrigible, I call that masterful.”

“I suppose you have a long list of things that you’re a master of.”

“I do, some of which you’ve already witnessed.”

“So you still have some tricks up your masterful sleeve, ones I’ve not yet seen?”

“Oh yes, things you would enjoy immensely. But...you’re too tired.”

Despite her exhaustion, and a

crotch that was already sore, Tessa was curious.

“What kind of things?”

“I can put a condom on a banana in three seconds flat.”

Tessa snorted. “Yeah, that sounds like something I would enjoy immensely.”

Ben traced the bumpy ring around Tessa’s left nipple and as before, she began to feel an electric spark in her sweet spot. She was tired, but apparently her sex wasn’t.

Ben’s blue eyes became serious. “You’re becoming aroused.” He pointed to the pink flush spreading

across Tessa's breasts and then placed her hand on his crotch, which was hard. "You've yet to experience the long, sweet fuck. I can hold you, fill you with my cock and rock you slowly until we both come. You can fall asleep with my arms around your spent body and I'll fall asleep with your pussy around my spent cock."

Tessa didn't even flinch at his bad words. "Show me."

And so he did.

Ben was as good as his promise. He had entered her gently and rocked her for what seemed like hours. Their sex was unhurried; the frenzy she'd felt in the back of the limousine was replaced by a languid build-up that ended with them coming just moments apart. Also true to his promise, Ben stayed inside Tessa until she fell asleep. The position was slightly awkward but worth it for Tessa; she fell asleep with a smile gently curled around her lips.

Tessa awoke to early morning

light and Ben's blue eyes.

"I'm going now," he said, tousling her hair. When he kissed her cheek he smelled of toothpaste and kindness.

"Thank you, for everything, but mostly for giving me exactly what I needed," Tessa said. "As great as your sex skills are, I think you're even better at reading women."

"You're a sexy woman with a lot to offer a man. But what you offer goes far beyond sex." He brushed a strand of hair from Tessa's face. "Ask for what you need. Give what you can. And the rest will take care of itself." Ben stood. "I left a note

on the dresser with the details of your next set of sessions. But don't worry about getting up now. You've got all day and most of tomorrow to relax. Russell will have the pleasure of working with you tomorrow evening."

He waved goodbye, Tessa blew him a kiss and Ben Larsen disappeared out the door. Tessa felt sure she would never see him again, and it brought her to quiet, gentle tears. She hadn't fallen for the big "Aussie goofball," but she had deeply appreciated everything about him. She closed her eyes, but couldn't sleep. There was another

man she deeply appreciated and now there was enough time to tell him so. She booted up her laptop.

David,

I so appreciated your last email. You are an amazing person.

You know I was married and that my husband, Mark, died in an auto accident three years ago. Here's what you don't know: after his death, I discovered he had been cheating on me. In fact, he died cheating on me. I was devastated and withdrew from men completely. After a year and a half of isolation, I decided to try dating. I met

a man who seemed nice. We shared similar interests and saw each other several times...until he raped me. That was the last straw for me. I spent months trying to pull myself back up. I just couldn't. I hurt so much that all I wanted was to escape. I was only able to see one way out of the pain, and so I tried to kill myself last May. Fortunately I failed, but in the process found a group of professionals to help me put my life back together.

And that's what my Australia trip is really about: me, putting my life back together. My journey to Sydney is a very private one, the details of which I will likely never share with anyone.

But someday (and soon, I hope) I will be able to say I've faced my issues and overcome them. I still have work to do, but already see much progress. I have so much hope for my future.

One of the things I've learned is to ask for what I need, which has been (and still is) surprisingly hard for me to do. I'm going to practice that new skill right now and ask you to support my journey. Your friendship and the hope that it may grow into something more means the world to me.

Yours, Tessa

Tessa re-read her email and

paused before hitting send. Was David ready to know this? *Of course*, she thought. The real question was whether she was ready to tell him. It meant opening herself up to his judgment, even his rejection. It also meant opening herself up to acceptance, and maybe even love.

Tessa took a deep breath and hit send.

When a tourist, why not act like one? After a hot shower and a lot of

coffee, Tessa bought a ticket for the Hop on Hop Off bus and took to the streets of Sydney. Since Jasor had taken her to the local clothing optional beach, Tessa decided to ride the bus to famous Bondi Beach. The stretch of white sand and glorious blue water was as breathtaking as the travel brochures promised and the bump and rumble on the top floor of the double decker bus was strangely soothing.

By mid-afternoon, Tessa was famished. She hopped off the bus near China Town and gorged on delicious dishes, the names of

which she couldn't begin to pronounce. The takeout near her hotel had been good, but the fresh greens and succulent fish she devoured in China Town was just this side of heaven.

After lunch, Tessa walked. Much like New York, Sydney was a great town for walking. She wandered out of China Town and eventually found herself surrounded by fabulous shops. Her days between sessions were vacation days, and what's a vacation without a little shopping?

Tessa noodled around, sometimes drawn into shops out of

professional curiosity and other times because an item caught her eye. She looked at one such item now.

“That would look stunning on you,” the sales clerk said, sidling up to Tessa.

“It’s beautiful,” Tessa said, holding silky fabric against her body.

The clerk smiled. “It’s very sexy without being vulgar. Would you like to try it on?”

The clerk led Tessa to a dressing room. “I have the perfect undergarment for that dress.

Would you like me to bring it to you?"

The dress was very low cut, though not as wildly provocative as the emerald dress she'd worn with Ben. But without the proper undergarment..."Yes, please do."

"B? Thirty-four or thirty-six?"

"Thirty-four."

The clerk hurried off and Tessa examined the dress. It was silk charmeuse the color of ripe pomegranate and the bodice was cut very close to the body. The point of the V-neckline ended several inches below the bust line,

but the cut of the gown—if it fit correctly—would keep the fabric where it was supposed to be. The dress flared softly at the hips and ended just below the knees. Tessa imagined how the fabric would move with each step, sensual yet elegant.

“Here it is,” the clerk said, handing Tessa a cream-colored lace bustier with rosy pink piping. “It’s cut very well for that neckline and if the dress should happen to move, no worries. This bustier is beautiful and it covers the essentials.”

“Essentials” was a code word for areolas and nipples, which still

left a lot of bare skin showing.

“You can’t know how it will look unless you try them on,” the clerk urged. “I’ve sold this combination several times. I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

And Tessa was.

The cream-colored lace and feminine pink piping softened the impact of an otherwise outrageously revealing bustier. It was cut very low, with coverage beginning just above the dark pink skin around Tessa’s nipples. The cups did not meet in the center, creating a provocative strip of bare breast straight down the middle of

Tessa's torso. The seams and stays pushed her breasts up, giving her ample cleavage and curves. Yet even when Tessa twisted and leaned, her nipples and the dark ring around them remained covered.

Tessa slid the silk charmeuse over her head and felt it glide past her bustier and hips. The hemline hit her just below the knees, and the airy sway of fabric made Tessa feel like a cross between Marilyn Monroe and Grace Kelly.

While the emerald dress had taken her breath away with blatant, nearly-naked sexuality, this dress

was more titillating than ribald. The bottom of the neckline's V ended mere inches above Tessa's naval and the bustier did not cover the valley between Tessa's breasts. With the right vantage point, a man could admire a long stretch of soft, naked skin.

"I'll take it," Tessa said.

"It's gorgeous on you. I also have an amazing shaper half-slip." Before Tessa could respond, the clerk was off to fetch it. When she returned she handed it to Tessa for inspection. "The charmeuse will show every little bump and line. I recommend this slip with no

panties. It will tuck right under the bottom of the bustier and give your *derrière* and thighs a very sleek silhouette."

Tessa tried it on. Like all shapers it was skin tight, but the spandex moved with her, so it was reasonably comfortable. Best of all, it erased all the bumps and imperfections any flesh and blood woman was bound to have. She took it too. By the time she was finished, Tessa's credit card was smoking and the sales clerk was smiling.

Tessa hung the new dress in the closet as soon as she returned to

her room. She kicked off her shoes, uncapped a Diet Coke and turned on her laptop. Her face lit up when she saw she had a new email from David.

Tessa,

I don't know what to say. You told me you had issues and I figured they must be significant if you went all the way to Australia to find some resolution. But that you tried suicide in May? Of course I couldn't have known, but Tessa, I would never have even guessed; you seem like such a happy person.

I mean no disrespect to your late husband, but how could any man cheat on a woman like you? I don't get it. And I do mean exceptional disrespect to that guy you dated. I'm not a violent man, but if you ever pointed him out, say we were riding on the subway and you said, 'that's him!'... I'd be overcome with a desire to turn into Rambo. Maybe it's a guy thing or just a human thing when a person cares about someone.

I know we haven't met in the flesh (yet). But we share our feelings about a zillion things as well as our daily ups and downs. I look forward to your emails or calls, and especially, your

beautiful face when we have a chance to Skype. Since you've just been very open with me, let me do the same: Tessa, I'm nuts about you and want nothing more than to see if our friendship blossoms into something more.

On a lighter note, guess who's gotten out of the cold weather? My boss is sick as a dog and needed me to pinch hit for him at a meeting in Honolulu. I didn't have anything else going and it's always good to be owed a favor by the guy who signs your paychecks (metaphorically speaking anyway.) Also, it's a chance for me to shine in my new position. And, full

disclosure, being in sunny Hawaii wasn't the worst thing that could happen to a guy. I've got today to get over some jetlag and get up to speed on the boss's notes. Meeting starts at 9:00 tomorrow, Hawaii time. (I think I'm a day behind you, more or less.) Wish me luck.

By the way, guess what I'm wearing right now? A really cool koala tee shirt. I figured if I couldn't be with you, I'd be with your 'favorite Aussie.' I've never had a tee shirt expressed to me from half way across the world, so I know this koala truly is special. It came just as I was packing for Hawaii, and I needed another clean

shirt (just kidding). Seriously, thank you.

I just want to say this: before you left New York, you asked me to support your Australian journey and I (mostly) did. Now that I know your backstory, my support level is different. Now it's:

One. Million. Percent.

Your favorite Chicagoan, and (I hope) your favorite guy, David

SUNDAY EVENING

It seemed like an odd time to begin their first session, but the instructions were clear. Tessa was to meet Russell Sunday at 6:00 p.m. in the hotel bar. At 5:50 Tessa left her room, wearing the gorgeous silk charmeuse. Was it her imagination or did nearly every man she passed stop to take her in? *The power of a well-cut gown and expensive underwear*, she thought.

Tessa took a seat at the bar. She

was there only two minutes when a man sat in the stool next to her.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

Tessa’s first thought was that this must be Russell. The problem was he didn’t look anything like the photograph she’d seen in Carmen’s office.

“I’m waiting for a friend,” she said. If this was Russell, surely he’d say so.

“I’d like to be your friend. How about we share a drink?”

Ah. Not Russell. “No thank you.”

When the man leaned closer,

Tessa could smell the alcohol on his breath. He had watery blue eyes and he actually licked his lips like he was about to eat something tasty.

“Darlin’ you are about the prettiest thing I’ve seen. You can’t say no to a friendly little drink.” He leaned even closer, practically drooling down Tessa’s neckline as he strained to get a peek under her dress. He brought his hand toward Tessa and it wasn’t clear whether he was aiming for her shoulder or her breast.

“The lady said no.”

A voice boomed from behind

them. It wasn't menacing, but it certainly wasn't friendly. Before the drunk could lay his hand on Tessa, a large hand grabbed a fistful of collar and yanked him to his feet.

"No means no," the man said, and the drunk started to object, but stopped as soon as his alcohol-soaked brain cells processed the fact that the man who'd yanked him was at least 6'4" and two hundred pounds, mostly muscle.

"Didn't mean any harm," the drunk said.

"Doesn't matter what you mean; only what you do. You invaded the lady's space when she

told you no. Now that pisses me off. Unless you want a mouthful of broken teeth, leave now.”

The man said it all calmly, but there was no mistaking his tone, or his ability to carry out his threat. His right fist was clenched so tightly his knuckles were white. The drunk decided Tessa wasn't worth facial reconstruction and left.

“Sorry about that,” the man said as he sat in the stool vacated by the drunk. “I'm Russell. Are you alright?”

Tessa was pale. “A little shaken.”

“Touch on an old memory...a particularly bad one?”

Of course. Russell was part of the therapy team and would know Tessa's secrets, especially the not so pretty ones, like rape. “Yes.”

Russell leaned closer. He smelled of soap and spearmint gum. “Breathe slowly and deeply. Don't try to brush away your memories or feelings, let them come, but remember you're no longer there. It's in the past, and it can't hurt you now.”

Tessa took a long, full breath and remembered the feel of Kent's hands as he pushed her dress up

and forced himself upon her. Her heart thumped wildly, and she took another deep breath.

“It’s all right, Tessa. You’re safe. Keep taking those slow, deep breaths.”

Tessa listened to the calm, warm sound of Russell’s voice. She’d known him for about sixty seconds and already she was mesmerized by him.

“Better, now?” he asked after a couple minutes.

“Yes, thanks.”

He took her hand. “Let’s go for a walk. The fresh air will do us

good.” He glanced at Tessa’s shoes.
“Are you okay to walk in those?”

“Depends on how far.”

“How about a few blocks?”

“I can handle that.”

Out on the sidewalk, Russell said, “That wasn’t the way I’d hoped to start our sessions, but it brought up a good point.”

“I shouldn’t wear low cut dresses to a bar?”

“You shouldn’t blame yourself for someone else’s bad behavior. And,” he smiled, “I need to teach you some moves that would knock an asshole like that on his butt.”

Tessa smiled; a big, toothy grin.
“I think I’d like that.”

“We’ll work on it.”

By the time they reached their destination, an Italian restaurant five blocks from Tessa’s hotel, both were relaxed and chatting. About kickboxing.

“Seriously,” Russell said as he opened the door for Tessa to enter, “it is great exercise. And if you ever have to use it, a well-placed foot to the groin does amazing things to a man’s libido.”

“I’ll remember that,” Tessa said.

Russell ordered a bottle of Chianti and they decided on an antipasto platter to start. Like the appetizer they shared, their conversation was a nibble of this and a bite of that, and Russell kept it lively. He was also masterful at getting Tessa to talk. She'd waxed philosophical on the difficulties of designing the perfect sundress. She talked about her design business, both before and after Mark's death, and the stress of being a little fish in a very big pond. And occasionally she found herself revealing something she hadn't consciously thought about in years.

“I still miss my parents,” she said, half way through her veal and second glass of wine. “My inheritance made the financial aspects of life easy. It provided Mark and me with the start-up capital for the business. And unless I do something really stupid, it should be enough to keep me comfortable for the rest of my life. But I’d give it all up to have my mom to talk to.”

“Your mom meant a lot to you.”

“Yeah. Dad, too. When I was twelve I got it into my head that I was going to be a fashion designer. So dad converted a spare bedroom

into a 'design studio' for me. He stocked it like a real working studio, too. Of course, he also expected me to work like a real designer." Tessa laughed. "But I got even. Every Christmas and birthday, until I was sixteen or seventeen, I gave him my menswear line 'samples.' I made some of the most horrible ties and vests ever. They were hideous, and dad wore them to work! In fact, he wore one of my vests, a particularly heinous one, I might add, in his official company photograph one year. The damn thing appeared in the Annual Report and everything."

“Sounds like a great dad,” Russell said. And then, like the master of conversation that he was, he moved onto another topic, and got Tessa talking about the first time she kissed a boy.

“It wasn’t actually Mark, but it was definitely for Mark’s benefit.”

“Now that’s a picture I can’t wrap myself around.”

“Not like that!” Tessa laughed. “I was a freshman in high school and I had a massive crush on the handsome, athletic older Mark, who was a sophomore. At the frosh/soph spring dance, I manipulated Jerry Dortmeyer into

kissing me when I knew Mark was watching. It worked. Mark asked me to dance and we were together from that moment on.”

Russell refilled Tessa wine glass. “It must have been crushing when you discovered the manner in which Mark died.”

Tessa hadn’t seen that one coming, but she should have known the conversation would turn serious at some point. This wasn’t a first date or even a causal dinner with an old friend.

“For years, I blamed myself. I: Mark had a passionate wife...” Tessa forced herself to face

Russell's gaze. "I don't know where I got it. Whether it was from my mom or the church they raised me in or what. But for as long as I can remember, I've been very conservative."

"I take it you're not referring to politics here."

"No, I'm not. I've never told anyone this, but you're a good listener, not to mention my therapist—of sorts. My wedding day was the best day of my life. My wedding night, was the worst. I was a virgin and completely overwhelmed. It was awful, not because Mark didn't try. He did

But he expected me to enjoy sex, the way he did. And I just didn't."

"It's common for women to need a few, shall we say, practice rounds before the game becomes fun."

"Sure. But the game never became particularly fun for me. I tolerated sex because I owed it to my husband and because I liked the before and after, the sweet cajoling and the falling asleep in his arms."

"That's not the Tessa I've heard about from Jason and Ben."

Tessa blushed. "I came to

Athena's Ground because traditional talk therapy wasn't helping me enough. I had everything on the outside and nothing on the inside. I couldn't figure out how to fill the emptiness and stop the pain."

"It drove you to attempt suicide."

Tessa smiled, but it was a sad one. "It was stupid. The help was out there all along. Instead, I could have died."

"But you didn't. And now you're using your second chance wisely."

“Carmen helped me understand. The old Tessa shut herself off from some of the best things about being human. And I don’t mean just the sex itself.” Tessa grinned. “Though I’m beginning to understand how really nice that is.”

Russell raised his glass of Chianti in agreement.

Tessa thought about her milkshake meeting with Shawntay, a few months and a lifetime ago. “Traditional talk therapy probably works for most women. Apparently, I needed something waaaay out of the box.”

Russell chuckled. “Well, you certainly got it.”

“I want to feel and experience...”

Russell held up his hand and interrupted. “Tessa, you *need* to feel and experience...”

“Always the teacher,” she said. “Yes, I *need* to feel and experience and open myself to healthy emotional—and sexual—relationships. Talk therapy was the roadmap. Field therapy is getting behind the wheel and driving.”

Russell grinned. “Nice analogy. And by the way, you’ve done some

pretty remarkable driving, for a woman with a learner's permit."

"I've had remarkable driving instructors." Tessa drained the last of her—third?—glass of Chianti. She was feeling bold. "Just how good of a driver are you, and can you teach as good as you drive?"

Russell leaned against Tessa. He slipped his fingers under the red and white napkin draped across her lap and rested his palm on top of the silky dress Tessa wore. His finger immediately located Tessa's clitoris, as if it came equipped with sonar. Tessa gasped, partly because of the surprise and partly because

he was already igniting sparks. Reflexively, Tessa relaxed her thighs to give Russell greater access. He circled Tessa's sweet spot and watched her eyes. They were beginning to show signs of dilation.

"I've not even backed the car out of the drive and you're almost fully aroused." He abruptly pulled his hand away. "I think I've demonstrated my point. Waiter," Russell said, raising his hand, "When you can, the check please." To Tessa, he whispered, "It's time to get behind the wheel for real, don't you agree?"

Tessa nodded. Driving had never sounded so good.

"It's only five blocks, I can walk it," Tessa said as Russell hailed a cab.

"We're not going to the hotel." Russell opened the back door and gently pressed Tessa to slide in. When he was in beside her, he gave an address to the driver.

"Where are we going?" Tessa asked.

"A private club."

"Why?"

"Because you don't back out of the drive going eighty."

Tessa thought about it and said, "Oh..."

Russell rested his hand on the back of her neck and played with wisps of her hair until the cab pulled up to a small brick building. Lights were on inside and music oozed from the door and windows. Tessa listened closely, made out the song, and said, "Sinatra?"

"And the like. Some contemporary versions, like Bublé." Russell rang the bell and a man dressed in a tuxedo opened the door. "Russell Thompson and guest," he said, showing the doorman a card from his wallet.

“Welcome back, sir. Is this the lady’s first visit?”

“Yes.”

“I hope you both enjoy.”

The doorman swung the door open and held it while Russell and Tessa passed through. “You know your way, sir.”

Russell took Tessa’s arm and escorted her from the foyer into a large open room.

“It’s a dance club!” Tessa said, looking at a dozen couples swaying to Bubl  ’s *Sway*.

“It’s a very special dance club,” Russell said. And as he spoke,

Tessa's eyes went wide. Some of the couples were doing a little more than swaying.

Russell laughed softly. "The etiquette is this: glancing and even subtle watching is fine. Staring is inappropriate. Commenting is rude. Interrupting will get us kicked out. Let's take a booth."

The room was large, with a polished wooden dance floor in the center. Speakers mounted from the walls and ceiling enveloped the entire room, and the music was loud enough to cover the sounds of conversation and mask other assorted sounds. Tall, thickly

upholstered booths lined the walls. There was a small bar at the end of the room and a hallway just off the bar.

“If you need the ladies room, it’s down that hall,” Russell said, pointing toward the bar. “What would you like to drink? I have water, soft drinks, red and white wine and rum.”

“You have...?”

“This is a membership club. We don’t have a liquor license. Members stock what they like and staff serves it.”

“Let me start with a Diet Coke

if you've got it."

Tessa headed for the ladies room. On the way, she carefully "glanced" at the other couples in the club. She was grateful that the room was softly lit; her blush would have been a little embarrassing. When she returned to their booth, there was a tall glass of ice and an unopened Diet Coke waiting for her. Russell was drinking water.

Tessa settled in next to Russell. Apparently she hadn't sat close enough, as he slid against her until his hips were touching hers.

"Do you like this kind of music?" he asked.

“On occasion.”

“How about this occasion?”

Tessa watched the dancers, and then turned her gaze to Russell. “It suits this place well.”

Russell rested his hand on her neck, as he had in the cab. This time, he lightly massaged the back of Tessa’s ear. When she relaxed, he whispered, “That dress suits you well.” His free hand lightly brushed the top of Tessa’s cleavage. “It shows off some excellent assets.” Tessa squirmed but didn’t tell him to stop, and Russell let his fingers roam further, until they were underneath the bodice of Tessa’s

gown.

He turned his head to face Tessa but his eyes were not on her face. He was staring quite openly at the view her bustier afforded. "Beautiful," he murmured, though Tessa wasn't sure whether he was referring to the bustier or her.

He slid his long finger through her cleavage and followed her flesh until he reached her belly button. Tessa shivered, and Russell smiled. He touched her breasts and nipples through the bustier's delicate lace and he traced the path of its stays and piping with long, slow strokes. He kissed her softly and asked her

if she wanted more by resting his tongue on her lips. She parted them, and Russell explored her mouth, softly and sweetly. She completely relaxed in his arms, so Russell put the car in drive.

Tessa felt Russell's hand slide to her back. It was under her dress and his fingers were nimbly unfastening her bustier. She tensed.

"Look around Tessa," he whispered. "This is appropriate behavior here. Can you give this to me?"

"Yes," she said, after a moment.

“Good.” His fingers finished their work and Russell removed the bustier. “Ohhh...” he said, and his voice sounded like gravel.

Freed from the bustier, and with the dress’s very low neckline, Tessa felt cool air on her breasts and glanced down. Russell had tugged the silk bodice forward and her breasts were completely naked to his eyes...and hands. They listened to music while Russell teased Tessa’s breasts until she couldn’t take it any longer.

“Let’s go back to the hotel,” she said.

“We’re not finished here. We’re

still backing out of the drive.”

“Well back out a little faster. My breasts are on fire.”

Russell laughed. “Is that what you really want?”

“No. It’s what I really *need*.”

“Bravo, student! Then you shall have it.”

Russell lifted one of the ice cubes from Tessa’s glass and pressed it against her right nipple. She gasped. “Part of the pleasure of making fire is putting it out, so you can start it all over again.” He replaced the ice cube with his warm, wet mouth.

“Ohhh,” Tessa said, wiggling under the pleasure.

“Open your eyes,” he said, “and look at the dance floor.”

She did. Three of the couples seemed to be copulating. The others were in various states of foreplay. None seemed bothered that they might have an audience.

“Tell me what you see.”

“What?”

“Tell me, of the things you see them doing, what looks most pleasurable to you?”

Ah. One of Carmen’s goals was for Tessa to explore what she did,

and did not, like. Russell had brought her to this place, which served as an open laboratory of sorts, so she could see some possibilities.

“I will tell you, when we’re back at the hotel.”

Russell nodded, as if that was fair, and returned his mouth to Tessa’s breasts. He raked her nipples with his teeth and sucked them with such force Tessa was sure she would be black and blue. And she didn’t care. She watched the dancers and cataloged all the things they did that added to the wetness she felt between her legs.

When she really couldn't take it any longer, she told Russell it was time to stop, or time to take it to the next level.

"Then let's dance," he said, dropping her bustier on the booth seat and pulling Tessa to the dance floor. She was so aroused she didn't care if everyone in the club saw the outline of her naked breasts through the silk dress.

Russell pulled her tight against him and began to sway to the music. Tessa could feel his penis pressing against her pelvis. It was hard and huge and she was wet and electric. She wondered if they'd

become one of the copulating couples, like the one they were dancing next to. Despite proper etiquette, Tessa couldn't take her eyes off the man as he drove his penis into his partner's parted thighs. He thrust to the beat of the music and Tessa thought this was the most unusual dance she'd ever seen.

“Does watching them turn you on?” Russell whispered.

Tessa nodded, but felt a little dirty for feeling that way.

Russell slid a hand underneath Tessa's skirt. “What's this?” he said, feeling the slip-shaper.

“My slip.”

“It’s in my way,” he said, like a driver annoyed at an approaching roadblock. He slid the tight-fitting slip up past Tessa’s hips and then he grinned, ear-to-ear. “My goodness, who’s not wearing any underwear?” He stroked Tessa’s moist slit with his finger.

“The sales clerk said I shouldn’t,” Tessa said, embarrassed. “The panty lines would show through the silk.”

“Thank God for panty lines,” Russell said, and he whirled Tessa around so they were dancing with her back against his chest. He

pulled her to him tightly.

“What are you doing?” Tessa said, feeling the palm of his hand against her mound, pushing her backside firmly against his crotch, and the huge hard-on in his slacks.

“You told me to back out faster. That’s what I’m doing. Do you want me to stop?”

The couple next to them started moving faster than the beat of the music. The woman ground her hips into the man and he responded by grinding his teeth on her exposed breast. She moaned and threw her head back, as if to ask for more. Part of Tessa was appalled by such

a public display, part of her was hot.

“Just don’t get a speeding ticket.”

Russell and Tessa danced two more songs, during which Russell's fingers were very busy underneath Tessa's dress. He massaged her clitoris to near climax, and just before her spasms began, he stopped. Tessa stomped on his foot and he told her he was just following her orders not to get a speeding ticket. He played at the opening of Tessa's wet core, seemingly just fiddling around to the beat of the music, until she began to contort her hips in an effort to create more effective stimulation.

“I take it you are no longer worried about speeding tickets,” he said, and he abruptly plunged two fingers deep inside her. She moaned, and ground her hips onto his fingers.

Russell chuckled. “More? Faster?”

She nodded.

Russell inserted a third finger easily; Tessa was so wet her juice was trickling down her legs. “Do you want to come now?” he asked, nuzzling at her neck.

Did she? The angel on one shoulder told her this was still a

public place and it was completely improper, totally vulgar. The devil on the other shoulder reminded Tessa that the skirt of her dress was covering her; that no one could actually see what Russell was doing under there. As she debated, Russell's fingers continued to move in and out, building tension that was quickly becoming unbearable. When she could take no more, the devil on her shoulder screamed, *tell him hell yes!*

And that's what Tessa did.

Russell danced her over to a corner for a greater sense of privacy. One hand worked her G

Spot, though Russell also kept pressure on her clitoris. The other hand kneaded a breast. Tessa was in agony of the most delicious kind, and when Russell's mouth took her nipple, it launched Tessa into waves of spasms so intense she almost lost her balance.

“And you thought you couldn't climax,” Russell whispered as he held a breathless Tessa close. When she'd recovered her composure, Russell tugged her slip back down, repositioned her silk bodice and walked her to the ladies room. “There are clean towels in there, if you want to freshen up.”

The ride back to the hotel was quiet. Tessa nestled against Russell and wondered what racing down the highway would be like if that was still backing out of the drive. She supposed she was going to find out. Soon.

"I have to stop at the concierge for a minute," Russell said, as they entered the hotel lobby.

"Do you want me to wait with you, or go upstairs?"

“Wait with me. It’ll only be a minute.”

Tessa was surprised to find that Russell had left an overnight bag with the desk. Alone in the elevator, he said, “My things, and other things,” he said, lightly shaking his bag. “We’re sleeping together tonight and tomorrow night. And it won’t all be sleeping.”

Tessa thought of one of her mother’s favorite expressions, one she’d learned from her mother: Boy Howdy.

As soon as they were inside the room Russell pinned Tessa against the wall. “Quick, tell me the thing

you saw on the dance floor that turned you on the most. Don't analyze, just answer."

"It wasn't on the dance floor. I saw a couple in a booth, on the way to the ladies room."

"What were they doing?"

"She was sitting in his lap. Their clothes were on but I could tell by the way he was moving his hips that he was inside her. She had this incredible expression on her face. It made me want to try it."

"What else?"

Russell continued to press Tessa against the wall until her

back was literally against it. She told him about the things that were hot, or at least interesting. She also shared what she didn't like.

“One of the dance floor couples was actually a threesome. Two men had one woman pressed between them. I broke the rule and stared. It looked like one of them had his penis inside her while the other, the guy on her backside, had his fingers up *there*. Both of them were moving inside her. It looked painful.”

“I saw that too,” Russell said “Easy to spot since the woman's skirt was up around her neck. Did it

turn you off because it was two men and one woman, or because of the anal stimulation?"

"Probably both."

"Okay, that's fine. We don't all like everything. You get to pick, but you should understand that properly done anal stimulation can be very pleasurable. You shouldn't reject it out of hand. No pun intended."

"My ob-gyn sticks her finger in there during my annual exam. Nothing pleasurable about it."

"That's entirely different. But I get it."

Russell led Tessa to the bed, turned her toward the bathroom wall, and said, "I want you to sit. Right there, and do not turn your face away. You are to watch it all, and do whatever comes naturally."

He went into the bathroom, raised the privacy curtain, blew Tessa a kiss, and stepped into the tub. His shirt came off in slow motion. He played with each button before he undid it. When at last all buttons were undone, he rolled his massive shoulders and inched the dress shirt down his back. Tessa hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath until his shirt hit the

bottom of the tub.

Russell turned his attention to his waistband next. He unhooked his belt, his fingers touched the zipper, and he stopped. He looked at Tessa, who watched with open mouth and growing heat. Instead of unzipping his pants, he ran his hand up and down his crotch until the bulge was visible to Tessa a dozen feet away. He blew her another kiss, and unzipped. His slacks fell to the tub and he stepped out of them. Tessa expected him to essentially repeat the process with his briefs, but he surprised her.

Russell's white briefs strained at the crotch. He was full and hard and instead of a slow reveal, his briefs were on the floor in one, quick motion. He fondled his manhood while he scooped his clothing out of the tub and turned on the water. Instead of facing the shower head, he faced the glass wall and watched Tessa as he used the soap as lubricant and his hand for friction. Tessa watched, fascinated. She'd never seen a man masturbate before. Her core was warm and becoming wet. Russell stopped before he climaxed. He rinsed the soap off and wiggled his

finger at Tessa.

He wants me to come into the bathroom, Tessa thought, and felt embarrassed. The longer she watched Russell, the more aroused she had become. She'd gotten so wet her dress had a stain on it.

He wiggled his finger a second time, and shouted, "Don't make me come get you."

Tessa went to the bathroom and stood in front of the tub.

"A little striptease goes a long way towards getting the juices flowing," Russell said. "If you're unsure with a man, sometimes it's

a good way to begin.” Russell stepped out of the tub. “Now it’s your turn.”

“I’ve never tried to take my clothes off, sexy.”

“Just have fun with it and you’ll find your own style.”

He took a seat on the bed and motioned for her to begin. Tessa’s face was almost the color of the pomegranate silk she wore. She unzipped the dress and slowly shimmied until the top of the dress fell forward. She lifted her arms out of the armholes and wondered what to do next. Russell was staring at her, and she felt like a complete

idiot.

Tessa decided to take off her dress. She wiggled her hips until it fell to the tub. She stepped out of it and placed it on the top of the towel rack. Now she was in her sexy bustier, a little askew thanks to her hurried redressing in the club ladies room. And, of course, she had the skin tight shaper slip Russell hated. She glanced at Russell and he was smiling.

To bare her breasts and belly or her whole bottom half? She was embarrassed to do either, but eventually she'd do both, so she opted to remove the slip first. Tessa

gripped the slip and tugged it down to her ankles. It wasn't graceful but the slip had gripping power and it wasn't moving without a fight. She stepped out of it and looked at Russell. His smile was gone, replaced by a very intense stare. It gave Tessa goose bumps.

Now she was down to the bustier, since she hadn't worn undies. She could unhook it and get on with the shower, or she could give Russell a real show. The devil on her shoulder squealed with delight. The angel was stunned into silence.

Instead of removing her

bustier, she adjusted the shower head and positioned herself so the spray was a direct hit on her crotch. She moistened her fingers in the spray, and began to rub her clitoris. When she glanced at Russell, he was standing...and clapping. She felt her face flame with heat, but she was proud she'd overcome her body shame enough to put on a little show.

Tessa was too tense to enjoy the self-stimulation, but she stayed with it long enough to satisfy Russell. She unhooked her bustier and stepped under the water. While she soaped, she forgot she had an

audience. She'd gotten so grimy at the club that her focus was getting clean, not getting off. She was interrupted by a rap on the glass.

"You're not bathing the cat," Russell said, loudly enough to be heard over running water. He pointed to Tessa's mound, which she'd been washing with determined efficiency.

Tessa shrugged, rinsed, and turned the water off.

Now what? Tessa thought as Russell came into the bathroom.

“Very nice, except for slacking off at the very end.” He grinned and petted Tessa’s damp crotch. She finished drying, and Russell said, “It’s late, and we’ve had a lot of activity this evening. How about we go to bed?”

They both brushed their teeth and Tessa reached for her nightgown.

Russell shook his head. “A good way to get comfortable in your skin is to sleep naked. Besides,

now that I've seen everything, what's the point of a nightgown?"

They crawled into the big king bed and Russell opened his overnight bag. "Take a look at this, Tessa." He handed her a strange glass object that looked like a baby pacifier, but not.

"What is it?"

"An anal plug."

Tessa almost dropped it.

"It won't bite," Russell said, chuckling. "It's the best on the market, the smallest size, new, sterilized, and ready for use. This could rock your world. I wish you'd

at least consider letting me try it on you, since you aren't inclined to allow fingers or cocks."

Tessa had read *Fifty Shades*. She had an idea about what it was supposed to do for you, but it just seemed too weird. "I'll think about it."

"Sleep on it," Russell said, and turned off the light. He scooted close to Tessa, kissed her on the forehead and said, "Good night." Then he rolled over and, in minutes, was sound asleep.

I'll be damned, Tessa thought. Her first night with him and Russell pulls a Mark. Annoyed, she

closed her eyes and willed herself to sleep. It didn't come easily, but eventually it came.

Tessa was in London with someone she knew was handsome, but in her dream she couldn't make out his features. Maybe it was Mark. Or David. He was pressing his hard shaft in the crack between her buttocks, whispering, "It's time to get laid." Tessa started to wake at the feel of a warm tongue in her ear. She realized where she was when Russell's large palm found her breast and his fingers stroked her nipple.

"What...?"

“You didn’t think we were going to *sleep* all night long, did you?” His fingers wandered from Tessa’s hardened nipple to her belly button. They came to rest on her warm mound. She began to squirm with pleasure, and he fanned her flames by stroking her slit. When she began to moisten, he inserted one finger and stroked Tessa from the inside.

She sighed.

Russell smiled and moved to her clitoris.

She adjusted herself until his finger was in the exact, perfect place and then she began to press

herself against his moving finger. He stopped.

“What?” she said.

“Good, you’re awake.” He sat up and pulled Tessa with him to the side of the bed. “I don’t think I can wait any longer.” He ripped open a packet and rolled a condom on to his fully erect penis.

“What?” Tessa was awake but a little fuzzy. Ben hadn’t used a condom, since everyone had been tested and Tessa was on the pill.

Russell must have sensed her confusion. “Condoms reduce sensitivity for me, so I can last

longer. It's also lubricated, which will help. And so will this." Russell kneeled on the floor, pushed Tessa's legs apart and found her clitoris with his tongue. Tessa lay back on the bed and pushed her mound to meet his strokes. After far too short a time, by Tessa's estimation, he stopped.

"Ah, sweet Tessa is very, very aroused." He sat on the bed next to her, hauled her on to his lap and wrapped one strong arm around her waist. Before she knew it, she was tipped forward. Russell's fingers spread her vaginal lips and felt her opening. "You're so wet,"

he grunted, and then he entered Tessa from behind.

She yelped, more from surprise than anything else. Russell pushed himself firmly inside her core and then sat, pulling her onto his lap.

“This was number one on your list tonight, remember?” He held Tessa in place, at an angle that felt awkward to her until he began rocking his hips into her. His shaft was long and hard and with each rock, it built pressure and friction across her sweet spot. Just as Tessa was getting used to the sensation at her mound, Russell leaned over her shoulder and took a mouthful of

her breast.

It was too much. And too little.

Tessa groaned, loudly, and Russell rocked faster.

Tessa wasn't sure how long Russell rocked, but it was without a doubt the longest time a man had ever been hard inside her. She felt the promise of white hot fire, but the stimulation wasn't enough to create the waves that brought her to orgasm.

"Deeper," Tessa moaned, thinking that would do the trick.

Russell obliged, rocking her so hard her thighs made loud slapping

noises as she landed back into his lap after each thrust. But it didn't work, and Tessa began to squirm. He stilled her by holding her tight against him with both arms.

"This position feels good, but it's often difficult for a woman to come without direct stimulation to the clit. I can make you come, if you trust me."

"Please," Tessa all but whimpered. Her clitoris was swollen and her insides full, but somehow, not full enough.

Russell stood, turned around, and placed Tessa face down on the edge of the bed. He kept her hips

raised, her weight supported on her knees. When she tried to raise her upper body off the bed, he gently but firmly pushed her back down.

“This is the best angle, Tessa. Trust me, you’ll like this.” Each large hand grasped one of Tessa’s hips and he held her in place as he thrust, gently at first to make sure he was still completely inside. The walls of Tessa’s vagina tightened around him and he smiled.

“You’re going to give my cock a great ride. And I’m going to make you scream.”

Since Ben, Tessa had stopped wincing when she heard ‘the

words.' Instead, she moaned.

Russell took the on-ramp to the highway going eighty miles an hour, his penis deep and fast while his fingers pressed against Tessa's clitoris. Tessa came with a scream she didn't recognize as her own.

Russell stopped moving. He was still hard, but a hair's breadth from coming himself. If he could hold on, he'd give Tessa a double.

Tessa started to wiggle free.

"No. We're not done yet."

Russell had been inside her for thirty minutes. He'd rocked her. He'd rolled her. And she'd had an

amazing, explosive orgasm. How could they not be finished?

Russell pulled out and reached for a tube. "Lubricant," he said as he squirted a generous dollop in his palm. Then he reached for the glass 'toy' he'd introduced Tessa to earlier. She started to back away.

"You said you were open to trying new things. Tessa, this is the safest you'll ever be. I know what I'm doing and I won't hurt you."

"Is it really like they say in the book?"

Russell laughed. "It is a unique sensation. The best description is that you'll feel very full, and when I

enter you vaginally, you'll feel super full, so full every sensation will be multiplied. I know you just came, but with this, you may be able to come again. Even harder."

Tessa leaned forward to look at the toy, and Russell seemed to understand her curiosity.

"I'll insert it slowly, with lots of lube," he said. "This is the smallest one they make so it should go in without much difficulty. If at any point it hurts too much, I stop immediately."

"It won't get lost in there, will it?"

“No. See this?” He pointed to the base and what looked like a little handle. “It seats on the outside of your anus. Even has a nice little handle to make it easy to remove. This little butt plug won’t get lost and won’t go anywhere you don’t want it to. Okay?”

Tessa nodded. Russell dipped the plug in lubricant and spread Tessa’s cheeks. “Bend just a little and relax a lot.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“It’s easy for me to do. Relax. It’s a small plug. A beginner plug.”

“Does it come with training

wheels?"

Russell dabbed lubricant around Tessa's anus. "There are so many nerve endings here," he massaged her slowly, almost reverently. And he took plenty of time. "The anus can provide surprising pleasure. The trick is to go slow. How does that feel?"

"Good."

Russell continued to rub the rim around her hole. Slow. Sensual. Gentle. Tessa was increasingly relaxed, and Russell poised the small plug for entry. He leaned over her and covered her mouth with long, sexy kisses. As his tongue

explored her mouth, his hand gently pressed the plug into Tessa. When Tessa didn't tighten, he continued gentle pressure until the plug was about a third of the way in.

Tessa's anus tightened.

"Alright?" he asked, stopping.

"I'm not sure. It's not as wide as my doctor's finger or thumb, or whatever she uses. But it feels strange."

"Don't tense up Tessa. Just relax." He left the plug where it was and began fondling Tessa's nipple. While he stroked her nipple to

erection, he whispered in her ear, "You're aroused again. I'm going to make you come like you can't believe."

She moaned as his fingers worked her breast.

"Concentrate on how hot your body is, how much you want to be full." As he spoke he pressed the plug in further. When Tessa didn't complain, he pushed it in until it was seated completely. "It's in all the way now. How does it feel?"

Tessa wiggled her rear, like someone testing a bone to make sure it hadn't broken after a fall. "It feels fine. No pain. And...strange.

Good strange, sort of like I'm full."

Russell turned her around to face him. "I'm going to make you much, much fuller. Use the word STOP and I will." Russell laid Tess on her back, nudged her legs wider apart and rested the tip of his penis at her entry. "Relax," he said, "my cock and that little, baby butt plug are going to rock your world."

He added a little lube to Tessa's entry and gently pushed himself inside. Russell's size and the fullness added by the butt plug made Tessa moan.

"Alright?" he asked.

“Yes. It’s intense, but good. I feel like there are two of you in there.”

“It’s like that for me too.” He thrust deeper and picked up speed.

Tessa started to buck and moan. “Oh God, it’s intense. Intense...just don’t stop.”

Russell found Tessa’s clit with his thumb and kept his hips moving. He drove into her deep and hard. She lasted only another minute. The moment he felt Tessa’s contractions, Russell let himself go. They both made noise: Russell a loud grunt and Tessa a throaty scream. They collapsed, together, in

a heap of spent passion. Later, Russell removed Tessa's plug and wiped her anus and cheeks with a warm wash cloth. They fell asleep in each other's arms.

An hour later, Tessa awoke; her mind and heart were buzzing like she'd chugged a half dozen Red Bulls. She'd had so many new experiences in such a short time, and for the first time in her life she was exploring her sexuality instead of hiding from it. She knew she

should feel exhilarated, and on one level, she did. She knew she shouldn't feel guilty, but on one level, she did. She knew she should feel alive and young and full of renewed hope, and on one level, she did...but on another, she felt as lonely as ever. No. Lonelier. She'd learned a lot about herself in Carmen's office, but to what good if she had no one to share her life with? She thought about all the amazing things she was learning about her body; how to open up emotionally and physically in order to give and receive pleasure. But what good is it if you've no one

special to share that pleasure with?

Sex without emotional connection was just physical recreation, like spinning or Zumba without the orgasm. She wanted more than that; she wanted it all.

Tessa slipped out of bed and quietly powered up her laptop.

David,

It's the middle of the night and I find myself thinking about you. I don't have anything I can report to you; I'm working on my issues and getting resolution. I'm happy with the way things are working out, but I think I

had unrealistic expectations. Kind of like when an overweight person loses a bunch of weight and likes that they're healthier, but is surprised that being thin doesn't mean being happy.

I'm kind of like that now. The things I came to Australia to fix are being fixed, and that makes me feel good. They were things that stood in the way of my happiness. But like the dieter, I'm discovering that removing obstacles to happiness isn't the same thing as becoming happy.

Tessa looked at Russell, sleeping in her bed. As wonderful as he was, he was an instructor. A

mentor. A therapist. Not a friend. Not a lover. Not David. Tessa wished it had been David, not Russell, rocking her world an hour ago. She finished the email.

I so want to become happy. It feels possible now, but it also isn't happening yet and that makes me very sad. I wish you were here.

Tessa

Tessa sent the email and powered off the laptop. It seemed strange that she could have the most amazing night of her life, and

an hour later, feel so empty. She crawled back into bed, rolled over and cried herself to sleep.

MONDAY

“Morning.”

Tessa opened her eyes and turned her face toward the voice. It was Russell, holding a cup of hot coffee in his outstretched hand.

“It’s 9:00. Time to get going.”

Tessa sipped the coffee, uncomfortable in her attire, which was to say, nothing.

Russell seemed to notice. “You were beautiful last night, you’re

beautiful this morning. Nothing's changed, except you're going to have to find a dry cleaner before you wear that again." He pointed to Tessa's silk dress, on the floor in the corner. "I was going to hang it up for you, but I noticed a rather large stain on it. Next time, you might embrace the panty lines and don some underwear." He grinned wickedly.

Tessa blushed.

"How did you sleep?"

To lie or tell the truth? Like Ben, Russell seemed to read women as if they were billboards: perfectly clear with only a glimpse and at high

speed. She couldn't fool him if she tried.

"I was a little unsettled."

Russell sat on the edge of the bed next to her. "Want to talk about it?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know what to say. Things have been going great here. You, Ben and Jason have been wonderful. The experiences you've all given me have helped me so much. But something caught up with me last night, after...you know."

"After we had sex?"

Tessa nodded. "I woke up, maybe an hour after we finished. I should have felt wonderful. Instead I had this deep ache." She lightly touched her heart and looked at Russell. "Stupid, huh?"

He put an arm around Tessa and gently pulled her to him. "Not stupid at all. When you came to Athena's Ground you were pretty buttoned up, physically and emotionally. Getting unbuttoned, literally and figuratively, is a stressful thing for someone like you. Add to that something the psych people call dissonance: you know, rationally, that you're not

morally, ethically or legally obligated to be celibate for David. But emotionally, you're pretty attached to the guy, so you feel like you're cheating on him. That leaves you feeling guilty and confused because the sex you've had has been extremely enjoyable. How'm I doing so far?"

"Am I that transparent or are you brilliant?"

"A little of both." Russell smiled. "When you get home you'll have follow-up sessions with Carmen. It's standard. Everyone needs to sort through the confusing feelings this field experience

creates. Carmen will help you sort through it: guilt, joy, right, wrong--throw it all at her, and I promise, you two will work it out. In the meantime, focus on getting what you need out of our experience."

"Thanks Russell." Tessa's voice was small and quiet, but she felt better. Hearing her own thoughts and feelings coming from Russell's mouth made her realize that she was confused, not crazy, and that her confusion was normal.

Russell stood and pulled Tessa off the bed with him. "Let's get going. The shower's yours. But Tessa, do me a favor and leave the

privacy blinds open.”

She couldn't tell by his expression if he was kidding. It was one thing to shower for his pleasure in the heat of pleasure, and quite another to do it when the only thing on her mind was breakfast. She closed the blinds and lathered up.

They had breakfast in a little coffee shop down the block. They were both famished. “Three a.m. aerobics,” Russell said, as he shoveled another forkful of eggs into his mouth.

“What's on the agenda today?” Tessa asked, nibbling toast.

“Sex. Lots of it.”

Tessa choked, and after he handed her a glass of water, he laughed. The smile reappeared thirty minutes later, as they stood in front of an old wooden building called Chandra’s Yoga, Pilates & More.

“In here?” Tessa said.

“Well we’re not going to do it standing out here on the sidewalk! Come on.” Russell took Tessa’s hand and pulled her inside.

The studio, or gym, or whatever one might call it was a suite of small, glassed-in rooms lining the

exterior walls. There was a common exercise floor in the center of the room. The place was well-used, a nice way of saying, worn. But it was clean and smelled of disinfectant and incense. At least Tessa thought it was incense.

Russell led Tessa to the back corner, toward a bright yellow door. They passed a young woman folding towels and an older woman in the center floor. She was dressed in Yoga pants and struggled with the downward facing dog. The rest of the facility was empty, and Tessa wondered how “Chandra” survived with such little business.

“Here,” Russell said, stopping at the closed, yellow door. Tessa could hear something that sounded like chanting coming from behind it. Russell tapped on the door twice, waited a moment, and called out, “It’s Russell.”

The chanting stopped and a woman said, “Come in.”

Inside, Tessa could see the room was a small office. A middle-aged woman with a long, gray braid down her back sat cross-legged on the floor. She rose and Russell hugged her.

“Tessa, this is Daphne. Daphne, this is a friend of mine, Tessa.”

“A friend of Russell’s is always welcome at my studio,” she said. Her smile was open and warm.

“Are we all set up?” Russell said.

“Yes. Tessa’s clothing is set out in the ladies changing room.” She looked at Tessa. “That’s on the other side of the room, far corner.”

Clothing? Tessa was beginning to sweat, thinking about the ‘& More’ on the sign outside.

To Russell, Daphne said, “I’ve reserved Studio A.”

“Tessa, please, go ahead and change. I’ve got a little catching up

to do with Daphne, then I'll be right out."

Tessa didn't move.

Daphne smiled. "Shame on you Russell. I'll bet this is her first time." She turned to Tessa. "Don't you worry, you'll love it. And I bet you'll be great at it." Daphne wrapped her hand around Tessa's arm and gently pulled her out into the center room. "Donna, will you show Tessa to the ladies changing room please?"

The young woman put down her pile of laundered towels and Tessa followed her, wondering what on earth she was getting

herself into.

Tessa wasn't prepared for what she saw in Studio A. Russell wore normal workout clothes with one noticeable addition: strapped to his groin was a bright red protective cup.

"Nice outfit," he said, pointing to her faded full body leotard.

"I could say the same about you," she responded, pointing to the red leather covering his groin.

He grinned. "I take no chances with the boys, especially around novices like you." He motioned her to get close, and she did. "Before you can enjoy sex, you have to have confidence that you are safe, or that you can take care of yourself if you discover you aren't. The very first promise I made when we met was..."

It took a moment, and then Tessa got it. "You said you wanted to show me how to put assholes on their ass!" She grinned. "Is that what we're doing here?"

"This will be a short lesson; I just want to introduce you to the

idea. You'll need to pursue it back in New York if you want to get good."

Tessa poked his chest playfully with her finger. "You're afraid I'm going to be a quick study and put you out of commission. That's why you've got the boys wrapped in armor!" She threw her head back and laughed. "Okay. Bring it on."

Russell poked her back, also in the chest. But his poke was different; it was slower and sensual, and it ended with his finger resting on top of a nipple. "I'll teach you the simplest move. After you've got the hang of it, we'll have a little

contest. Whoever wins the most points gets to pick the next activity."

The simple move looked and sounded incredibly easy. Just bring your knee to your chest and kick straight forward. Swinging your leg out from that position wasn't difficult at all. The tricky part, Tessa discovered, was connecting to the bull's eye—in this case, Russell's red leather protective cup. Despite her best effort, Russell either caught her foot or dodged her blow eight out of ten times.

"Don't give up on it," he told Tessa, after declaring himself the

contest winner. "You have good balance and body awareness. Find a gym in New York that does kick boxing. With some more work, you'll do well."

Tessa headed for the studio door.

"Where are you going?" Russell said.

"To change. We're done, right?"

He shook his head. "I won. That means I get to pick the next activity." His dark eyes sparkled devilishly.

“I pick yoga.” He removed his red groin cup and crooked his finger. “Come close. This is going to be fun.”

Tessa had taken a few yoga classes, but had never heard of the position Russell planned to teach her.

“It’s called Yab Yum. Its proper use is to align energy between partners. I do it because it’s so damn sexy.”

Russell sat cross-legged on a mat and motioned for Tessa to sit on his lap, facing him. “Cross your

ankles behind my back," he instructed. "Don't schlump," he said. "Use your lower back muscles and your abs to keep yourself aligned with me." When Tessa straightened to mirror Russell's posture, he leaned his forehead into hers and said, "Breathe in when I do, out when I do."

Their bodies were pressed together, from pelvis to forehead, and their very breath synchronous.

"It feels like we're one," Tessa said, and Russell smiled.

"Having an orgasm is undisputedly awesome. But connecting to someone you care

about is every bit as awesome. When you feel their breath and match it, when your heart and head are pressed against theirs, when you see and smell and feel them: it's as intimate as sex, and just as important."

Russell gently pulled out of the pose. "One more," he said. And this time, Tessa looked forward to it. He sat on the mat, legs slightly bowed and his feet stretched out in front of him. He motioned for Tessa to sit on the floor between his legs with her back to him. He pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her. "Relax and let my hands direct

you.”

Russell slowly pulled Tessa’s arms away from her tummy and placed her hands at the top of each of his thighs. He pulled her knees up and placed his strong hands under them. “I’m going to roll back and pull you with me. I’ll end up in a bridge pose. You know that one?”

She nodded; they did that in exercise classes to tone the buttocks.

“When I create a bridge with my thighs and butt, you continue to roll. Just pretend my chest and belly are the floor and roll up until your legs are extended all the way

back, over your shoulders if you can. Are you flexible enough for that?"

"Like a plow pose?"

"Yes, except I'm your floor."

"I can do that. Then what happens?"

"When you've got a good stretch, slowly roll back. Same as you would if you were on the floor, except my hands will guide you down."

Russell and Tessa rolled backwards, Tessa on top of his chest and belly. When he formed a bridge with his thighs and butt,

Tessa rolled further, until her buttocks were elevated off his chest and her straight legs extended over her shoulders. Russell guided her hands off the top of his thighs, and sensually slid them down, telling Tessa to slowly roll back into his lap. She gently landed in the starting position, on the mat between Russell's legs.

"It's not done," he whispered in her ear. He crossed his ankles over Tessa's legs so his legs were now folded inside hers, and he nudged her until she bent at the waist, all the way forward in a long sensual stretch. He followed her stretch,

lying on top of her back, stretching his arms forward to mirror hers.

“Oh, that feels good,” she said. It was a wonderful stretch, but it was a caress as well.

“There’s more,” Russell said. His hands started at her wrists and slowly slid up the length of her arms. When his hands reached her shoulders, he massaged her trapezius muscles with strong, nimble fingers. He moved his massage from her shoulders to her neck and then up to her scalp.

If Tessa had been a cat, she would have purred.

“You can reciprocate by massaging your partner’s feet and calf muscles. It’s about stretching and relaxing and sharing sensual touch therapeutically, lovingly, if it’s the right partner.” Russell said. He slid both hands around Tessa’s body and dropped his hands in her lap. “You can also do this exercise naked. When you end up in this position,” he pressed his fingers against her mound, “it can be the start of very nice foreplay.”

Tessa reflexively relaxed her legs, giving Russell better access to her sweet spot.

“Well, look who’s gone from

white-knuckle sex to bring it on.”

When Tessa realized how right he was, she blushed. But she also relaxed against Russell’s chest, looked up into his eyes and said, “You promised me, and I quote, ‘Sex. And lots of it.’ I just assumed you were about to make good on that promise.”

Russell rested his chin on top of Tessa’s head. “I’ve been making good on that promise all morning.”

Tessa scrunched her face. “We’ve done nothing sexual since the middle of the night.”

“Wrong. Meaningful sex is

more than inserting Part A into Part B. It's connection and foreplay and building anticipation." He nuzzled Tessa's ear. "How did you feel when we kick boxed?"

"At first I was surprised. I wasn't expecting you to take it seriously."

"*It* being my promise to teach you how to put an asshole on his ass?"

"Yes."

"And when you realized I took my promise seriously and made special arrangements to teach you a skill I hoped would keep you safe,

how did you feel?"

"Really good. I felt like you were seeing the whole me, not just the student in need of, ah, driver's training."

"So we deepened our connection. And these yoga exercises, they brought our bodies together in a pleasing way, but also built trust."

Tessa thought about Russell's strong thighs creating a bridge for her overhead stretch. His guiding hands as she rolled back into position. He was right, she had trusted in him physically, and he in her, as she rolled across his chest

and landed against his groin.

“All of those elements heighten our appreciation for one another,” Russell continued. “Foreplay isn’t just teasing Part A with Part B. Having you wrapped in my arms, rolling across my chest, and settling here, nestled between my hips increased my desire. I think it did for you as well.”

It had, and it had felt natural, so much so the old Aretha Franklin song popped into her mind. She would have begun to hum it, were it not for the realization that swallowed her up a nanosecond later: how could she have

established a stronger physical connection with a man she'd barely met than the man she'd married and lived with? Mark saw sex with her as inserting part A into part B, to be done as quickly and efficiently as possible, because that's the way they both secretly wanted it. She got to avoid responsibility for her own sexuality and even though it was predictable and boring, Mark got an orgasm without expending much time or effort.

“Hey, what's this?” Russell said, wiping away the parade of tears streaming down Tessa's cheek.

“What you just said...the way

you said it...I feel it, like I've never felt it before." Tessa looked up at Russell, encouraged by his complete focus on her. "I knew this, here." She tapped her head. "Carmen and I talked all around this, poked at it, picked it up and bounced it around. But right now every minute I wasted, every excuse I made, every time Mark checked out on me—mentally and physically, every bit of every second that we spent with each other, but not part of each other, I feel it all, right here," Tessa touched her heart. "And it feels like death."

"What you and Mark could have

been was the dream that brought you to marry. When Mark died, the way he did, you had to face the harsh reality that the dream died long before Mark did. That must hurt a lot."

Tessa sniffled in response. Her nose was running and her sniffles were desperate.

Russell didn't have a tissue, so he offered her the tail of his tee shirt.

Tessa cried even harder.

"It's not that sweaty, is it?" Russell asked, sounding bewildered.

Tessa shook her head. "Mark would never have let me soil his shirt, and I would never have considered blowing my nose on something drenched in his sweat." She took the tail of Russell's shirt and blew her nose. Hard. "I can't believe I could be more intimate with a man I barely know than with my own husband."

"You can't change what was, but you can change what is yet to be. That's why you came to Athena's Ground." Russell stood and offered Tessa his hand. When she rose, he pulled her into a gentle hug. "Let's get going. We've got

some work to do.”

Their next stop was for a light lunch. While they waited for sandwiches, Russell slid a piece of paper and pen across the table to Tessa.

“When we were at the club last night, I asked you to tell me what things you saw that you’d like to try, or at least explore. You mentioned several things, and we did the first one on your list in the wee hours of the morning.”

“Along with a little something extra you convinced me to try.”

Russell grinned. “Admit it, it

rocked your world.”

“Admission made. And don’t even think about trying to take away my little friend with training wheels. I’ve recently been taught to put an asshole on his ass and I’m not afraid to do it.”

“Wow. We’ve got you using naughty words and sex toys. Our work here is done. Almost.” Russell smiled. “The paper,” he said, pointing to paper he’d slid to Tessa, “write down the things you saw at the club, the things you mentioned to me last night. But Tessa, only put down the things you seriously want to know more about.”

"If I write it, you'll do it?" Tessa said, arching her brow.

"Something like that."

Tessa grabbed the pen, but hesitated. "Um, you asked me to include things I saw at the club. Can I only include those things?"

Russell's eyes sparkled and he seemed to be amused. "You've thought of something else?"

Tessa nodded.

"Well, sure, put it on the list. We'll see what we can do."

They ate in silence while Tessa wrote. Twice she scribbled things out and started over. When she

finished, she looked her list over and said, "I don't know that I want to do all of this, but I want to know about it, understand it." She slid the paper across to Russell. "Am I a sick-o?"

"The only sick things are things that cause injury to the body or spirit." He glanced at her list. "I think we can do all of these things without ending up in hospital. Though I'm not sure about this last one..."

Tessa looked horror stricken. Before she could become hysterical, Russell reached across the table and patted her hand.

“Just a little joke, to lighten you up. There’s nothing horrible about what you want to experience, or investigate. You’re not being judged. You’re not being graded. You’re the boss of you! Opening horizons is like opening presents: some of them will be cherished and used, time and again. Others may never come out of the box again. All of them give you better insight into what you like, and what you don’t.” He grinned and slipped the list into his pocket. “Finish up. We’ve got some present shopping to do.”

The first stop was a store called

Laces & Ties. Tessa stood on the sidewalk, imagining lace-laden dresses and fine men's ties, until Russell opened the door and nudged her inside.

"Russell, how good to see you!"

The voice came from a very short woman wearing a very short dress and very long earrings.

"Sunny, nice to see you too. How are the twins?"

While Russell and Sunny chatted, Tessa's eyes took in the contents of the store. Sure enough, there were many things made of lace, though none were what came

to mind when one thought of 'lace dresses.' There were lace panties and bras, garter belts and bustiers, eye masks and handcuffs. And the ties. Oh my.

"Forgive my manners," Russell said, interrupting Tessa's silent inventory of the most elegant sex gear imaginable. "Tessa, this is Sunny. Sunny, Tessa."

"Nice to meet you, Tessa," Sunny said, smiling pleasantly. "Welcome to Laces & Ties. I take it this is your first time?"

"Yes."

"Well enjoy your look about.

We have a lot of wonderful things here.”

“I’m afraid we’re on a bit of a schedule,” Russell said, looking at Sunny, “or we’d love to linger. I have some specific things in mind. Sunny, if you could get Tessa’s size I’ll show you what we need.”

Tessa gave Sunny her dress, bra and panty sizes and started to tag along as Russell led Sunny to the other side of the store.

“Tessa, see that display over there?” He pointed to long, wide shelves in the corner. “Some of the things on your list are on that top shelf. I’ll join you in a minute.”

She'd been dismissed, excluded, and Tessa wasn't sure of the reason. Did Russell have a thing for Sunny?

Tessa found the top shelf while Russell and Sunny huddled on the other side of the store. She was trying to figure out exactly what she was holding when Russell appeared behind her.

"It's a cock ring," he said, matter-of-factly.

Tessa dropped it.

Russell laughed.

"I suppose it wasn't something you checked out when you did

Carmen's homework assignment."

"It was not."

"It's not something we need for the activities on your list. But a good tight cock ring on a nice hard dick..." He shrugged his shoulders as if there was nothing more that needed to be said. "Would you like to play with it tonight?"

"Your cock or the ring?" He was trying to embarrass her and she wasn't going to let him.

"Touché." He gave Tessa a look she interpreted as respect and his expression became serious. "Cock rings were originally used as

treatment for male impotence; once a man got reasonably hard, he'd slip the ring on and be able to sustain his erection long enough to have intercourse. It didn't take long for all those smart men, and women, out there to realize the humble cock ring had other advantages."

"Like?"

"It helps a man with a good erection have a great one. It makes the penis extra sensitive to touch, so orgasms are more spectacular. And..." he picked up a different ring, one that had a cylinder on each side of the 'O' ring, "...the

enhancements to the basic purpose provide interesting options.” He dangled the orange plastic contraption by his index finger and thumb.

Tessa poked it like it was a cockroach instead of a cock ring. “I get the ring part, but what are those cylinders?”

“This ring has batteries. The batteries vibrate each of these cylinders.” He put three fingers through the ‘O’ ring and held the device against his pelvis. “The cylinder closest to the receiver, the lady in my case, vibrates the clitoris during intercourse. The cylinder

closest to the device wearer, that would be me, in my case, vibrates the testicles. That's why they call this one a couple's ring."

Tessa smiled. "I notice that when you get serious you lose the slang words and become quite the teacher."

"And I notice when you are in full orgasmic throttle you find the slang words and enjoy your sexuality."

It was Tessa's turn to say touché, and she did.

Russell snatched several items from the shelf. Tessa recognized

the small vibrator, but the other items were a blur of unfamiliar shapes and names and colors, though she thought she saw something orange, and that made her smile all the way to the cash register.

“What’s next?” Tessa asked as they pulled away from Laces & Ties.

“A two-fer,” Russell said.

Tessa frowned. “I told you I wasn’t into two men at the same time.”

“Yes. You did. And fortunately for you, or maybe not so fortunately, the two-fer I’m talking about has nothing to do with the number of concurrent sexual partners.”

Tessa laughed. “I’ve really got you going with that teacher talk. I love it!”

“Then I’ll keep it up, since you love it. But, Tessa, when the time comes for me to stop lecturing and start doing, I’m going to do what most men do. I’m going to use words that rev up my sexuality, and those words don’t include phrases like ‘concurrent sexual partners.’ Nor do they include medical terms or other polite-company words.”

Tessa thought about Mark, who never used rough words. Maybe because when he had, early on in their marriage, she shut him down. After that he used no words at all. He simply rubbed himself up against her, tentatively touched a

breast or her crotch, and if she didn't object, he got on to the business of getting himself off. Afterwards he'd cuddle, so she got something out of it too.

"Where did your mind just go?" Russell asked. "You looked a mile away."

Tessa told him what she'd been thinking. "Mark fell short in a lot of ways," she said, "but so did I. If I'd respected his needs—for something other than missionary, for dirty sex talk in the bedroom, for toys..." Tessa shrugged. "Things might have worked out differently."

“Do you remember what I said this morning, that you can’t change what was, but you can change what is yet to be?”

Tessa nodded and was still thinking about the ways she’d already changed when Russell turned in to a parking lot and stopped behind what looked like the employee entrance to one of the buildings.

“Behind that door,” he said pointing to securely locked gray metal, “is a school, of sorts, at least for the next hour, and only because I’m one of their favorite customers.”

“I’m going to guess this is unlike any school I’ve been to before.”

“You’d guess right. We’re going to get out your list of sexy things to explore and begin doing that here. Remember how self-conscious you were dancing at the club?”

“Until you got me so heated up I couldn’t take it anymore.” Tessa laughed, remembering how Russell maneuvered her to a dark corner so she could experience the magic of his fingers and an orgasm powerful enough to curl her toes.

“Things on your list converge. You find watching sexy activity a

turn on, which is both common and normal," he said, before Tessa could flood herself with shame. "And you want to find, and develop, a more naturally sexual Tessa."

"I strangled my femininity by being too straight-laced. But that doesn't mean I don't want some limits."

"Of course, most of us do want limits. And the way to find them is through exposure, experience and knowledge. That," he said, waving his hand at the gray door, "is what lies beyond."

Russell grabbed the bag from

Laces & Ties, jumped out of the car, and said, "School's on."

"Are you sure this is right?" Tessa said.

Ashlee, whose stage name was Mahogany Smooth, tugged the laces on the back of Tessa's corset even tighter. "Now it is." She pointed at the mirror. "Makes your waist look tiny and your boobs look big."

"Makes it hard to breathe,"

Tessa said.

“Long as you’ve got enough oxygen to keep your brain cells from dying, it’s good.”

Tessa looked at the outfit Sunny and Russell had picked out. The front of the corset was see-through black lace. The lace barely covered Tessa’s areolas and her nipples jutted through the lace like a hot knife in soft butter. She poked at a nipple. “Is that how it’s supposed to be?” she asked Ashlee.

“Girl, that is exactly how it’s supposed to be. Half the girls who work here would kill to have those perky tits. And the nipple jut? Gets

a man's juices going before you even have to do a thing."

The corset had no back, per se, just a series of black lace ties. Each tie was independent of the other, so getting out of the corset was one tug at a time.

The panties were nothing but a G String of matching black lace. Very thin, see-through black lace.

"My hoo-hoo is naked," Tessa said, looking at the half-inch strip of lace covering her slit.

"Your hoo-hoo is hot-hot," Ashlee said, "and nobody older than eight and younger than ninety

calls their snatch a hoo-hoo." She pointed at the curls of dark brown hair on each side of the strip of lace. "You wear that again, you'll need to get a Brazilian wax."

Tessa turned her rear to the mirror and looked over her shoulder. The lace disappeared between her cheeks, giving the look of total nudity.

"Don't worry, your hole is covered," Ashlee said. "And your ass looks good. You ever lose those inhibitions, you could make some money as a dancer."

Tessa's face turned pink.

Ashlee led Tessa to a dimly lit room. It was empty, except for Russell, who was relaxing in a love seat. He patted the space next to him and Tessa joined him.

“How do you feel in those clothes?” he asked.

“Embarrassed. Naked. Silly.” In a smaller voice, Tessa added, “Sexy.”

“It’s the last descriptor I want you to focus on, Tessa. No one’s asking you to walk into church in that outfit. But someday, someone is going to thank God when you walk into his bedroom in it.” He put his arm around her shoulder

and dangled his long fingers until they lightly brushed the place where lace met skin. "Even in this light, I can see how much your nipples beg to be fondled." He pressed the black lace and felt the hardness of Tessa's nipple underneath.

Russell's exploration was interrupted by the explosion of lights at the front of the room. There was a small stage, now brightly lit. On the stage was a simple cane chair, turned so the back of the chair faced the audience. In the chair was a redhead with smooth, light skin

and long, red fingernails. She wore a soft pink bustier, a long string of pearls around her neck and a pink G String. Tessa noticed this woman had a Brazilian.

Russell spoke softly into Tessa's ear. "This is Bunny Love, or at least that's her stage name. She will not speak, but she will be your teacher for the next ten minutes. Her moves are sensuous and provocative in the beginning. She'll build on that; men will be clawing at themselves by the end of her number. Notice how she moves. But mostly notice how comfortable she is with her body."

Tessa watched, transfixed. Bunny's eyes focused on a point in the distance while she moved to music; the chair was her dance partner, her companion, and her lover. She strutted around it, hoisting a toned leg up and over it. She bent over it, showing the audience every part of herself not covered by the bustier and G String. She oozed and slithered and flexed, and each movement was slow and languorous and so sexy Tessa was amazed. Not once did she seem to doubt her body or the sexy, provocative things she did with it.

The tempo of the music changed, and Bunny changed with it.

“Watch how she moves from temptress to hot sex,” Russell said, just as Bunny unsnapped the top hook of her bustier. Timed to the music and with a rawness that took Tessa’s breath away, Bunny’s bright red nails popped the hooks of her bustier one by one. When the last was unhooked, she flung it off her body, like unwanted weight. All she wore now were hot pink pasties and a soft pink G String.

The early music had been playfully provocative. It was raw sex

now.

Bunny Love strutted forward, away from her lover—the chair—and faced the audience. She toyed with the string that held her diminutive G String in place, tugging it as if she would rip it off. She sucked a finger with her bright red lips and then inched the finger over to the thin strip of lace that covered her slit. Each time her finger came close to her clit, she pulled it away and shook her head, *no-no*. She played with the tassels on the end of her pasties, moving her breasts to the rhythm of the music. And she ended at the exact

moment her music did: standing with her back to the audience, bent over, each hand pulling a cheek apart just enough to give the audience a glimpse of the thin pink lace between her butt cheeks. Bunny moved a finger to the bit of lace that hid her anus, wiggled her bright red fingernail and gave the audience an exaggerated wink. The lights died, and Bunny Love silently moved off the stage.

Tessa was flabbergasted. It was sexy, if a bit lurid, but she could no more prance and primp and shake her ass than fly. Not to mention play peek-a-boo with her anus. She

told Russell as much.

“You’d be surprised what you can do, if you decide you want to. But you better decide quick.” Russell pointed to the woman headed their way. “Because the master teacher is about to take the student through a practice exercise.”

Russell ushered Tessa to a corner with chairs, tables and floor-to-ceiling curtains. He sat her in a chair, and pulled the curtains closed. A moment later, the woman Tessa had seen entering the room stepped through the curtain, put her hands on her hips and said,

“You have all the equipment honey.
You just need to learn how to use
it.”

The woman's name was Mary. She was the owner of what she refused to call a strip club.

"We give a little instruction to Russell's friends, from time to time. His friends leave with a greater appreciation of their femininity, and what to do with it, and Russell leaves happy."

Mary wasted no time. She asked Tessa if she'd ever given, or witnessed, a lap dance. Tessa's wide-eyed shake of her head made Mary chuckle. "Well, that's about to change."

Russell was placed on a chair in the center of the small space. Mary moved Tessa into various positions, barking orders.

“The rule of the lap dance is that the receiver, your man, cannot move or touch you in any way. You are in complete control. Now, the way to make your man enjoy your control over him is to give him what he needs, but at your pace and in your way.”

Mary demonstrated, and Tessa mimicked her moves. She started by bracing her arms on each side of the chair and leaning into Russell, whose legs were spread to provide

maximum access to his crotch. "Closer!" Mary said, and Tessa pressed herself until her black laced nipples were brushing Russell's chin and her pelvis was rubbing Russell's crotch.

"I feel silly," Tessa said, as she wiggled against Russell. "How do I know if I'm doing this right?"

"You've got your pussy against the man's lie detector," Mary said. "If his package's gotten bigger, you're doing it right."

Tessa stopped wiggling and looked. "Hey, I'm doing something right."

Russell laughed.

For ten minutes, Mary tutored Tessa on positions and moves. Rub yourself more Tessa. You look like you're mopping the floor. Snap your G String in his face. Suck your finger and trace your nipple. Brush your backside up and down, from his nipples to his crotch.

With each command, Tessa responded, sometimes giggling at how silly she felt, but sometimes surprising herself with other emotions. By the time Mary was finished with the lesson, Tessa was wet and Russell looked like he'd kill for some relief.

“Good job Tessa,” Mary said “I’m going to leave you to finish the dance privately.” She looked at Russell. “The club doesn’t open for a couple hours and this room is off limits to staff for another half hour. Enjoy yourselves. Just keep the curtain closed.”

With that, Mary was gone and Tessa was alone with Russell, and his very big hard-on.

“You wanted to learn how to

light up your man and be in control. A lap dance is an excellent means to that end. You should know, you just did it," Russell said, repositioning himself to ease the strain in his now-tight pants. "What happens next is something you and your man will decide. Unless you want to drive him stark-raving mad, you'll need to cancel the no-touch rule at some point. When you're tired of dancing and your man's dick is about to punch through his trousers, it's probably time."

Tessa nodded and Russell pushed Tessa forward. She felt his fingers on her back and felt the top

tie release. Then the next. Then the last. Russell slid his hands under the black lace and squeezed Tessa's breasts, one in each palm. He groaned.

"Unzip me," he said into her ear.

Tessa reached for Russell's fly. It wasn't easy, sliding the metal teeth down over the rock that developed in his crotch. After a moment, she managed to loosen his pants.

"Reach in. Pull my cock out."

Tessa pulled on his manhood and it roared out of confinement. It

was hard and thick and it had a drop of moisture on its head.

“At this point in your lap dance,” Russell said, “you and your man need to negotiate how you’re each going to get what you need. For example, I need to come. What about you Tessa?”

The thin strip of lace over Tessa’s slit was wringing wet. He smiled when Tessa nodded, yes.

“You’ve rubbed and teased my prick until the only thought in my head is to thrust it in your tight pussy until it explodes.” Russell raked his teeth over Tessa’s sensitive nipple and she yelped. He

pulled her to a loveseat and pushed her onto it. "You've had all the control, up to now. Your man may want to continue with you in control, or he may want a turn calling the shots."

Tessa said, "What do you want, now?"

"I want to ride you until you scream. I don't want this to be gentle and sweet. Can you handle that?"

Tessa whimpered, pulling her hips up to align with his. She opened her legs wide, sucked her finger, and began massaging her clit.

Russell seemed surprised that Tessa's answer was so overtly sexual, and he smiled. He forced his hips between Tessa's open legs, shoved the lace G String out of the way, and inserted his finger.

"Your pussy's ready for my cock, isn't it Tessa?"

Tessa nodded and moaned something that sounded like yes and Russell responded by driving his member into her wet center. She wiggled but he kept control, holding her hips with his hands while his pelvis found its rhythm. When she settled into the position Russell required, he moved a hand

to Tessa's mound. He created friction and heat on her clit and his penis did the same inside. Tessa began to writhe. The muscles of her vagina gripped his shaft and waves of small contractions began to build.

“You're almost there.” His breathing was ragged, but he kept pumping, quickly and deeply. His palm pressed Tessa's mound and his fingers concentrated on her clit. “Do it. Do it. Before my cock explodes.”

Just as Russell filled Tessa with his semen, Tessa shuddered and screamed. After they both caught

their breath, Russell pulled his spent manhood from her core and gently slid it back into his pants. He repositioned the thin strip of lace over Tessa's wet mound, lifted her to her feet and said, "Now that's how you end a private lap dance."

Tessa studied Russell's face as he drove them back to Tessa's hotel.

"What's the wildest thing you've ever done with a client?" she asked.

"I never talk about clients to anyone except the client's therapy team at Athena's Ground."

"Not even in a generic way?"

"Not in any way."

Tessa was relieved—she certainly expected her experience here to be kept confidential, in fact,

if military grade Top Secret was an option, she'd demand it.

Again, Russell seemed to read her mind. "You'd skin me alive, after you sued the stuffing out of me, if I told my next client all about you, right?"

"Right you are. I know some very good lawyers and my receptionist's husband is a sous chef, very skilled with sharp instruments." Tessa smiled. "I was curious about your experiences, but I'd have been disappointed if it turned out you had loose lips."

"There's nothing wrong with my lips," Russell said, smiling, "as

I'm sure you've noticed."

"Well, if you aren't going to talk about past clients, let's talk about the current one," Tessa said. "What are we doing this evening?"

"Like the Big Man in the Red Suit, I'm taking your list and checking it twice. Except in your case, my job is to make sure you're naughty, not nice."

Tessa laughed. "Just how naughty are you going to get me to be?"

"As naughty as you like. This is all about you, Tessa, so take full advantage." The light ahead turned

red. Russell brought the car to a stop and used the opportunity to focus on Tessa instead of traffic. He looked into her honey-colored eyes. "I'm going to spread out an assortment of toys—the ones I picked up at Laces & Ties—and you're going to try them." Russell smiled. "What kind of cuisine have you never tried before?"

"What?"

"Name a type of food you've never eaten before. Like Thai or Brazilian or whatever."

"I live in New York, we have everything. But for some reason I've never tried authentic Swedish

food, except a drink called glogg, which will put you on your ass in no time if you aren't careful."

"Okay. Think of tonight as an all you can eat Swedish Buffet. You'll taste a little of this and that, and eat a lot of whatever you like. If you hate something, you can spit it out, but you must at least taste it."

"What if it looks so bad I can't even put it in my mouth?"

"Then I'll blindfold you."

They pulled into the hotel parking lot. Tessa wondered just how much of the buffet she would like and Russell hummed. It took

her a minute to recognize his song: Three Blind Mice.

While Russell showered, Tessa checked her email. There was the usual junk from websites Tessa occasionally shopped at. There was an email from Stacy, her right-hand woman at work. Tessa held her breath as she opened it, paranoid that some terrible thing had happened while she was gone. A fire. A burglary. An order cancellation from Dillards or Macys or Saks. Or worse, an order cancellation from Dillards and Macys and Saks.

Hey Tessa. Just a note to tell you all is well here. Everyone survived Christmas and will, we predict, survive the craziness that is New Year! We all hope your vacation 'down under' is fabulous and that you're having the time of your life. You deserve it. See you shortly after New Year. Stacy.

Tessa smiled. A friendly note was so much nicer than finding out her entire office was gutted by fire or a very greedy burglar.

There was one other email that caught Tessa's eye. It had been sent just after she'd left with Russell

this morning and it was from David.

Are you alright? I read your email first thing (Hawaii time) and you sounded a little lost.

Tessa searched her memory. What had her last email been? She'd written when she couldn't sleep and... Oh yeah, she was feeling sad that the hot sex she'd had with her sex therapist hadn't been hot sex with her wish-he-was-my-boyfriend David. She'd also been feeling more than a little

guilty. Apparently she had worried David, and she felt terrible.

You know you can call me if you need me, right? I have an early breakfast meeting, after which I'm done with work. I'll have a few days off before I have to head back to Chicago. Thought I'd soak up some Hawaiian sun as long as I'm here. Well, got to get ready for my breakfast meeting. Call or text me and let me know you're okay. David.

Tessa grabbed her phone. She was a little fuzzy about the time

difference between her and David, now that he was in Hawaii, but she was pretty sure he'd sent this email many hours ago. While she was lap dancing with Russell, David was worrying about her. She felt sick to her stomach as she pulled up her contact list. She wasn't sure she could calmly tell David that she was happily sightseeing or even laboriously tackling personal issues without her voice screaming *I'm a harlot having raw, steamy sex with three Australian hunks*. Never mind they were her therapists. Never mind David wasn't, yet, her boyfriend and therefore had no

right to expect sexual fidelity. Never mind she had only done this to fix herself, so she could offer a healthy, happy, sexually secure Tessa to the next relationship, which might turn out to be David. None of it mattered because nothing would keep guilt and embarrassment from her voice right now.

So she texted him instead.

I'm ok, just was lonely and wanted to be with you face2face. Sorry I worried you. I'm fine now and will be home B4 2 long. Enjoy Hawaii. Thnx 4 caring.

She hit send and hoped her text would reassure him. She didn't want his days off in beautiful Honolulu to be tainted by worry, especially since it was worry she caused.

"It's all yours."

Tessa startled. Her mind was with David in Hawaii but her body was in Sydney with Russell. And Russell, naked save a towel loosely wrapped around his hips, was looking at her with an odd expression.

"The bathroom," Russell added,

when Tessa didn't respond. "I thought you might like a shower."

Tessa glanced down at herself. Rather than put her clean street clothes on a body that smelled of sex and sweat, she'd thrown a borrowed set of Russell's sweats over her naughty outfit, but she'd shucked them off as soon as Russell had gone to shower. Tessa stood in a black lace corset, poorly tied in place, and a still damp G String. She felt grubby and disheveled, but realized Russell might not share that opinion when his towel twitched, as if a small rodent nesting in his groin had stirred.

“Thanks, I’ll just...” Tessa sat her phone down and walked toward the bathroom. As she passed Russell, he grabbed her hand.

“Your face looks sunburned. Strange, since we’ve spent no time in the sun today.” He was smiling and Tessa thought the glint in his eyes was more than a little wicked.

Tessa shrugged.

He dropped the towel at his waist. “When a man’s dick does this, it’s confirmation of your appeal. You shouldn’t blush, you should beam.”

Tessa glanced at what the towel

had hidden. The small rodent from moments ago was now a large, hungry rat.

“I’m grubby.”

“You’re very sexy.”

“I’m going to shower.”

“I’m going to get the buffet set up.”

It took Tessa a moment to understand what he meant. When she did, she turned a deeper shade of pink and scurried off to the privacy of her shower.

Tessa turned the hot water off and breathed in the lingering steam. She toweled off, squirted a generous dollop of moisturizing lotion in her palms and massaged the lightly scented balm all over, from neck to toes. As she smoothed lotion into her skin, both mind and muscles began to relax. When she stepped out of the shower, she noticed the black lace outfit was no longer on the counter where she'd left it. Instead, there was a neatly folded pile of new clothing, and resting on top of it, a single red rose. She'd been so absorbed in the

shower she hadn't heard Russell make the clothing exchange.

Tessa lifted the first item in the pile. It was a red satin bra. She held it up against her skin and glanced in the mirror, which was still a little foggy from the shower steam. The cups were cut to cover only the lower half of the breast, beginning just below the nipple. A quarter inch of fine black lace stood up along the edge of the cups, providing peek-a-boo camouflage for the nipple and areola. Underwire and a standard hook and eye back closure kept the strapless bra in place. The next item

was a matching red garter belt with black lace accents and black lace stockings. The last piece was a thigh-high kimono. The fabric was a very loose weave of black lace and it was entirely see through. The satin waist tie was red and a perfect match to the bra it was meant to cover. Tessa pawed through the pile a second time with the same results: there was no panty.

Well, she'd wanted to learn how to be sexy. If this didn't do it, she didn't know what would. She wiggled into the outfit, fixed her hair and makeup, grabbed the long stemmed red rose and strode out of

the bathroom. Outside, she was a bombshell. Inside, she was shell-shocked, and determined not to let Russell see it.

“Very nice,” Russell said, looking up as Tessa walked into the room. “You are stunning.”

“Thank you. You are...” Tessa didn’t quite know what to say. Should she compliment him on his washboard abs? His thick, muscled thighs? His tight round butt? Or the star of the show, his six inches of thick manhood, growing larger even as they spoke, now that he’d seen Tessa in her red satin bra and black lace stockings.

“Stunning?” he said, winking.

“Absolutely, though I was thinking naked.”

“Oh, I left one thing out. Hold on a minute.” Russell reached into a large bag and pulled out a shoebox. “I’m not sure if they’re your size.”

Tessa lifted a red high-heeled shoe from the box. It was open-toed and shiny. A college friend of hers, Kim, had a wicked name for shoes like this.

“Fuck-me shoes!” Tessa said, slipping one on as she thought about Kim. It was two sizes too big.

“Not a bad fit, if I don’t walk,” she said, and this time she winked as Russell roared with laughter.

Russell pointed to the table. “Your buffet awaits.”

Russell had been busy while Tessa was in the bathroom. All the usual things one finds on a hotel room table were gone, replaced with a smorgasbord of stuff, from sex toys to food.

“Let’s start with some mood music.” He tapped a screen on his iPhone and Tessa jumped, not expecting the rich sound to pour from a small Bluetooth speaker Russell had placed on one of the

nightstands. It was jazz, Tessa thought, with sensual, bluesy guitar and a raspy voice she didn't recognize. He took Tessa's hand and led her to the table. "All the things we need to feed body and soul," he said. "All washed and prepped and ready to go."

Tessa nodded. Of course she recognized the food. Beautiful pink shrimp resting on a silver plate nestled on ice. Soft, flakey rolls and butter. Thin slices of cheese. Deep purple grapes. And a huge ice bucket with chilled champagne and bottled spring water. What she wasn't as clear about was

everything else.

“Let’s start with this.”

Russell handed her something that reminded her of her Lelo, but this one looked quite different. It was shaped a bit like a very chubby tampon, complete with removal string.

“The vibe is inserted into the vagina, or it can be pressed against the clitoris,” he said. “It’s operated remotely, by this.” He held up a disc, also bright pink, and pressed a button. The chubby four inch toy began to vibrate in Tessa’s hand. She almost dropped it. “Obviously you can use it solo, but it’s got

great potential as a couple's toy. I could explain, but as they say, a picture is worth a thousand words."

Russell gently pushed Tessa onto the edge of the bed. "One of the things on your list was to learn how to be more sexually playful in an intimate relationship." He pulled up a chair for himself and positioned it at the foot of the bed, in front of Tessa's knees. "I'm going to show you a tool—a toy—that is intimate and sexually gratifying and, when used right, is also very playful." He firmly pressed her legs until they were fully spread apart. "Relax, this is

fun, not a trip to the gynecologist.”

Tessa giggled nervously, but she relaxed a little.

“Even if you feel turned on, always use a generous amount of lubricant. It makes things a lot more comfortable for everyone, and if you make a sexy little game out of it, it can be part of the pleasure.” Russell grabbed the tube and squirted it on the vibrator. Then he made a show of spreading it over the chubby pink toy, using long sensual swipes. “If you let your lover prepare and insert the toy, you’re making him a partner, not an observer.”

Russell leaned forward and buried his face in Tessa's mound. His tongue slipped through her slit and found her clitoris.

"Mmm," Tessa said. "Nice."

Russell waited until Tessa was wet and ready before sliding the four inch vibrator all the way into her center. Only the removal cord peeked out.

"Sit up," he said to Tessa. "Your lover inserts the vibe, and you both go about your business. In our case, we're going to have a bite to eat."

"Really?" Tessa said. "A guy puts a vibrator up a woman and

then they eat dinner?"

"Or go dancing. Or watch a football game. I once knew a man who inserted the vibe into his wife, and then turned the thing on while she cooked dinner." He shook his head. "One night he forgot to turn the vibe off until he smelled something burning. Ran to the kitchen to find Wifey on the floor finishing herself off while the meatloaf burned."

"Serves him right!" Tessa said, laughing.

Russell made a small plate with shrimp and grapes, poured a glass of champagne, and returned to the

bed. He pulled Tessa on to his lap, facing him. "Your lover can feed you." He popped a ripe grape into her mouth, and after she chewed and swallowed, he lifted the champagne to her lips. She took a sip and so did he. Then he dipped his index finger into the champagne, slid the black lace aside, and traced his finger around Tessa's exposed nipple. Tessa shivered.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" Russell licked the champagne from her nipple. "Touch my cock while I do this," he said, the 'teacher voice' replaced by the voice of a man now

fully aroused. When Tessa's hand grasped him, he sucked her nipple until she became lost in the sensations of cold champagne and warm tongue. "When your lover chooses, he can excite you further." Russell pressed the remote and the vibrator whirred into action.

Tessa jumped. She hadn't expected the sensation to be so powerful. She wiggled with pleasure.

"Your lover can pleasure you, and himself, by taking control of your orgasm." Russell changed the vibrator to pulse and pulled Tessa to a lying position on the bed. He

flipped himself around, so his face was between her legs. "Lick my cock while I lick your pussy." Tessa's soft tongue struck his hardness, and Russell sucked Tessa's swollen nub and pressed the remote to intense pulse. She squealed and bucked and Russell rode her with his mouth and the vibrator until she shuddered to climax.

"Do you...?" Tessa said, when she'd caught her breath. She pointed to Russell's hard on.

He shook his head. "I'm saving that for later."

They drank more champagne

and fed each other shrimp and grapes. "How long have you been doing this Russell?" Tessa asked as she laid a grape on his tongue.

"Three years."

"Aside from the sex and the money, why do you do it?"

They both laughed.

"Seriously, though," Tessa said, "it can't be easy. Every woman you deal with has big issues and insecurities and problems that you have to address and nurture and fix."

"I don't have the power to fix someone, Tessa. I do have the

knowledge and skills and temperament to help a woman fix herself. And it's a privilege to watch a woman come in broken and leave standing on her own two feet."

When the flush of Tessa's orgasm had completely faded, Russell waved the vibrator control at Tessa. "Another way you and your lover can pleasure each other is to keep low-level stimulation in you while you do something to stimulate your man." He turned the vibe on low. "In fact, you can use it as a communication device, of sorts. He keeps the control while

you tend to his needs. He lets you know you're successfully exciting him by increasing the vibration inside you."

"Like you scratch my back and I scratch yours?"

"Something like that, though what you'll be scratching won't be a back. Well..." he began to fondle Tessa's rear, "...maybe a backside."

“Sexual role game? I could never do that,” Tessa said.

Russell raised his eyebrows and the vibrator control. “A higher speed or off, it’s your choice.” His eyes sparkled and Tessa got the feeling he enjoyed his control over her building arousal.

“Tell me again why we do it? It sounds kind of silly.”

“Would you eat every meal with only salt and pepper? Never any garlic or oregano. Heaven forbid the cumin or cinnamon. Of course not. And if sex is a meal, toys—and

a little role-playing—is the spice that keeps mealtime tasty. And fun.”

“Hmm. Tell me about our game.”

“First we’ll finish playing with the items on your buffet table. Then I’ll go out for a fresh bottle of wine while you get yourself together.”

“You’re awfully confident I’ll need time to recuperate from your buffet, aren’t you?” Her eyes twinkled.

Russell clicked the vibrator control to the next higher level,

which was still pretty calm, but Tessa jumped, and Russell smiled. “Yes, I am confident. But getting back to our fantasy scene. I won’t be gone long, but time enough for you to freshen up. I need you to leave this outfit on, with one small adaptation.”

Now it was Tessa’s turn to raise her eyebrows.

“That bit of lace covering your nipples. It’s removable, with a firm tug. While I’m gone, I want you to rip it off, so I can see your beautiful pink circles and big, lusty nipples. I also want you to put some bright red lipstick on. I put a tube in the

bathroom for you.”

“How thoughtful,” Tessa said, a blend of sarcasm and excitement. The vibe inside her was slowly fueling her arousal and she wondered how long it would take before spontaneous combustion.

“When I return, I’ll knock on the door and say your first name. That way you’ll know it’s me and not Room Service, though I’ll have the Do Not Disturb sign on the door so they wouldn’t knock anyway. When you hear the knock and your name, you’ll answer the door. But not as Tessa.”

“Not as me? What do you

mean?"

"What would you never, ever do in real life? Be a hooker? Be a spy who uses sex to steal national secrets? Be a nymphomaniac who craves sex like cocaine? The fantasy is more than silly role-playing. It's a chance to walk on the wild side, safely and with someone you trust. So what is Tessa's wild side?" He leaned back and waited while Tessa thought.

Tessa thought about Kent the night he raped her. He took complete, non-consensual control of her. She would never do such an unspeakable thing to another

human being, but she had to admit, in a fantasy game it might feel good to be on the giving side. She took a deep breath, a little ashamed.

“I would never force sex on an unwilling person. But for the fantasy...” she shrugged her shoulders.

“We can make that happen. A good way to start is with those dirty words you hate. Even before you open the door, start telling me what you’re going to make me do to you, whether I like it or not.” Russell smiled. “When you open the door all the way and see me, I’ll be quaking and fearful and completely

under your command.”

“Who knew I could control the male world simply by talking dirty to them. In my business, that’s good to know.”

Russell laughed. “Sorry. It only works in sex role games.”

“And American politics.” Tessa thought about being able to command Russell to do anything she liked, well, almost anything. “Can we forget the other stuff on the buffet and go straight to game night?”

Russell wagged his finger. “And miss out on the wonderful toys I’ve

brought you? Such wonderful lessons, lost because you can't wait to order me around." His eyes crinkled with amusement. "The night is young. We have time for it all."

"How does that feel?" Russell asked.

Tessa was sprawled on her back, legs flung apart. "It's cool, but..." she started wiggling. "It's starting to heat up. Tingle."

“That’s what stimulating gel does. A little dab rubbed on your clit will light a fire under your arousal.” He handed the little bottle to Tessa. “The peppermint and menthol make the tingle. The gel wakes up the nerves and increases the blood flow to your clit. Bumps up the sensitivity and helps amp up your arousal. Do you like it?”

“Yeah. It’s not overpowering, but it just feels like a friendly little goose, if you know what I mean.”

“Keep this by your bed. If your lover needs a little help getting your fire lit, have him apply it. Just

a little, though. Once it's on there you can't rinse it off."

"What's next?" Tessa was beginning to feel like a five-year-old on Christmas morning. And between the light pulsation of the vibe buried inside and her tingling clit, she needed to unwrap some presents soon.

"Roll over and stick your ass in the air."

Tessa hesitated.

"You've already met this guy," he said, lubing up Tessa's butt plug.

Russell took his time. He

massaged her hole and nibbled her earlobe until her muscles relaxed and he was able to fully insert the little plug with no discomfort. "Don't ever let your lover rush you on this," he whispered into her ear. "It should never hurt, and if it does, it's not being done right or you're not in the mood for it."

"Umm, it's making the vibe inside feel bigger. More powerful."

"That's the plan. And when I turn up the speed..." Russell moved the vibrator to mid-strength with pulse.

"Ooh." Tessa touched her mound, in search of her clit, which

was still tingling from the gel. "I need to go."

"To the bathroom?"

"No. Here!" She tapped the top of her mound. "Help me."

Russell chuckled. "Not so fast. You've got to give what you can to your lover." Russell pulled Tessa's hand off her mound and placed it on his throbbing penis. He reached for the tube of lubricant and squirted some in Tessa's hand. "Rub me. I'll tell you how fast by changing the speed of your vibe. Let's see who comes first."

Russell lowered the vibe speed

and Tessa groaned, but matched her hand speed to the vibrator's. "Firmer grip," he said, and when Tessa complied he turned her vibe one setting higher. They matched each other; as Russell became more excited he excited Tessa by cranking up her vibrator. When they got to the vibrator's highest setting, Tessa was begging for relief. The vibe and gel had stimulated her, but her clit needed direct pressure.

Just as Tessa was sure she would die of frustration, Russell took her swollen clit in his fingers. He worked it faster and firmer

while Tessa did the same with Russell's shaft. When Tessa screamed and jerked, Russell squirted his seed onto her mound. He caught his breath, dipped his finger into the milky liquid on her pubic mound, and massaged her slit with his semen.

"I'm finished, for the moment, but you're not," he said.

Russell pulled the vibrator out and inserted one, two and then three of his fingers inside. With the butt plug and three of Russell's fingers in her, Tessa felt full. She was still twitching from her orgasm, but Russell refused to let

her wiggle out of his grasp.

“There’s no reason you can’t come again. As long as you’re wet, or lubed, have your lover insert as many fingers as comfortable and curl them up like he’s scratching an itch up here.” He pressed a spot inside Tessa and she felt sparks. “That’s your G Spot. It’s no mythical. And if you talk dirty to me, I’ll make you come again.” He scratched her itch again, and Tessa moaned.

“Since when is a moan a dirty word? Come on, give what you can to get what you need. I want to hear some dirty bedroom talk. It excites

me.”

Tessa wanted another orgasm more than she wanted a clean mouth. The problem was, she had a pretty limited, and boring, vocabulary. She gave it a try.

Russell moved his fingers in and out, teasing the G Spot without providing enough stimulation to bring Tessa to climax. He said, “Really? ‘Please fuck me’ is the best dirty talk you’ve got?” He found her spot and began to work it again, watched as she neared another orgasm, and then moved his fingers from the target. “Try again, Tessa.”

“If I still had your dick in my

hand I'd strangle it! Make me come or I'll find it and show you I mean it."

Russell beamed. He found Tessa's G Spot and was still smiling when she came so hard she ejaculated.

“I thought that was a myth,” Tessa said a minute later, embarrassed by the clear fluid that spurted from her vagina.

“Most women live their life without coming hard enough to squirt. How’d it feel?”

“Like a tsunami. No control. Didn’t want any either.”

Russell gathered Tessa in his arms and placed a kiss on her forehead. “Congratulations. That’s quite an accomplishment.”

“Your accomplishment,” Tessa said, “I couldn’t have done it

without you."

"I've a fabulous skill set, if I say so myself." He grinned. "Work with your man. With practice, he'll be able to do the same."

Russell got up. "I'm going to clean myself up a little, then I'm going to go get some fresh wine." He winked. "Freshen yourself up while I'm gone. Remember to rip off that lace. I want to see those nipples like headlights on a '57 Chevy."

"Yes sir."

"And don't forget to put the lipstick on. I'm looking forward to

seeing it on my big, hard cock.”

“I’ll be ready.”

Russell put the Do Not Disturb sign on the door and left. Tessa heard him whistling as he headed to the elevator.

She wasn’t sure she’d have time for a shower, so Tessa washed between her legs with a warm, wet washcloth. Russell had removed her butt plug earlier and walked her through the proper way to clean and sanitize it. Now, Tessa washed her anus. It wasn’t sore at all, and she smiled with the memory of such fullness, thanks to her little plug with training wheels. Who’d

have guessed?

Initially, Tessa thought sexual role games, fantasy play, scenarios--whatever you wanted to call them, were silly. But the idea grew on her as Russell explained them. One of the biggest problems she and Mark had was a sex life so bland it had no life, hence his need to enjoy more flavorful sex with other women. Tessa was determined not to make that same mistake again, and not just for her guy, but for herself as well. If role playing added flavor to a relationship, she sure as hell was going to learn how to sprinkle on some spice.

“But how?” she said out loud, as she tugged the black peek-a-boo lace from the top of her bra. With the lace off, her nipples were completely exposed. “Like headlights on a ‘57 Chevy,” she said, thinking of Russell. Her bra, her exposed nipples, and the black garter and stockings were a start. But something was missing.

“My fuck-me shoes!” Tessa said, trotting to the bed where the shiny red high heels lay abandoned. She put them on, and slipped around inside them. As long as she didn’t walk fast, they were steady enough.

The first time Mark had talked

dirty to her was on her honeymoon night. It terrified her. He tried again, now and then, during their first year of marriage but he stopped when dirty words turned Tessa even colder. "I'm going to change that," she said to her reflection in the mirror. "Give what you can and get what you need."

Still looking in the mirror, she tried on a few phrases.

"I want your dick!"

It reminded her of the old recruitment slogan, even if she wasn't Uncle Sam, and it had the added benefit of sounding moronic.

She put her hands on her hips, in what she hoped was a provocative pose, and said, "Fuck my pussy."

On rare occasions, usually when something went very wrong with her business, she used the word fuck. Except as a young child, and only when referring to furry little felines, she'd never used the word pussy. It felt ridiculous to do so now, especially since she was hardly referring to a four-legged creature. She felt utterly bizarre and that rubbed off on her delivery. Both syllables of the word came out muffled and ashamed.

“Pussy needs a little work.”

Tessa freshened her hair and makeup, laid on a heavy coat of Russell's red lipstick, and loosened the see-through kimono so it gapped open at the top, allowing her 'headlights' complete visibility. “At least I can get that right,” she said, smiling. “Oops.” She'd smeared red lipstick on her front tooth and had to tissue it off. If the lipstick transferred from her lips that easily and with such indirect contact, she could only imagine what Russell would look like once she took him into her mouth. She blushed.

“When are you going to grow up and stop blushing every time you have a sexy thought?” she asked the reflection.

The reflection turned a deeper shade of pink.

“It’s hopeless!” she screamed.

A knock on the door interrupted her outbreak. “Tessa?”

Russell was here and she wasn’t sexed up enough. The outside, yes. The stuff that required her spirit and her mind, not so much. Tessa took a deep breath and willed her introvert into silence.

“Yes,” she called through the

door. "Russell, you better be ready for me." She reached for the door knob. "With a bottle of red wine in one hand." She pulled on the door and it opened two inches. "And a big, juicy cock in the other." She yanked the heavy door all the way open, juttred her hips like the stripper had taught her, and thrust her nearly naked boobs front and center.

It was not red wine in his hand; it was a bouquet of red roses.

And it was not Russell holding them.

The man behind the roses stared at Tessa. His eyes started at her bright red lips, moved to her breasts and traveled down to her crotch, clearly without underwear and only subtly covered by the black see-through kimono. His face turned as red as Tessa's shiny high heels and the roses he carried.

"David?" Tessa said, mouth open in horror.

"Tessa?" he said, eyes wide as if he was watching a nightmare come to life.

Tessa pulled the kimono over

her breasts and said the first thing her frozen brain came up with. "I wasn't expecting you."

"Clearly not."

Tessa winced. "What are you doing here?" Her voice began to quiver.

"I thought I was welcome. Your email...I heard you shout, something about being hopeless. I was afraid..." The redness in his cheeks began to fade, replaced by angry dark sparks in his blue eyes. "Obviously I needn't have worried."

"It's not what you think," Tessa

said. "Let me put a robe on and we can talk." She motioned for David to come inside.

He shook his head and didn't move. "I obviously made a mistake with you. You're not who I thought you were." He handed Tessa the flowers. "I don't know who Russell is, but maybe he can tell you you're not hopeless. Me? I'm not so sure."

David turned and headed for the elevator. He walked as if there was a fire at his back and the flames were about to engulf him.

"Wait!" Tessa screamed, following him. She only made three steps before her right foot slipped

out of the high heel and she fell to the carpet. By the time she recovered, David was in the elevator and on his way down to the lobby.

Tessa pulled her shoes off and ran to the elevator. She realized she couldn't appear in the lobby half naked, and when she got back to her room, she realized she was locked out.

"Fuck!" she wailed. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

“What’s this?” Russell said, the smile evaporating when he saw Tessa huddled on the floor in front of the door.

She looked up. Black tracks of mascara-laden tears were hardened on her cheeks. Her eyes were red. Her face was pale.

“What happened?”

Russell jammed his key card into the lock, pushed open the door and lifted Tessa to her feet. He sat her in a chair, grabbed a fluffy bathrobe and placed it over her. “Are you hurt?”

Her heart felt like it had been smashed by a runaway bus. Did that qualify?

"I thought it was you at the door."

"Did someone hurt you?" Russell's face tightened and his hand gently lifted Tessa's robe. He was clearly looking for signs of sexual assault.

"Yes. But not the way you think. And it was my fault."

"Tessa, look at me." Russell kneeled down in front of her and looked into her eyes. "Did someone touch you?"

She shook her head, no.

Russell took a deep breath.
“Okay. Tell me what happened.”

“I just lost David.” She burst into tears, deep racking sobs that threatened to choke her.

Russell got her a glass of water and coaxed her to calm down until she was under control. “David is the guy you met online. The one you hoped to meet in a month or two.”

Tessa nodded her head.

“He was here?”

Tessa told Russell about the email she had sent when she was

feeling lonely. "I guess I sounded kind of bad, and I said something like, I wish you were here. He knew about the problem with my husband. And the rape. And the attempted suicide." Tessa took the tissue Russell handed her and blew her nose. "He got worried about me, so he hopped on a plane."

"He flew to Australia for a woman he'd never actually met. Because she sounded a little depressed and he was worried for her?"

"Yes."

"Shit. Sounds like a good man with bad timing."

Tessa started to cry again.

“Did you explain...” Russell had a momentary loss of words.

“Did I explain why I opened the door to someone named Russell wearing fuck-me clothes while ordering him to give me his big, juicy cock?” Tessa wiped another tear from her eye. “No. I’m not sure I could have, but I didn’t get the chance. He ran like his ass was on fire.”

“Well, then we’ll have to find him. Even if the explanation doesn’t fix things you owe it to yourself and him to try.”

“I could call him.”

Tessa fished out her phone and dialed. David’s phone rang, unanswered. Her expression went from scared-hopeful to just plain scared. “I don’t know where he went or how to get in touch with him.”

“Maybe the staff downstairs put him in a cab. Maybe someone knows where he’s staying.” Russell patted her hand. “Are you okay while I go downstairs and see what I can find out?”

Tessa nodded and Russell practically ran out the door. Ten minutes later, he returned. “Had

some luck," he said, sitting in the chair next to Tessa. "David was really upset when he got to the lobby desk."

"And you call that luck?" Tessa felt like poking him with the stiletto heel that tripped her.

"Of sorts. He told the desk clerk that he had intended to book a room here, but that his plans had changed. The clerk knew David had come to see a lady guest, because he asked for your room number when he first arrived, and he was carrying roses."

Tessa's lip began to quiver and the only way to stop from crying

again was to bite it.

“The clerk didn’t give out your room number; instead he had staff deliver the flowers. But it would have been easy for David to follow the roses to your door. Anyway, when David left, the clerk felt bad for him. Gave David a recommendation, even called the other hotel to confirm they had rooms available.”

“Where’s David?”

“The Randal. A boutique hotel about ten minutes from here.”

Tessa stood up. “So take me there.”

“Tessa, it’s your call. I’ll drive you to the Randal whenever you like. But I suggest you think this through. It’s,” he looked at his watch, “nine o’clock. David’s spent hours in an airplane, probably hasn’t eaten a proper meal, and just had a huge, unpleasant shock. He’s not going anywhere tonight, especially if he doesn’t suspect you’ll come looking for him. Let him lick his wounds tonight, eh? While he’s doing that, you figure out how to explain what he saw in a way that he’ll understand, and maybe forgive. Then tomorrow morning, before he’s up and out,

I'll drive you over to the Randal. You can wait in the lobby and catch him when he leaves his room."

"What if he won't listen to me?"

"He might not. You need to be prepared for that."

"I know not every guy would react the same, but if it were you, what would work best?"

"You're right, not every guy's the same. What might work with me might not do a damn thing for David."

"Tell me anyway."

Russell thought a moment. "I'm not sure a night of licking my

wounds would give me enough emotional distance; to be able to constructively talk with a woman I cared about who'd disappointed me in the way David was disappointed, that would take a little time. I'd probably be more receptive to an initial communication that was less threatening, less intimate."

"He's not taking calls. A note?"

Russell nodded. "Maybe. A note or an email could be read in private. Slowly and without any need to control emotions."

Tessa thought emails were too easy to delete without reading, and

too impersonal. "I like the idea of a handwritten note. I'll figure out what to say tonight and you can drop me at the Randal tomorrow morning. I just hope he doesn't run the minute he sees me."

"You won't be wearing five inch heels tomorrow. You'd catch him." Russell ruffled her hair. "Whatever happens, you'll survive this Tessa. Believe that."

Oh how she wanted to.

After the David fiasco, Tessa was far too upset to go on as if nothing had happened. Seeing the sex toys on the table made her cringe, so using them was out of the question. Russell drew a hot bath, liberally sprinkled it with scented bath oil, and walked Tessa into the bathroom. "Soak," he said, "the warm bath will help you relax." While Tessa soaked, he closed down the sex buffet, turned down the bed, fluffed up the pillows and ordered warm cocoa from room service.

Tessa was touched.

After her cocoa, Russell crawled into bed with her. He held her until her breathing was regular and gentle. He stroked her long hair with his fingers and let her melt into his chest. They fell asleep.

The room was dark when Tessa woke. Russell's arm was still wrapped around her and he was snoring softly. How things had changed in just twenty-four hours. The first time she woke with him in her bed, she had the urge to write a lonely email to David. And look where that got her.

What could you say to a man

who flew across the globe out of concern you might be depressed enough to do something foolish, only to find you decked out like a hooker and talking like a drunken sailor to another man, or at least to someone she thought was another man. Tessa wondered what she could possibly say to David that would make him understand. Shakespeare wouldn't have the right words. Or Nicholas Sparks. Or even Dr. Phil. How was she supposed to?

Give what you can, ask for what you need.

What she could give was the

truth. What she needed was to be heard, and God willing, a chance to see what they might have together.

Tessa slipped out of bed and pulled up a chair at the desk. She took hotel stationary and a pen and began.

David,

You deserve the truth, even though telling it is very difficult. But if I can find a way to tell it, I hope you can find a way to hear it. That's all I have the right to ask.

Tessa opened her heart and

poured it on to the paper. She told David about her paralyzing fear that she was so broken she'd never be able to enjoy a healthy, loving relationship with a man. She described the horror of having that fear confirmed when traditional therapists, one after the other, failed to work for her. She confessed that the only thing that kept her from a second suicide attempt was sheer determination to do anything it took to turn her life around, that nothing was more important to her than finding joy in life and a life partner with which to share that joy. And then she told

him about Athena's Ground, what they did and how they worked.

I will understand if you think my trust in Athena's Ground is misplaced, she wrote, foolishly given to men who are paid to have sex under the pretense of helping me. From the outside, it would look like that to me. But I'm not on the outside. I'm on the inside, where I know the truth, and it is this: I needed professional sex therapists. I needed them to show me I wasn't broken. I needed them to open my eyes to the fact that I can be a loveable, passionate woman who can enjoy both love and passion. Oh my God, I needed

to know that I was not hopeless. In a short time, they opened my eyes to those truths. I hate that you were hurt. I never imagined you would show up in Australia. But as badly as I ache for causing you pain, my truth is still my truth. The sex therapy was my lifeline, and I cannot apologize for taking it. I can, and dear David I do, apologize that you got hurt in the process. If I could erase your pain, I would.

Tessa thought about sweet, funny David and his trip across the planet because he thought she was in distress. How could she not be willing to travel across the globe to

offer him a fresh start? The question was whether he'd take it. She pulled her laptop to the table and booted it up. In twenty minutes she had all the arrangements made, thanks to the magic of the internet. She logged in to the hotel's intranet and sent the documents to the printer at the concierge's desk. She'd pick them up when she finished. But what were the right words, the last David might be willing to hear from her? She wrestled with the words in her head, and her heart, and finished:

If you believe I have not been

truthful, you have given me all I deserve by reading this letter. If you believe I've been honest but you can't get past the sex therapy, then I thank you for your dear friendship and wish you well finding that special lady you seek. But David, if you believe me and accept my truth without judging me harshly for it, perhaps we can explore whether there's an 'us' in our future. I do so hope there is, and console myself with what one great writer once said. I don't remember it exact, but Pearl S. Buck once spoke of sorrow, saying it can grow into wisdom which can bring happiness, even if it doesn't bring joy. I hope my Athena's Ground experience,

which has brought me wisdom and both of us sorrow, will eventually bring us both joy.

Enclosed is my invitation to explore “us.” Perhaps underneath our current sorrow lies that joy we both seek. I so want us to find out, and hope to see you there.

Tessa

Tessa glanced at Russell, who had flopped over on his stomach, still sound asleep. She threw on the hotel's oversized robe and a pair of shoes and slipped out the door. The concierge collected her printouts

and Tessa was back in the room before Russell knew she had gone.

“Russell,” Tessa said, shaking his shoulder, “wake up.”

It was seven o'clock and Tessa had been showered and dressed for an hour. She'd done her hair and makeup. Everything about her—from her chic white jeans to her sophisticated up-do—screamed class, with a hint of glamor.

Russell opened his eyes to Tessa, who was leaned over him, staring intently.

“You look beautiful,” he said, stretching and coming awake. “Any man who didn't desire you is nuts.

But isn't it a little early to start casing David's hotel lobby?"

"I was just wondering whether I'm too late. Come on, get up."

He smiled. "In case you hadn't noticed, I am." Tessa followed his eyes to the bulge in his underwear. "I said you were desirable and I cannot tell a lie."

"Shower!" Tessa said. When Russell's bulge twitched, she added, "And make it a cold one."

While Russell got ready, so did Tessa. She read her letter to David for the tenth time. She thumbed through the printouts, obsessively

rechecking details. Everything was in order. Everything was a mess.

With his hair still wet from the shower, Tessa drug Russell out the door. "Breakfast?" he said, as Tessa pulled him past the hotel coffee shop and onto the street.

"I'm assuming there will be a coffee shop in or near David's hotel. Perhaps you can hang out there while I camp out in the lobby."

Apparently that satisfied Russell's rumbling belly. They got into his car and he pulled out of the parking lot, accelerating quickly but not quite peeling rubber. Tessa

smiled. The way to a man's heart—and his expedient adherence to a schedule—really was through his stomach.

The Randal had a small lobby marketers would describe as “intimate” and only one elevator bank. She was grateful. There was little chance David could slip past her.

“There's a little café two doors down, on the right as you exit. I'll be there if you need me,” Russell said. “When I've had some breakfast, I'll bring you something to eat. Any requests?”

“Coffee and a muffin or

croissant,” Tessa said. Her stomach was too tense to eat much, but she knew she’d need something.

There were only three small groupings of chairs in the lobby. Each group offered a couple of reasonably comfortable chairs and a small coffee or end table. Tessa took a chair with a good view of the elevators and registration desk.

Time passed slowly. It felt like Russell had been gone hours, not minutes, when he returned with a cup of coffee and a buttery croissant stuffed with bits of ham and cheese. “I’ll watch for David if you need to use the ladies room,”

he said, setting Tessa's breakfast on the end table next to her chair.

"I'm good, thanks." But his offer brought up something she hadn't considered. The presence of 'the other man' would only aggravate David, so having Russell hang out with her in the lobby wasn't an option. But she couldn't sit for hours and hours without food and bathroom breaks. "I don't think it would be smart to have you wait with me."

Russell nodded.

"But if David sleeps in, I could be here quite a while. I might need some more food and a bathroom

break or two."

"Not a problem. Hand me your cell phone." As he entered his name and cell phone number in Tessa's phone, he suggested she text him if she needed a break or had a problem.

"Where will you be?" Tessa's earlier confidence was gone, her face pale and eyes dark.

"Within a quick walk. You text and I'll come running."

Tessa munched on her croissant and sipped coffee. An hour that felt like ten passed before she recognized the person emerging

from the elevator. Her heart beat as if a wild bird was trapped inside her chest. She stepped up to David, whose back was to her as he studied a rack of tourist brochures.

“David, can we talk for a few minutes?”

David turned around to face her, and for a second Tessa thought he would run. “I think I said everything I needed to last night.”

“You may have, but I didn’t.” Tessa gently touched his hand, and he pulled it away. “Sorry.”

All the beautiful words Tessa thought she had committed to

memory were gone. As she stood before David, and the pain and anger on his face, all she had was what remained in her heart.

“I care about you. The last thing I want is to cause you pain, but I did, and for that I am deeply, deeply sorry.”

David stared, but didn't respond. Tessa thought she should be grateful he wasn't running or screaming, but something about cold silence made everything feel even worse.

“What you saw last night wasn't what you think.”

He raised his eyebrows like she'd just told him the sun didn't rise from the east.

"Well, it was what you think, but not why you think." Damn! Where were those beautiful words now? She searched his eyes, hoping for a spark of sweet David, but only saw sparks. She said the only thing she could, the unvarnished truth: "What you saw last night was me preparing for a visit from my sex therapist. A therapist, David, not a lover. None of the traditional talk therapists I saw in New York helped. I was desperate. I didn't want to try suicide again, but my

life sucked and I knew something drastic had to happen."

"And Russell is Mr. Drastic?"

Well, at least he's talking to me now, Tessa thought.

"Yes."

"I don't believe you."

"Call him." Tessa pulled out her cell phone. "Ask him what his relationship is to me." She held her phone out to David.

He hesitated, and then took the phone.

"Contact list, under Russell."

David found the list and tapped the contact.

“Tessa?” Russell’s voice. “Is something wrong?”

Tessa leaned close to the phone and spoke loudly and clearly. “I’m okay Russell. I give you permission to answer truthfully and fully every question you’re about to be asked. In fact, I beg you to.” She nodded at David and said, “Ask whatever you like.”

David looked uncomfortable but determined. When he spoke, he sounded like one alpha male growling at another.

“How do you know Tessa?”

“She is a client.”

“What kind of client?”

“I am a professional sex therapist. She is my client in that regard.”

“So you’ve had sex with her?”

“That is the goal of a sex therapist, among other things.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

Russell hesitated. Tessa leaned into the phone and, again, waived her right to confidentiality. When Russell remained silent, she pleaded, “Please tell David everything he wants to know.”

Russell cleared his throat. “Yes,

we've had sex."

"What personal connection do you have with her?"

"None. She is a client."

"When she leaves Australia, will you see her again?"

"Only if her counselor in New York believes it is therapeutic and only if Tessa wishes it. If that were to happen, Tessa would come to Australia for a limited number of sessions, as appropriate."

David stared at the phone, temporarily out of questions. Suddenly his eyes lost their fire and his face softened. "Did you help

her?" he asked.

"That's a question best answered by her. I think it would be an excellent one for you to ask."

David ended the call and handed Tessa her phone. "That could have been a setup, something your lover agreed to do to get you out of trouble with me." His words were serious, but did not sound harsh.

"It could have been. But it wasn't." Tessa held out the envelope in her hand. "I spent hours last night on this. Between crying and writing, it was quite the evening."

David didn't say anything.

"After last night, you owe me nothing, except a chance for me to tell you the truth. I wrote down everything—my truth—and I ask you, I beg you, to at least read this. You can rip it to shreds and set it on fire when you're finished, if you want to. But please, if I've meant anything at all to you, please, just read it."

Tessa inched the envelope closer to David's closed hand.

"Any time today or tomorrow. After that..." she shrugged her shoulders.

David's fingers uncurled and he took the envelope. "I'll read it. But don't count on my trust. Or forgiveness."

Tessa nodded, blinking away the tears that began to cascade down her cheek. Before her tears turned into a flood, she turned and walked into the Sydney sunshine.

DECEMBER 31st

Tessa was nervous. It was twenty-two minutes after four o'clock. The sun was low in the sky, and it would officially set in another twenty-seven minutes. It would be the last sunset of the year, the pivotal moment that paved the way for the next 365 sunsets.

After saying a sweet goodbye to Russell—how many days ago?—she boarded her Quantas flight, and re-

boarded her connection in Singapore and re-boarded again in Doha, and landed in Rome's Fiumicino Airport almost thirty hours after she stepped on the first plane in Sydney.

She'd arrived in Rome the day before, December 30th, but had resisted the urge to come here until now. She'd refused to give into temptation and check the airline and hotel, though she ached to do so. And she'd dodged the clawing fear that David was back in Chicago, wishing he'd never heard of Tessa Donovan. She forced herself to make this moment, the

last sunset of the year, the moment of truth.

Tessa looked at her watch, 4:29; the air was chill with the approach of sundown, and damp with the rain that had fallen earlier. But the unfriendly air didn't keep Romans and visitors off the streets. It was New Year's Eve. When she'd asked the concierge at her hotel for directions he had wondered why she wasn't going to the big celebration at Piazza di Popolo. Tessa had told him she hoped to meet someone at the Trevi Fountain at 4:49, official sunset.

"Three Coins in the Fountain"

her concierge said, laughing.
“Americans!”

Tessa’s lips had smiled, but her eyes had not. The concierge noticed.

“Oh. Not sure he will come?”

Tessa nodded.

“You came all the way from Australia. You are a beautiful woman. Of course he will come! After you meet, embrace, do what young lovers do, go to the party at the Piazza di Popolo and bring in the New Year with a full heart.”

Italians. Could they be any more romantic or optimistic?

Tessa clutched the bottle of Chianti. *You bring the Chianti*, David had once said in an email, *and I'll get the pizza.*

4:32 and no David. Of course, he still had time. Didn't he?

Maybe she hadn't been completely clear on her invitation. She searched her mind to recall exactly what she'd written. *Sunset, 4:49, at the Trevi Fountain*. Nothing unclear about that.

Tessa strolled around the fountain edge, dodging children and grandparents and young couples holding hands.

4:41 and still alone amongst a throng of people.

Maybe something was wrong with the airline ticket she'd purchased him. She didn't want to tie him down to a specific flight, so she'd bought an open ticket for the highest published fare. It should have covered any Qantas flight. Maybe all of them were full.

Tessa groaned, out loud, at the foolish excuses her mind was concocting. It was 4:48 and David wasn't coming. Not because he had problems with the airplane ticket. Not because the invitation wasn't clear. A tear slipped from her eye

and she juggled the Chianti bottle to wipe it away.

4:49. 4:53. 4:55.

David wasn't coming.

There was no 'us.' Not even the possibility of one.

The rain started again and Tessa reached for the hood on her slicker. As she juggled the wine and the jacket, her cell phone chirped.

"Who's texting me now," Tessa said, dropping the hood of her slicker and reaching for her phone. It would be *Happy New Year!* from the girls in the office or her exercise

partner from the gym. She'd have to text back the same, and the thought annoyed her. Pretending you're fine when you're not is a bitch.

The text turned out to be a photo. There were no words, just a picture of two pizza boxes.

"What?" Tessa said.

Tessa stepped out from the clutch of people at the fountain edge and scanned the crowd. She looked up, towards Quirinale Palace and down along Via delle Muratte.

You bring the Chianti and I'll

bring the pizza, Tessa remembered from an old email.

“David?” she screamed at the top of her voice. His name sounded like a sob. “Are you here?”

A million people surrounded the Fountain, and only one mattered.

Tessa began plowing through the crowd, twisting her head from right to left. Searching for a glimpse of the man she didn't want to lose.

“David!” she screamed, so loudly a little boy next to her put his hands over his ears. “Where are

you?"

"Right behind you."

Tessa whirled around. In front of a face were two pizza boxes. The boxes lowered slowly, inch by inch, to reveal damp brown hair, sparkling blue eyes, and a smiling, sensual mouth.

"I didn't know what kind you'd want," he said, jiggling the pizza boxes, "so I got two. It took longer than I expected."

Tessa threw her arms around him, crushing both boxes between their chests. Her words were swallowed by huge, ragged sobs.

“I don’t know where this will go,” David said, his lips pressed against Tessa’s ear. “But I’m committed to finding out.”

Tessa pulled back to face him. At the Trevi Fountain, in the fading moments of the last sunset of the year, she pressed her lips against his and kissed David as softly as the gentle rain falling around them.

David accepted her kiss. Then he pulled away, wiped the single tear that had formed in his eye, and returned to Tessa’s lips with a kiss of his own. To Tessa, it tasted of pain and forgiveness, passion and patience and, most of all, hope.

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