

CHAPTER 1



The redhead sprawled on the warm boulder, feeling lazy as she thought about her life and how much it had changed recently. She was comfortable basking in the sun, with a blanket under her to cushion the rock and a thick layer of sunblock to keep her from burning. In the background, the loud roaring of water crashing into a still pool from several falls was punctuated by the cries of native birds. There were no manmade noises to distract from nature's soundtrack out here in the secluded grotto, and she felt completely at peace for the first time in a long while.

Just a short time after her greatest sadness, she was now experiencing the deepest sense of contentment she could recall in her adult life. It felt surreal, like it shouldn't even be possible. But then nothing about this was normal, not when she'd gone through such a turbulent couple of weeks and come out the other side with a new dominant lover, and the most amazing secret—something right out of a science fiction novel.

When Christopher had dumped her and then suggested she take their planned special anniversary trip alone to clear her head, she'd agreed only because she didn't know what else to do. It was paid for, and she had the vacation time booked from work, so why not?

But she'd expected to spend the entire week moping around the ship being miserable. She hadn't expected to run into a handsome stranger who seemed built from a checklist of her deepest desires.

He was tall and handsome, with a strong jaw line and an expressive face. His eyes were a beautiful dark brown and filled with both compassion and humor. But physical attributes weren't what had attracted her to him. She liked how he looked; of course, she did, but she wouldn't have cared if he was ugly. What reeled her in from the moment she set eyes on him was the aura of dominance he exuded without even trying—the way he took charge of her from the moment they met and started guiding her towards healthier choices.

It wasn't just an attitude, either. He was the real thing, and he'd proved it the first night they'd met by giving her a blistering spanking that had her sitting uncomfortably in her seat the next morning. He had no patience with reckless behavior that could have cost her life, and he'd made that clear with his hand and then a good dose of her own hairbrush. Not that it had been nonconsensual; she'd asked him to give her what he thought she deserved, and he had—in spades.

It had only been a few days since they'd met, and she was already head over heels for him. She'd never thought it was possible to fall for someone so fast; she certainly never had before this. It wasn't just rebound lust; she knew what *that* felt like. This was different. It was like they had some deep connection that had clicked into place the moment they'd set eyes on each other. If she believed in such things, she'd say it was fate. It had the feel of something that had been predestined, and the level of happiness she was feeling right now only made it more obvious how miserable she'd been before she met Jack.

She'd like to say that it was only the past couple of weeks she'd been unhappy, then she could blame it on Christopher for dumping her without warning, but the truth was she'd been feeling unsettled

even before that. His nonstop pushing for her to give up her own place and move in with him had her constantly on edge, and she'd never been comfortable with the way he handled it when she didn't comply with his desires fast enough. In his annoyance, he often cut her out of his life for a day or two—sometimes longer, and it felt cold and unreasonable to her. Of course, it usually made her desperate to please him and win back his affection—which was the point of withholding his affections. The only thing she'd refused to give in on was moving in with him, and that one thing was too much for him to handle.

There was a big part of her that wished she'd put the pieces together before he ended their relationship, so she could have left him, instead. It would still have been heartbreakingly painful, but at least, she'd have had some warning that way. Instead, she'd been half-expecting a marriage proposal when she'd showed up for their last date, only to get dumped. At the time, she'd thought her issues with him were small, that they were things she'd get used to in time, because, eventually, she'd give in to his demands, as she always did.

It wasn't until she met Jack and spent all those hours pouring out her sadness into his willing ear, she'd realized just how unhappy she'd been. The deep depression she'd found herself submerged in wasn't just because she'd been thrown away by her dominant; some of it was anger at herself for letting things get that far. She wasn't experienced at that kind of relationship. Christopher had been her first dominant, the first one to fulfill all those fantasies she'd been having for as long as she could remember, and she'd kept pushing away the signals that something deeper was wrong with their relationship, because she had nothing to compare it with.

Until now—Jack was everything she'd always thought a dominant partner should be. He was kind, he listened to her when she talked and took *her* needs into account. Best of all, he actually *wanted* to know what she desired, what excited her, and he had an

uncanny way of knowing exactly what to do to take her to that needy submissive place.

Christopher kept her turned on pretty much all the time, but it was more that everything was new and exciting when she'd first started exploring with him, rather than any special effort on his part. He'd definitely felt that it was her place to excite him, *not* the other way around, and most of the time, that had been enough, because it made her feel submissive to please him. She thought that kind of one-sided care had already started to wear thin, and she could recognize it now, even if she'd missed it then.

Of course, there might have been some self-defense going on, as well. After all, she'd made the poor choice of dating and submitting to her boss when she really couldn't afford to lose her job. No doubt the fact that she'd be losing more than just a dominant and lover had played into her need to please him, but she was feeling much more centered now. As she lay there, she toyed with the idea of abandoning her empty life back home to stay with Jack. It really didn't matter that she'd only known him a few days, she could see giving it all up for him. Of course, that was just a daydream. Committing to that course would be hard for her, and she knew that actually doing it would be a monumental struggle. Just agreeing to move across town to Christopher's house had been beyond her.

She hated to admit it, after all the pain she'd been through, but breaking off their relationship had probably been the best thing Christopher could have done for her. If he hadn't, she'd never have met Jack or learned how much better submission could be. She sighed and sat up, leaning back on her arms as she looked over at him. His nude body had a healthy tan going, and unlike her, he wasn't in danger of burning to a crisp if he lay out too long. Though it did amuse her that all of his skin was uniformly tanned. She wondered if he made it a habit to lie around naked in the sun.

"You know, I can feel you watching me," he said. An arm slung

over his eyes to keep the sun out also kept her from seeing his expression.

She laughed. "I was just wondering if you make it a habit of sunbathing in the nude. No tan lines," she pointed out.

"I tell you I'm a time traveler, from the past, and the only question you have for me is about my tanning habits?" He snorted a laugh and sat up. "Being able to travel in time has a few perks, kitten; one is the ability to spend as much time somewhere as I like. When I find beautiful places like this, I tend to visit a lot, and why bother wearing clothes when no one is around to see, right?" He stood, stretching out a kink in his back as he got to his feet and held out a hand to her. She took it and let him pull her up.

"I'm getting a little overheated; join me in a swim?" he suggested. Before she could reply, he'd dived off the rock and into the cool water below. She leaned over to watch him bob to the surface before she jumped in after him, letting out a loud squeal as she hit the water. After baking herself for an hour, the cold water was a shock and she splashed around breathlessly until her body adjusted.

They spent a pleasant little while swimming, enjoying each other's company as they paddled around the pool, occasionally splashing or trying to duck each other under the water like carefree children. Before long, she found herself in his arms, holding on to him as she pressed against his warm body. She wrapped her legs around his waist and let his strong legs keep them afloat while she stared into his eyes.

"There are *so* many things I want to ask you that I don't even know where to start," she admitted, thinking back to his comment on the rocks. "I mean...I believe you. You've been honest with me from the start, and I can't imagine any point to making up a story like that." She paused. "Unless you're crazy and believe it yourself, of course, in which case, well, you seem pretty sane to me, and if you're crazy I must be, too, because it all makes perfect sense."

He chuckled. "I'm not insane, but if I was, I guess I'd probably

still say that. I expected you to want some proof. To be honest, it took me off guard when you just accepted it," he said, rolling his eyes, as if she'd believed him just to throw off his plans.

"As proof goes, the butterflies were pretty fucking compelling. I know a little bit about the monarch migration, from watching the science channels, you know? I can't figure how you could have known they'd get pulled off course like that unless—" she trailed off.

"Unless I had a way of knowing the future?" he asked, with a hint of amusement. He regarded her thoughtfully, as they spun in the water with slow, lazy circles. "That's why I chose to show you; I thought it would raise some questions in your mind so that when I told you, you'd be more open to the idea. Guess it worked better than I expected," he said.

"I just don't understand how you knew all the other stuff. The private beaches, the local restaurants, the best tourist traps. I mean, how often have you visited here?" Her eyes narrowed, thinking about the many small clues he'd given her.

"As many times as it took," he replied.

Her head tilted, confused. "As many times as it took for what?" she asked, and then before he could reply, she switched tracks, a look of complete bewilderment on her face as she asked, "Jack, why me? What could possibly be so special about me that you'd go to such trouble to make me happy?"

He sighed; it was as though he'd been waiting for the question. He visibly debated his reply and she waited, holding her breath to see if he would answer. "Remember I told you there were some things I wouldn't tell you until I knew you were ready?" he asked finally.

She frowned then pursed her lips. She had a feeling she wasn't going to like this. "Yes," she admitted with reluctance.

"This is one of those things," he said. There was a hint of firmness to his words that seemed to indicate it would be best if she didn't press, but she'd never been one to heed warnings like that.

"Jack, look, you've already told me you're a time traveler, what else could you possibly tell me that would upset me?" she demanded. Her eyes glittered with annoyance, tired of the secrets and desperate to know everything about this exciting mystery he'd shared with her, especially since it clearly involved her.

"If I answered that, I'd be telling you, now wouldn't I, Katherine?" he asked, one eyebrow going up. His use of her full name pulled her up short, giving her a little nervous flip low in her belly, and she hesitated before going any further.

When they'd met, she'd introduced herself as Katherine, because her ex-lover hadn't been a fan of nicknames in general, and he'd thought 'Kitty' was far too childish for a grown woman. She'd gotten into the habit of going by her full name to please him. Jack had ferreted out her real preference after her first punishment at his hand and begun to call her Kitty, the way her friends used to, and that had quickly extended to calling her kitten most of the time. She had to admit she loved that. There was something sweetly submissive about being his kitten. Now, when he reverted to her whole name, it brought her up short and made her worry she was getting herself in trouble.

She arranged her bottom lip in a pout, hoping that a sad look would get her further than arguing, but he just chuckled. "That won't work, either, darlin'. Sorry, how about I tell you something else, instead?" he suggested.

Sighing, she nodded; there was a lot she wanted to know, and some information was better than nothing. "Fine, but it better be interesting or I'm going to throw a fit so loud they'll hear me back on the ship," she warned him in a huffy tone.

He snorted, "Do you mean they'll hear your having the tantrum? Or that they'll hear you howling afterwards when I blister your ass for throwing one?" he asked. His tone was one of curiosity but the pointed look he gave her made her swallow hard and drop her eyes from his.

There was that taking charge thing he did so well; she

wondered if he realized how it affected her. Just a small threat and her body was reacting. Something low inside tightened and her cheeks flushed. If the cool water hadn't already made her nipples hard, his words would have done it, but they seemed to gain extra sensitivity as they brushed against his chest.

"I meant the first," she grumbled, a little embarrassed and not meeting his eyes as she tightened the grip around his neck and buried her face against his shoulder.

He laughed. "Of course you did. Well, I have no idea what you'd find interesting, but if you can think of some more questions we can try and find one I can answer. How's that?" he asked. His hand slid down her back, cupping her ass as he turned them towards the falls and began to kick, propelling them backwards towards a ledge at the far end of the pool. The loud crashing of water was slightly less overwhelming there, making it easier to talk.

While he pointed them in that direction, she mulled over the thousand or more questions crowding her mind. There were so many things, both emotional and scientific, that she wanted to know, and she debated whether it was worth avoiding the emotional ones. He'd seemed sad at times when he spoke about his past, and she didn't want to trigger painful memories, but at the same time...learning about *him* was more interesting at the moment than learning how he did what he did.

She sighed. "It's hard to decide what to ask first," she said. "I-I'd really like to know why you can't go back and see your family but I-I don't want to bring you down."

He'd told her some stories about them, about the farm they'd owned, and especially about his sister, Emily, earlier in the afternoon after they'd made love in the shallow basin under one of the smaller falls, but she'd let him reminisce then without asking many questions

"My family? Ah." He was silent, but it wasn't the kind of silence that made her feel he was drawing away. It was more like a contemplative quiet. He took his time answering, and long before

he'd come up with the words, they'd reached the far end. It was shallower there, and a ledge halfway out of the water provided a seat for them. By the time she'd settled herself comfortably next to him, he was ready.

"I'm sorry," he began, making her look up in confusion. "I've never talked to anyone about my past before, for obvious reasons; today is a first, and it's a little hard. You'll remember I told you it started when I was four and that my parents were surprised, not because I was a traveler, but because they already had a child who traveled and two was unheard of?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes, and your grandfather was one, too. He taught your sister before he died, and she taught you, right?" she clarified.

"Exactly. Before me, there was always only one. One in every generation; I guess I'm an anomaly. Most of what I know, what *we* knew, came from old family journals and stories. There hasn't exactly been anything you'd call scientific research into what we could do, and sometimes what we think we know is—well, wrong." He stared down into the water that came just over his waist, legs kicking lazily under the surface as he spoke.

"So, you're basically just guessing at all of this?" she asked.

"Yep, pretty much," he agreed. "Though my sister and I were able to do a lot of experimenting together. I think we learned quite a bit more than our predecessors." He seemed proud of that, though there was a hint of melancholy, too.

"Then why can't you go back?" She leaned against his shoulder, taking his hand and holding it under the water.

He tilted his head to smile at her. "You can't go back to the exact time and place you've been. I'm not sure what would happen if you collided with an earlier self, but we were warned it would be bad. It can be very difficult to pinpoint an exact time and place to go, especially in the beginning, so to keep from having any accidents, we were told to leave at least a year gap between trips home."

He paused, and she was about to ask another question when he began again, "Apparently, the first few years of a traveler's life are

the most critical. Many of them vanish and never return. No one really knows what happens, but it's assumed they just don't survive —another reason my parents grieved when they realized I was one, too. The earliest trips are run purely by instinct, and if I'd returned too soon..." He shrugged as if unconcerned by the thought, but her breath caught in her throat and her chest tightened just thinking about how many near disasters there must have been.

"That's awful!" she blurted.

"Yes, I think, in a way, my parents felt like they'd already lost me the moment they realized. They were always guarded with their emotions with us, but it was worse with me. You see, once Emily began traveling, they pinned all their hopes and affection on me. It wasn't just a double loss, it was like they lost everything," he said.

She wondered if he still felt pain over that. If losing his parents' love still made him sad. If so, he didn't show it in his voice, but she leaned closer into him, wanting to offer what comfort she could for that long-ago pain. "That must have been rough," she said softly.

"It was, at first, but I had my sister and that made up for a lot. She understood me more than they ever could have, anyway, and we had a lot of fun traveling the world. Each time we came home, we were older, and more time had passed. Our parents started to treat us like casual visitors more than family and then, one day, they were gone. We came home to find the farm abandoned. They'd been struck by a sickness, and with no one to take care of them, they died. At least, that's what we were told," he explained.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry! I can't imagine what that must have been like for you," she said, horrified that she'd even brought up the topic at all.

"Don't be. It was a long time ago, and it doesn't matter now. You ask why I can't go home? Well, I supposed we could have risked trying for an earlier visit but, by then, we both felt very little emotional attachment to anyone but each other, and knowing how things turned out..." He shook his head. "Can't think what I'd say to

them. Better just to leave it in the past where it belongs," he said with a tone of finality.

"Yes, but...but couldn't you have warned them that they were going to get sick? Maybe saved them?" she asked tentatively.

"Maybe. Thing is, it's hard to change things once you know they've happened. Fate, or whatever you want to call it, usually finds a way to keep you on the path you're meant for. Other times I've tried changing things; it usually didn't work out well." He shifted suddenly toward her on the ledge and scooped her into his lap, wrapping his arms around her waist and squeezing her in a tight hug. There were some hidden emotions there that he wasn't explaining, but she could feel it in the tenseness of his body.

As much as she wanted to know more, she pushed her curiosity aside for the moment, turning instead to loop one arm around his neck, so she could lean in and press her lips against his. It was meant to be a gentle kiss, one of reassurance, but he responded with a frantic hunger that surprised her. She started to pull away, eyes widening at the way his mouth fastened on hers, his tongue thrusting hard between her lips, but already, she was responding. A throbbing pulse started deep in her core, and after a second, her body relaxed.

She melted against him, turning until she straddled his hips, and then returned the kiss with equal passion. With her backside seated firmly on his lap, she could feel him begin to stir to life underneath her. As his shaft hardened with interest, it pressed against her and she shifted, grinding down against his hot flesh. There, in the sun-warmed shallows, the water wasn't chilly enough to cool his ardor and there was nothing keeping them from making love.

Except, she could still see that remnant of pain in his eyes, or maybe it was fear. She couldn't tell, and she didn't know exactly what had caused it; she was pretty sure it wasn't lingering feelings for his parents but, rather, something he was choosing not to tell her. She was tired of the secrets, but since he'd been so forthcoming already that day, she really didn't feel like she could argue his

decision to hold things back. Especially when he looked so pensive; she decided something else was called for.

His arms were wrapping around to pull her tighter against him while he kissed his way down the side of her neck, and that's when she made her move. In a flash, her slippery wet body had squirmed out of his lap, twisted, and given him a hard shove off the ledge and into the water. He came up sputtering. "Hey!" he shouted at her as she clambered up onto dry rock.

She stood there, hands on her hips, legs akimbo, and looked down at him laughing. "How are you going to catch me from there!" she called down to him.

His eyes were narrowed with irritation and he reached up to slick his sopping hair back, getting it out of his face as he climbed back on the ledge with a determined glare. She could see exactly why he was so annoyed when he lifted himself out of the water and his rampant shaft sprang up, hard and ready. She'd interrupted just as things were about to get very hot and left him all bothered.

Her eyes glittered with amusement as he stalked her across the rocks. Naked and barefoot, neither of them could go very fast, but then she wasn't really trying to get away from him. Just give him enough reason to spank her ass when he caught her. She didn't have to *let* him catch her, he was surprisingly fast and agile, and she didn't get very far. But she held him off long enough to call out a few bratty teasing remarks, ensuring he knew exactly why she was doing this.

By the time he caught her, he was struggling to keep the annoyed look on his face, and they both knew he wasn't mad; it had become a game of chase and they were both enjoying the play, knowing how it would end. She pretended to stumble near their towels and packs, and he scooped her up and dropped her over his shoulder. "Well, well, look what I caught? Is this a mermaid on dry land?" he inquired. His voice was full of suppressed laughter as he slapped his hand down hard on her wet backside.

She yelped, legs kicking with far more drama than the sting

warranted. "I'm not a mermaid; do I look like I have a fish tail to you?" she demanded. She was dangling upside down with an excellent view of his firmly muscled ass, and she couldn't resist reaching down and giving him a pinch.

He didn't comment on the pinch but snorted at her response. "Nope, the only tail I see is definitely human, which is good, because I intend to spread those legs of yours wide later, but first..." His hand came down again, leaving another blazing handprint and then he was swinging her off his shoulder and setting her on her feet.

"Oh? Is that the plan? Catch a poor innocent girl, minding her own business, enjoying a little swim, and ravish her right here on the rocks?" she demanded in a faux offended voice. One eyebrow had gone up, and she had what she probably thought resembled a judgmental look on her face—it didn't.

"Maybe. Any objections?" he asked. No longer bothering to hide his amusement at her little game, his mouth had curved into a crooked grin.

Pretending to think about it first, she finally answered, as if reluctant, "I suppose not...since we're both here and all. I mean, I have a little free time."

"A little? Oh, no, that's not going to work for me. This is going to take more than a *little* time. Guess you'll have to clear your schedule," he said firmly, and with that, he began dragging her towards a towel, sitting down crossed-legged and pulling her across his lap while she made mock protests about how busy she was.

"You're about to be busy, anyway," was all he said, and then he began to spank. There was no doubt that this was meant to be a sensual spanking; the difference between it and the punishments he'd given her before were like night and day. Instead of a blistering tempo of painful swats, he took his time. His palm coasted lightly across the rounded flesh of her ass, skin barely touching hers and then swung with a light slap. He kept the spanking slow, though the

strength behind each swat gradually increased until her ass was hot and stinging.

But he alternated between the spanking and rubbing, and every time he landed an especially hard slap to her hindquarters, he'd stop and massage the burning flesh for a moment or two. Her pale skin colored from a rosy pink to scarlet over the course of the long, slow spanking, but it never got too much to handle, and after he judged her sufficiently warmed-up, he began to add in the lightest of feathery touches along the seam where her legs were pressed tightly together.

Like a spring being released, her legs snapped apart, encouraging more of that, and he gave it to her—but not enough to get her where she wanted to go. His fingers investigated, nails dragging lightly up and down the skin of her inner thighs—teasing her by getting close to the junction of her legs and then moving away, until she was squirming and making soft little whining sounds. When she began to seem too desperate, he'd pause to land a few slaps across her rounded backside, catching her with a scooping upwards swat that made each cheek bounce.

There was something about the motion of those slaps that increased her pleasure. The way things jiggled made her moan, rocking across his lap with a soft gasp, and she could hear a little chuckle as he noticed her reaction. Suddenly, his hand was between her legs, cupping her mound and parting her lower lips so his middle finger could stroke through the soaked folds, circling her clit and wrenching a cry of pure pleasure from her.

It echoed across the water as the spanking had. The high stone walls on all sides trapped the sounds there, making them seem louder, and even the crashing of water from the falls couldn't drown them out as he brought her close to her peak. His fingers plunged inside of her, working their way in and out as she writhed across his legs. But he wasn't quite ready to let her reach climax yet. He slid his fingers from her, ignoring the way she tried to clamp her legs around them to keep them there.

"Jack! No, no, you can't stop now!" she begged, looking over her shoulder with a desperate hunger that only he could satiate. She remembered how he'd teased and teased, driving her to desperation on the ship—only to stop short of allowing her orgasm, and she was afraid he was doing it again. Of course, the first time she'd agreed, knowing that he had refused to have sex with her because she thought he'd be unable to stop and walk away when it got to that point. She'd been wrong. His willpower was made of iron and he'd done exactly what he'd promised.

The second time he'd done it, it had been something of a game. He'd wanted to keep her on edge all night so that when the evening culminated with their first full sexual encounter, she would be half-crazy with need for him—and it worked. The pay-off had been worth the delay (probably) but the wait for him to take her had seemed like an eternity, and it hadn't been nearly as much fun for her as it had been for him, but it *had* made her feel intensely submissive to be controlled like that. She just wasn't eager to experience it again so soon, but luckily, that was the farthest thought from his mind.

"Oh, I'm not stopping, kitten. Not even close," he said with a laugh. He tumbled her carefully off his lap and onto her back, with the beach towel underneath to protect her bare skin. He knelt over her body, her legs spread wide by his knees as he dragged his backpack over and pulled a condom out of a small side pocket. He seemed to have thought of everything and she watched with hunger in her eyes as he rolled the rubber sheath over his hard length.

He leaned in, bracing his weight on one arm as he covered her body with his. He reached down to guide his shaft between her legs, pressing into the slick folds to find her entrance and circling it in a teasing way that made her cry out. His mouth caught hers while it was still open, and as he pushed inside of her tight sheath, his tongue echoed the movement, thrusting between her lips. There was something satisfying about the dual sensations and her hands

came up to cup his face, holding him there as she returned the kiss with a passion that bordered on overwhelming.

He began to stroke in and out at a nice easy pace, going a little deeper each time. It was tender and without haste, and sometimes that slow lovemaking was exactly what she wanted, but today, it was not enough for her. She rolled her hips, encouraging him to go faster, deeper as her tongue danced with his. He obliged with a few hard thrusts, snapping his hips forward and sinking his hard erection deep inside of her willing flesh.

She broke the kiss to catch her breath, and he began to lick and nibble his way down the side of her neck as their bodies moved together. Shifting to give him a better angle, the sudden change caused him to slide across just the right spot. There was a spasm, a feeling of something uncoiling low in her body as a flood of warm pleasure filled her. Her walls clenched around him as they pulsed from a small orgasm and his hips jerked in response to her body squeezing rhythmically around his shaft. For a second, he was afraid it might end right there, before they'd even gotten started—so close to spilling that he froze in mid-stroke with a low groan. He pulled back after a few seconds and took a slow breath, letting it out with a rueful chuckle as he stared down into her dazzling blue eyes.

"Give me a second, kitten, or this isn't going to last very long," he warned her as he eased out of her body with an obvious reluctance that was echoed on her face. But he was only planning a short breather, just long enough to get himself under control, and as soon as he'd eased back from the edge enough, he was ready to go again. He gripped her by the hips, dragging her towards him and lifting her ass off the towel slightly so that he could plunge into her with a long, hard thrust that wrenched a cry of pleasure from her lips as she wrapped her legs around him and held on.

It didn't take him long to bring her back to the fever pitch she'd been at before he'd paused, and as he continued to move inside of her, she quickly passed that point. Her whole body seemed

enflamed as it built towards another orgasm and a deep blush spread across her skin as she writhed under him, twisting and mindless in her passion, with a halo of red hair surrounding her head and shining as it caught the sun. Her arms slid around him, clinging with a soft moan as her nails dug into his back. His hips snapped forward with deep, penetrating thrusts that drew all manner of sounds from her.

"Please, Jack, please. Yes. Right there. Yes—I'm so close, so close, Jack," she chanted in a breathy whisper. She was only vaguely aware that there were words spilling out of her mouth, a litany of nonsense punctuating the noises of pleasure she was making as she clung to him, hunching and bucking against his body with a frantic need that took all her focus. Suddenly, all the building pressure crested, and she was swept away on a tide of intense pleasure. Her legs squeezed him with an almost painful grip around the waist. He barely noticed it, because with her orgasm, her slick flesh had clenched around his shaft, making her so tight that he had to fight to move at all. The internal stroking as the orgasm pulsed rhythmically through her sheath thrust him over the edge, seeming to milk the pleasure from him. He stiffened, back arching as he thrust one more time, holding that pose until his arms shook from the strain.

When he began to move again, it was with slow, jerky motions that prolonged her pleasure and set off aftershocks, making her twitch. A laugh burst from her as she slumped back on the towel and stared up at him with a dazed look in her eyes. "That was amazing, Jack. Fuck!" she blurted.

"Thought that's what we just did?" he teased as he let his softening shaft slide from her. He caught her around the waist and rolled them to the side, so they could lie face-to-face. His breath came in halting gasps, but there was a wide grin on his face as he looked at her.

"You know what I mean; my whole body is tingling and...mmm. It was perfect," she said. She reached out to fuss with his hair. The

besotted look on her face was a spillover from all the romantic feelings her heart couldn't hold in.

It really had been the most spectacular day and she felt like nothing would ever top it. In the past, days that went a little too well had always worried her, because it seemed like when something good happened, something bad would quickly come along behind to balance things. The better the day, the worse the corresponding balance would be, but today...today, she felt like nothing could go wrong, and she sighed happily.

Jack yawned and rolled onto his back, stretching. "I'd love a long nap right about now," he said.

"Me too; it's so peaceful here and the mist from the falls keeps it cool enough for comfort despite the sun," she agreed. "Not to mention the fact that you've worn me out with your lusts, you voracious time traveler!" she added in a dramatic tone suitable for a really campy sci-fi movie.

"With *my* lusts?" he chuckled. "I don't know who you think you're fooling there, kitten, but I'm pretty sure we're a match when it comes to lust. And just who was it who decided she wanted to play a game of 'spank me if you can' hmm?" he teased.

"Okay, okay, let's call it a tie," she said as she sprawled there lazily. She was too worn out to argue, and the sun was really making a nap sound like the best idea. "Let's sleep for a little while and then do it all again," she suggested hopefully.

He laughed and sat up, shaking his head. "Much as I'd love to... we're going to need to leave before long." He tilted his head back, wincing as he looked up into the bright sky and tried to judge the time of day from the position of the sun. "Guessing it's right around four p.m. by now, so we've got a few hours before the boat leaves, but it's a hike and then a long drive back," he said.

"No, I don't want to leave yet," she whined. She rolled over on her stomach and covered her head with her arms in protest.

"There's no sense arguing about it, Katherine; we've got a ship to catch and it won't wait. But we still have a little time left. How

about if we take a quick swim to rinse off and then have a snack while the sun dries us, before we start back," he suggested, always hungry. He ignored her complaints, instead slapping a hand down firmly across her bare ass when she refused to sit up and cooperate. It was still pink from the earlier spanking and the sudden smack startled her into sitting up quickly, with a scowl on her face.

He didn't comment but one eyebrow went up in a subtle threat. The spanking she'd just had was for foreplay and it was nothing like the punishment he could dole out when necessary. With her body still thrumming and sensitive from sex, the last thing she wanted was a punishment, so she dropped the attitude immediately, sighing.

"I guess we don't have a choice," she grumbled as she got up reluctantly. She didn't want to leave their romantic haven, but he was right, the ship wouldn't wait for them. Since they didn't have too much time before they'd have to pack up, she decided to make the most of it. She jumped into the water and splashed around to rinse the sex sweat off of her body and then stroked a few laps across the deep pool. He joined her, and they had a nice, easy swim, without the racing and horseplay, before they clambered back onto the rocks to eat.

He dug through his backpack and pulled out the rest of the sandwiches and fruit he'd picked up from the shipboard kitchen. They'd packed everything up neatly with little cooling packs to keep it from being ruined by the heat, and after all the exercise they'd had, she was starving again. She ripped into her share voraciously, not bothering to make any attempt at eating in a ladylike manner.

Jack, for his part, sat back and watched her with amusement, but he didn't let that keep him from eating just as quickly, and as usual, he ate twice as much as she did, still stuffing food into his mouth long after she'd finished. He'd always eaten a lot, at every meal, and his lean frame didn't show an ounce of it. He'd explained to her at their first shared meal, he had a very fast metabolism and

had to eat a lot, or he lost muscle—but now that she knew his secret, it made her wonder.

"Hey, Jack?" she said, catching his attention between bites.

"Yeah?" He paused, then took another large bite while he waited for her to tell him what was on her mind.

"I was just wondering...all the food you eat? Is that part of your uh—" she trailed off.

"Part of the traveling thing? Yeah, it is." He hesitated and then pushed the last bite into his mouth, chewing slowly while he considered how much to tell her. There were definitely things he wasn't ready to share yet. Not because they were bad, necessarily, but because he didn't want to overload her with too much at once.

"Thing about time travel is that it takes a lot of energy. You know about the conservation of energy law?" he asked.

She shook her head; science had always interested her, but she'd been focused on other things during her college career, things that would get her a job, so she could survive on her own.

He considered how to explain things so she'd understand. "All right, well, it states that energy can't be created or destroyed. Basically, it just changes form. When you eat food, it gives your body energy which you use to do..." he waved a hand "...whatever. If you eat more food than you burn off, the energy is stored as fat instead of changing, and you gain weight. With me, with the traveling, I am constantly burning energy at a higher rate than I can keep up with, so I have to eat twice as much food." He watched her, trying to gauge how much she understood.

He'd had a little trouble understanding it himself, at first, and his education had been spotty, for obvious reasons, but when it came to things that affected him, he'd made an effort to learn. His sister, he explained, hadn't understood the science of it. She'd just taught him what she knew, that they had to eat plenty to keep them from starving. He'd had to go out on his own to learn why it was so.

"So..." She frowned as she turned this over in her mind. She tabled the questions about his education, and a lot had just cropped

up, but this was more important. "But you're not traveling now, are you still burning extra energy?" she asked slowly.

He nodded. "Always. Except when I'm home, in the time I should be in, and as I said, I don't really go back there anymore."

"But why?" One eyebrow went up, questioning. "I mean, why would it be different back then?" she clarified hastily. It didn't seem to make sense. She understood using a big burst of energy each time he traveled, but why would his metabolism constantly be working so hard?

"I'm not sure, but we always thought maybe it was because I'm not meant to be here. Possibly my body is constantly burning energy because it's fighting to hold me where I want to be, instead of snapping me back to where I belong," he said, shrugging. As he'd explained, there weren't any scientific studies to go by, only what he'd been able to learn on his own.

"It's so strange," she said finally, a frown plastered on her face as she turned it all over in her mind.

"Yep, inconvenient, too. Imagine a couple of starving little sprouts trying to beg or steal enough food to feed five kids their size. That was how it was when we were small—always searching for food, always hungry." He chuckled, and there was some actual amusement there, but she could also hear the remnants of long-ago pain and frustration.

"Well, you'll never be fat," she said. She sounded a little jealous about that; he'd never know what it was like to have to watch every calorie, the way she did.

"Nope, I can never fill my gut with enough food to get heavy. Wouldn't mind a few extra pounds, to be honest; it would make things a little easier when food is scarce." As he spoke, he'd begun packing up the remains of their lunch, mostly wrappers and debris, all the food was gone.

She sighed and shook her head. Her body had dried quickly in the sun, but her hair was still damp and clung to her skin in wet hanks, pulling a little as her head moved and she fussed with it in

irritation. "Isn't there any way to stop it? It seems like, if you're staying in one place for a while, your body would adjust to it and it would slow down," she said.

"It does a small amount, but not enough. The more I travel, the more I burn, so I try not to make trips too close together if I can help it. When it's possible, I like to stay in one place for a month or more, and after I've been settled a bit, I'll notice my appetite is slacking off some, but the weight falls off pretty quickly if I don't eat a minimum of about five-thousand calories a day," he explained.

"Five thousand? That's so much food!" she blurted. She wasn't sure why she was shocked, after all, she'd seen him shoveling it in at every meal, but she'd dieted enough in her life to know how high that number was.

"When I'm staying put. More when I travel, when I can get enough," he said, laughing. He stood up and began to get dressed.

She hated watching him tug his shorts on, knowing it was getting close to time to leave. She reached for her own clothes and then paused. "Hey! You never answered my question: Is there any way to stop it?" she asked. When he sighed and looked away, she realized it hadn't been an accident; he'd ignored it on purpose.

He didn't respond until he'd pulled his shirt over his head, slipping his arms through the sleeves and then he turned back to her with a solemn look. "I know you hate hearing this, but there are some things I'm not ready to tell you yet," he said.

She blew out a loud huff of frustration. Even now, after he'd told her the biggest secret, he was still holding back, and it frustrated her beyond belief. She was already, in the back of her head, thinking of a future life with him, but when she ran into one of these mysteries, it shook her and forced her to realize how little she actually knew about him. It was stupid, of course, falling in love with a man she'd only known for days, yet here they were. "Yeah, whatever," she snapped, scowling as she yanked her clothes back into place.

"Katherine," he said quietly. There was a firmness to his tone that pulled her up short.

She avoided his eyes as she slipped on her shoes and knelt to tie them, and she didn't respond until after she'd straightened. She almost didn't want to answer at all, afraid of her attitude getting her in deep trouble, but she knew he'd demand her attention if she tried to ignore him. "Yeah?"

"I know it bothers you that I can't tell you everything, but you said you trusted me and believed me, so I need you to remember that I'm not going to lie to you. Not telling you everything is better than lying, isn't it?" he asked.

She gave him a sharp jerk of a nod, still not looking at him, but then sighed and let her head tip back so she could see his face. "I don't want you to lie but...it's *so* frustrating," she complained.

"I know. I get it." He pulled her into his arms, wrapping her tight in an embrace. She stiffened against him at first, but slowly gave in, and her body relaxed against his. Only when she'd let go of the anger, did he speak again. "There is a way. One way, but it's not an easy thing and it would mean—well, a lot of changes. It would be a big adjustment, and it's not something I'll be able to do anytime soon. That's all I can tell you, and I'm not sure if that helps or makes it worse," he said.

She thought about it, considering. It gave her more questions, more to wonder about, but also another clue to the puzzle of Jack. "Better, I think, a little bit, anyway," she admitted.

"Good, now it's time to go and—" His eyes narrowed as he gave her a very stern look. "I'm all out of patience for attitude and sulking, so if there's any more of it, we're going to have to take the time for a little lesson on the way back. And since we're running a bit late, it will have to be hard and fast. Not something you'll enjoy at all, am I clear?" he asked.

She gulped and immediately decided she was going to be positively sunny on the way back to the jeep. "Y-yes, Sir!" she said. There were far too many sticks laying around for her to want to

push him to give her any lessons. She'd never been switched, but she'd been caned, and she hadn't liked it one bit. She wiped any sign of displeasure from her face, and he let her go with a satisfied nod.

There were no signs of their visit when they left, hiking up the steep path to the ledge above the waterfalls. She stopped there to look down longingly at the grotto. Leaving was hard, but at least, she'd been able to take a million pictures to bring home with her, and the memories of what they'd shared there would never fade—not if she lived to be a hundred would she forget this afternoon. The long sweaty hike back to the jeep, however, *that* she'd willingly erase.

The afternoon had turned sultry and a number of biting insects seemed to swarm around her, nipping at her salty skin at every chance. Between that and the hurried half-trot through the forest after his much longer legs, she had trouble keeping a cheerful disposition. It didn't take more than the occasional sharp look as a reminder that Jack was willing and able to punish her no matter where they were, though, and she managed to make it to the parking area without experiencing one of his lessons. Barely.

She spotted the lone jeep waiting for them and let out a loud cry of relief as she hurried over to drop her tote bag on the front seat. "Finally! I swear the walk back was twice as long," she complained.

"Felt like it," he agreed, wincing as he slid the heavy backpack off and dropped it in back. He took a moment to stretch. His arms reached high over his head, pulling the shirt up to reveal his belly and the trail of curling dark hairs that vanished into the waistband of his shorts.

She'd learned he was ticklish there and couldn't resist sneaking in a quick tickle. Her fingers slid under the edge of the shirt and caught the exposed skin with a little scratching motion. A laugh burst out of him and he grabbed her before she could dart away, grinning as he pulled her up tight and dropped a kiss on her forehead. "Don't start something you'll regret, kitten," he said, teasing her. Unlike the earlier threats, this one was playful, and

she twisted out of his arms and danced away, laughing without worry.

"What makes you think I'd regret it? I think you're more ticklish than I am!" she said with a smirk. She wasn't at all sure that was true; she had a few spots that were horribly ticklish, but he hadn't discovered them yet and none of them were easy to get to at the moment, so she felt confident in her bluff.

He made a sudden lunge in her direction, eyes narrowed with a fierce look, and she stumbled back a few steps, giggling and ready to run. He stopped, snorting, and shook his head. "You're lucky we've got to get on the road, or I'd have to test that," he said.

She'd count that as a win and smirked. "Sure, blame it on the time. If it makes you feel better," she said. She turned back to look at the gorgeous expanse of trees that started not far up the path and said in a more serious tone, "I do wish we could have stayed longer."

"Maybe we'll come back someday," he said. "Or maybe we'll find some place even better. There's a whole world of places for us to explore," he reminded her.

"I suppose." She sighed, "I better pee real fast before we go," she said as she ducked into the dilapidated restroom. Their vehicle wasn't big on comfort, and if the trip back was anything like the trip out, she was going to be glad of an empty bladder.

The restroom was surprisingly clean, though weathered. The cracked old mirror over the sink looked more like funhouse glass than a reflection and the water only ran cold, but it was better than nothing. She finished her business quickly and was buckled into her seat, ready to return to the ship in under five minutes.

The sun was still high in the sky, but she could tell without even looking at her phone that it was getting late. Jack was far too responsible for her to be overly concerned about missing the ship, but she couldn't help checking real fast just to make sure they were on time. She relaxed, when she realized they had a decent cushion of time before they were due to leave the dock, and settled back to find what comfort she could during the bumpy ride. It wasn't so

much the roads that were the problem, though they didn't help, but that the jeep had very little in the way of shocks.

The combination kept her awake, even though a wave of tiredness had hit her, and her eyes desperately wanted to close. Jack looked over at her and chuckled. "Maybe a nap when we get back on board?" he suggested.

"Mm, that sounds good," she agreed and was looking forward to getting back to their room for a little rest. The day had been wonderful, but exhausting, and she was feeling all of it now. Her body was stiff when he pulled into the rental lot and she got out, wincing as she tried to stretch out the kinks with a tired yawn.

"We have about an hour before we need to board. I thought you might like to look in the shops," he said, pointing at a cluster of small shops that lined the docks, waiting for eager tourists.

She let out a low groan. What she really wanted was their cabin, possibly some time in the Jacuzzi tub to sooth her sore muscles, and then sleep, but she couldn't resist the allure of 'cheap' souvenirs and she took his hand and let him drag her along to the stores, regretting the fact that she'd let herself get so out of shape when she gave up her daily runs.

Looking around the shops rejuvenated her a little, the excitement of finding fun little knick-knacks and junk to bring home tended to do that for her; she loved all of it from the tacky magnets covered in glitter to the low-quality t-shirts. Mostly, she was content to just look at all of the overpriced items packed on the shelves, but she did buy a few things for her friend, Maria, and her kids, and a t-shirt for herself, before they were done and ready to return to the ship.

"What do you think?" she asked, laughing as she held up the bright pink shirt, with its garish teal logo and the word 'Cozumel' emblazoned across the chest.

"Very colorful," he said with a wry look on his face. "If you get lost, I'll be able to find you in the crowd."

"Right? It's perfect! And look!" She flipped it over, so he could

see the back where it read, "This is the tackiest tourist t-shirt I could find in Cozumel!" in gaudy fluorescent green print that made him wince.

"Yeah, that's...something all right, darlin'," he said, shaking his head and chuckling. "So, you were specifically looking for..."

"The ugliest shirt, yep!" She gave him a wide smile as she rolled it up and shoved it into her bag. "What's the point of buying cheap tourist crap, if it's not obviously cheap tourist crap, right? I mean, I could get better quality at home for less money, but I wanted something from here, and this is perfect," she explained.

He laughed. "That's actually a pretty interesting take on the whole souvenir thing, I guess." He pulled her over against him, brushing his lips across her forehead as his arms wrapped around her. She let her head fall back so she could grin up at him.

"Why, thank you, Jack. It makes me feel a little less of an idiot for wasting the money, to be honest," she confided. She opened her mouth to continue but she was interrupted by the horn blast from their ship bellowing across the dock. It startled her with the volume and she jumped, clinging to him tight with panic before she realized what it was and what it meant. "I guess that's it for the day," she sighed wistfully when the deafening sound finally cut off.

She wasn't ready to leave and go back to the ship or to go home, for that matter. She wanted another day here or a week. It was funny, since she'd never expected to enjoy this trip at all. Christopher had been the most important thing in her life. He'd been her lover and her dominant—not to mention, her boss. The sharpness of his abrupt departure from her life had cut so deeply that she'd had trouble seeing her way through it. She'd expected to mope through the whole vacation, but then...she'd met Jack. He was everything she'd lost when Christopher dumped her and more, because he was a far more skilled dominant. He actually cared about her needs and desires in a way that she now realized Christopher never had.

So, instead of a week of depression as she lurked in her

luxurious cabin and worried about her future, she'd fallen in love with an impossible stranger, been dragged through a whirlwind of fantastic experiences, and discovered that time travel actually existed. While she might not be able to visit other times herself—and that was a harsh disappointment she still hadn't had time to really process yet—she was still connected now to the most amazing adventure she'd ever imagined because of Jack. It had opened a whole new realm of possibilities for a girl who'd always loved sci-fi and fantasy, and though she had every reason in the world to dismiss his stories as lies or insanity—she did believe her new lover.

It wasn't her being naïve because she wanted to believe in magic, either. No, there was something about the absolute surety in the things he said that she found utterly believable. The fact that he'd been honest with her and expected that in return, from their first moments, didn't hurt, either. If she believed in *him*, she had to believe in his stories of being born in another time and traveling here from the past. So much had happened in such a short time that she'd found the only way she could deal with any of it was to simply live in the now, taking the new experiences as they came.

But with that, there was still an underlying feeling of certainty that Jack would be part of her future and that everything was going to be all right now that they were together. There was a connection between them that she'd never thought existed outside of fiction. She wasn't quite ready to call him her soulmate yet, but the idea flitted through her mind as they walked back towards the ship holding hands.

Jack let her hand drop as they got to the boarding ramp; there was a small crowd of people making their way back and more arriving last minute behind him, so he let her proceed ahead of him, one hand lightly touching her back, as if he needed to keep her safe from the crowds around them, or maybe he just liked the contact with her. She didn't mind; it made her feel protected, and she flashed a smile over her shoulder at him.

Stopping at the top of the ramp was probably the worst idea, with so many people hemming them in, but she did, and when she didn't immediately begin moving again, Jack laughed, saying, "You going to stand there all day, kitten? I think there are some people who'd like to board."

Katherine didn't reply; in fact, she seemed rooted to the spot and he frowned, moving around to look at her. "Hey, you okay, darlin'?" he asked with concern in his voice. She was staring in a fixed way that seemed almost like shock to him, but he couldn't for the life of him figure out what could have caused it. One second, she was smiling, the next...this.