Rackety Kate
and
The Pirates
by
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With the kind assistance of the Newsletter Readers of the deniserossetti newsgroup.
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/deniserossetti

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CHAPTER 26

Devious Plans

The story so far:

The evil Rossetti somehow ensures that Kate wakes up back in the bookstore buried under a shelf-full of erotic romances. Jack was just part of a crazy dream, born of a bump on the head. Grimly, Kate throws herself into work at the law firm, vowing to forget.

The knock came again. Kate glared at the door as if she could eviscerate the idiot on the other side. "For crying out loud, come in!" But all she could produce was a strained whisper, as if she'd been sobbing in her sleep. Which was ridiculous. Really.

Footsteps moved away, a voice murmuring something to the receptionist.

With a muttered oath, she sprang to her feet, knocked her hip on the corner of the desk and cursed even louder. Rubbing the sore spot, she wrenched the door open. At the far end of the corridor, the receptionist was reaching forward to take a pile of documents from a man with long blond hair, confined in a neat pony tail. He wore an elegantly tailored suit in a charcoal gray. Shazelle's upturned face was a study in feminine appreciation.

Peter had had hair like that.

Ruthlessly, Kate slammed the lid down before the thought could take on a life of its own. She made a mental note to do a background check on the Rossetti woman. There had to be some dirt somewhere. Everyone had a dirty little secret.

"No problem," Shazelle was saying, heavily mascaraed eyelashes fluttering like centipedes on speed. "I'll see she gets them."

The man murmured something in response that made the girl flush with pleasure. Straightening, he turned toward the foyer and the elevators, his lean body moving with compact grace. Fine, very fine, thought Kate, enjoying the scenery. Of course, Armani did tend to have that effect. The elevator swished open, the man entered, pressed the button and about-faced.

Holy shit.

Designer spectacles that magnified glorious sea-blue eyes, a straight nose, sexy mouth.

"Peter." She thought she'd shouted, but the word got strangled in her throat.

He gave her a quick appreciative glance up and down, all male. But after a second, his grin stalled, a crease appearing between his brows. The doors of the elevator slid closed on his puzzled face.

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"No, no!" She pounded at the `up' button, almost sobbing with frustration. "Come back, come back!"

"Kate? Kate, are you okay?"

Sagging against the wall, Kate turned to gaze blankly at Shazelle's worried face. "Yeah." She cleared her throat. "I'm good. Who...who was that?"

The girl grinned. "That," she said, "was Mr Peter Panford, delivering the documents from the opposing counsel. For your new brief? Mr Choke put in a request for disclosure, got the ball rolling for you."

Kate sank into the nearest cream leather chair. She wet her lips. "I haven't had a chance to read it yet. Who am I representing?"

Shazelle frowned. Crossing to her desk, she extracted a folder from beneath the pile of documents. "Ah, here we go. CDN Developments Pty Ltd."

"Against?" The breath stalled in Kate's lungs, her heart thundered like a runaway freight train.

"Hmm. Cavanagh Enterprises. CEO Jack Cavanagh." Shazelle flipped a couple of pages. "Mr Panford's listed as his PA." She sighed. "Even with the glasses, that man is hot." Another sigh. "Bet he's gay. The classy ones always are."

"Bi," said Kate absently, pressing her thighs together against the visceral memory of Peter's hot, hard length buried deep inside her. Shazelle's jaw dropped, but Kate was too preoccupied to notice. Vaguely, she wondered if she was going to pass out. Peter - *Peter* for chrissake. And Jack. God, she hardly dared to think—-

"Really?" said Shazelle. "How do you know?"

"What?" Kate had to backtrack through the conversation. "Uh, I don't. Just guessing. Forget I said that, it was totally unprofessional."

Shazelle winked. "No problem. I'll get you a coffee shall I? You look like you could use one." She handed over the folder and trotted off.

"Thanks," croaked Kate. Her hands shook so hard, it took her three tries to open the folder. Holding the neatly stapled sheets of paper still enough so she could focus on the small print was almost more than she could manage.

Names leaped out at her from the page.

Mr Jack Cavanagh, CEO.

Mr P. Panford, Executive Assistant to Mr Cavanagh.

Mr D. Duke, MBA, Director of Research and Development.

Ms V. Dorchester, Executive Assistant to Mr Duke.

She flipped a page. Mr Lee Chan, Mr J.D. Harley, Mr Tom Cavanagh. They were all there.

The elegant marble walls of the foyer swung, then steadied. Shakily, Kate rose. For the first time since her almost forgotten Prom night, she wobbled in her high heels. Arms full of documents, she tottered back to her office, carefully thinking of nothing at

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all. Dumping her load on the desk, she sank into her faux leather chair - only full partners rated genuine cow.

All right. She pinched the bridge of her nose, rubbed her forehead. *All right*.

You're a lawyer, she said to her herself. *So damn well think like one*.

First point - coincidence be damned, not when all their names were there. A warm glow flickered in the pit of her belly, growing and spreading until it reached her heart. Well hell, she wasn't completely bugnuts crazy after all. Perhaps a trifle, but if so... She wasn't the only one. A little suspension of disbelief was a helluva lot better than certifiable and drooling. If she was clever and ruthless and single-minded, life and love was there for the taking.

Jack was there for the taking. She'd see him again - soon. The hair rose on the nape of her neck. Every inch of her skin tingled with sheer relief and a healthy dollop of old-fashioned anticipation.

Shazelle tiptoed in and left a tall coffee on the corner of the desk. Kate shrugged out of her suit jacket and tossed it over the filing cabinet. She rolled up her sleeves.

Second point - Jack had said he'd find her. He'd *promised* the no-good pirate bastard. No one did that to Katherine Mary O'Reilly - not when she'd been fool enough to give her heart.

Therefore... Kate fished a propelling pencil and a clean pad of yellow legal paper out of a drawer, and laid them neatly beside her laptop. She flexed her fingers, gazing at the pile of documents.

Thirdly, therefore - she was going to whip his ass. And then she was going to own it.

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An hour later, the coffee was cold and scummy and Kate's head ached because she'd been so tugging hard on her hair. An icy ball of dread had formed in her stomach. CDN Developments specialized in sleazy tourist resorts, the sort that made money and ripped off the locals. Ethics didn't figure in their modus operandi. Looking at the brochures, Kate shuddered. Could you say garish? Not to mention ugly and intrusive?

Sheesh, look at this proposal, for a twenty story building smack on the beach-front of a pristine tropical island. Even in the architect's sketch, it pretty well obscured the twin peaks rising behind it. The whole thing was so damn *wrong*, it make her stomach turn.

Kate's breath caught. She could swear...

Holy shit, it *was!* It was Sweet Sisters Isle, except the brochure referred to it as Pirate Island.

The islanders had withdrawn from a contract with CDN at the last minute and her client claimed that Cavanagh Enterprises had bribed and/or pressured them into it. Hence this action. Her guts churning, Kate scrabbled through the brief. She had a baaaad feeling...

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The Comte sneered up at her out of the glossy pages of the CDN company prospectus. He wore an elegant suit and a perfectly matched tie, his hair perfectly groomed, his beautiful long-fingered hands resting on the arms of an office chair so imposing it could have doubled as a throne. A bland smile quirked his mouth, revealing the merest glimpse of incisor.

Hell, the bastard hadn't even changed his name. The Comte de Nothos, read the bio, descended from European aristocracy, educated at Oxford and Harvard. The blood-sucker must be worth millions by now.

Kate reached for the phone. "Shazelle," she said, "get me an appointment with our client this morning please. Don't take no for an answer."

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Expensive blinds shielded the Comte's penthouse office from the glare of day, but even in the gloom Kate could see the hungry gleam of teeth. She paused in the doorway. "Good morning," she said briskly.

"Ah, Ms O'Reilly," purred a dark voice. "Please, don't hover. Come in, come in."

Striding forward, Kate leaned right over the desk and snapped on the lamp. "I remember you, Comte," she said evenly. "Don't insult me by pretending it isn't mutual."

A silky brow rose. His hair looked as thick and as beautiful as the pelt of a black panther. "I make it a rule not to insult lovely women, Kate."

Patronizing bastard. She took a chair opposite him. "Let's get on with it, shall we?" She showed her teeth. "As your counsel, I'm here to advise you to settle with Cavanagh Enterprises out of court."

The Comte went from languid to rigid in a heartbeat. His fingers flexed on the arm of his chair. "No."

"You don't have a chance. I can go through this brief with you, point by point. Any half-competent attorney will demonstrate you meant to take advantage of the islanders, a good one could prove intent to defraud. Chan and Harley are Jack's legal team. You think they won't be devious?"

"Naturally." A fluid shrug. "But so am I. I found you before Jack did, didn't I?" He leaned forward. "While you are employed by Windsor, Nott and Choke, you belong to me, pretty Kate."

"Don't call me that!"

He clasped his hands together on the table and smirked. "I will if I want to. Pretty Kate." Silver cufflinks caught the light. "Naturally, you could resign. Perhaps you have ambitions to be Jack's brood mare? Go ahead, but you'll never work in this town again. I guarantee it."

Kate ground her teeth together so hard her molars cracked. Her heart plummeted. Let him win? Give in? Never! Though the thought of having Jack's babies... The Comte's cufflinks blurred as tears stung her eyes.

She blinked. They were exquisite, in the shape of...*handcuffs?* And inside each tiny manacle was a letter H. Which made two H's, linked.

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HH.

Kate drew in a sharp breath.

Did she have the nerve? Almost she longed for the *tap, tap, tap* of Rossetti's keyboard. *Listen, Rossetti*, she thought, *if you're out there, you have to help me. I'm sorry I said you were crazy*.

Nothing.

I'm sorry, all right? You created the Tess and Ess in that world. Make them real in this one and I'll set up a fansite for you. Hell, I'll even read your stupid books.

Shit! She squeezed her eyes shut. *Your sexy, clever, wonderful books, I mean. And if you get sued for plagiarism, or for murder of the English language, I'll defend you gratis, okay?*

Nothing.

Oh, God. She'd have to go in blind. Kate leaped.

"They don't know you're doing this," she said. "In fact, I'd go so far as to say they're going to be seriously pissed with you when they find out."

The Comte froze. "Who?" he said, calmly enough, but his fingers clamped together so hard his knuckles cracked.

Kate leaned back in her chair, putting on her poker face. "You know who," she said. "The Hormone Harlots."

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No vote this month. I'm still trying to decide whether to help Kate or not. `Murder of the English language' indeed --well, really, I've never been so insulted in my life! harumph!harumph!

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CHAPTER 27

Punishment Is Its Own Reward

The story so far:

To her astonishment, Kate discovers that she's been retained as counsel by the Comte de Nothos -- in an action against Cavanagh Enterprises. Legally, The Comte's position is untenable, but he's refusing to budge. If he won't listen to Kate, who will he listen to?

Kate leaned back in her chair, putting on her poker face. "You know who," she said. "The Hormone Harlots."

The Comte glared. His face, already pale, went the colour of finest alabaster. "I have no idea who or what you're talking about," he said in a voice like ice. "I'm instructing you to pursue the action against Jack Cavanagh, Ms O'Reilly."

Shit, it wasn't working. *Come on, Rossetti*, thought Kate. *You can write smut for the discerning anytime. I need you right now.*

"You don't have a snowball's chance in hell," she said. If she hadn't been watching him so closely, she might have missed it, but the Comte's lashes flickered. Kate leaned forward, intent. "I like to win, Comte," she said. "Not piss off the judge and waste the court's time."

Very faintly, she heard a sound from somewhere deep in the building, or was it in her head? *Tap, tap, tap.*

Holding the Comte's fathomless gaze, Kate licked her lips. Her heart hammered. "Did you hear that?"

The Comte shifted slightly in his high-backed chair. "This is an office, people work here." he said.

In the distance, an elevator made a swooshing sound, then a bright ding! The low murmur of female voices drifted through the door, accompanied by the tap of heels, drawing closer.

A slow flush climbed out of the Comte's collar, reaching his cheeks. Apart from that, however, he'd gone so still he could have sat for a portrait entitled Sex in a Suit.

"I'll let them in, shall I?"

"No," croaked the Comte. "I haven't... They'll..."

Ignoring him, Kate rose and flung the door open wide.

Arm in arm, Tess and Ess beamed at her. They looked just as she remembered them, except that Tess had purple and red streaks in her hair and a nose stud, while Ess

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was tricked out in a silk suit the colour of a dove's breast, with a cream silk blouse and pearls.

"Heya, babe," beamed Tess.

"Kate, dear," smiled Ess.

"You're, um, full size," said Kate stupidly. Her knees went weak and she clutched at Tess who grabbed her elbow in a strong grip.

"Hafta be," Tessa said in her husky contralto. "Gotta keep up with big boy here." Her eyes flashed. "Nothy baby, doncha know better than to think for yourself?"

Patting Kate on the shoulder, Tess strode forward. An imperious finger beckoned. "Stand up, pet, and come here."

The Comte shot Kate an appalled glance, but he rose and took a couple of stiff steps toward Tess.

When she grabbed his silk tie and jerked him closer, he made a garbled noise of protest, but didn't resist. Kate watched, fascinated, as Tess wrapped both small hands around his jaw. In a leisurely sort of fashion, she nibbled on his lower lip, slipped an inquiring tongue into his mouth. The Comte's hands fisted by his sides and he groaned, a sound full of pained desire.

What on earth?

A light floral fragrance drifted past Kate's nose. "Don't you remember?" murmured Ess. "All he needs is a firm hand." She gave a throaty laugh. "Or four."

Smiling, she tilted her pretty blonde head, watching her sister ravage the Comte's mouth - his desperate attempts not to ravage back. The front of his well-cut business slacks bulged.

Kate's brain spun. "I was so scared he'd kill you."

Ess raised a cool brow. "Not a chance. Though he did threaten to pull our wings off." She shook her head. "Tsk, tsk."

"Where did they go? Your wings, I mean?"

Tess patted the Comte's cheek and turned her head. "They get in the way most of the time, so we don't bother. Nothy here's the only one who's seen 'em in ages." When she ran a proprietary hand over the taut curve of buttock, he tensed. "Tell Kate when the wings come out, lover."

The Comte only snarled, his teeth sharp and white.

"Tell her." Tess dug her fingers hard into his ass and he choked, coming up on his toes. Kate's eyes widened.

The Comte shot Tess a murderous glare, but he said, "When they're angry."

"And?" Tess increased the pressure.

"Fucking fairies," growled the Comte under his breath.

"You keep right on like that," crooned Tess, slipping her fingers between his legs from behind. "This is fun."

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"Don't—!" The Comte's chest heaved. "Don't touch it! All right, all right. When they're...turned on. They have wings then."

"Ah, but there's more to it than that, darling." Ess sauntered past to caress his cheek with smooth fingertips. "Tell Kate what turns us on."

A wash of scarlet colour suffused the Comte's porcelain cheek. "M-me," he muttered, so low Kate could hardly hear him.

"Mm." Ess snugged herself under his arm and slipped the buttons on his shirt, one by one. "Especially when you're good." Gently, she tugged the fine cotton out of his waistband and spread the two halves open. She loosened his tie, tossed it onto the desk and stepped aside.

"And even more when you're bad." Tess chuckled at Kate's slack-jawed expression. "Which is most of the time."

There wasn't a hair to be seen on the Comte's pale muscled chest, but his nipples were an angry rosy-red and fiercely erect. Each was pierced through with a sturdy gold hoop, linked by a filigreed gold chain. If that wasn't kinky enough, another couple of chains ran down from the nipple rings to disappear under the waistband of his trousers.

Kate gurgled.

"You should see your face." Ess gave a lady-like chuckle. Then the humour died out of her expression. "So what's our boy done now?"

Gathering her scattered wits, Kate explained about the suit against Cavanagh Enterprises, the threat to Sweet Sisters Isle. She even showed Tess and Ess the picture of paradise despoiled in the brochure.

"Well, well," said Ess softly when Kate ran down at last, and gooseflesh rose on the Comte's skin. His eyes had gone very dark and with a shock that tingled in her belly, Kate realized they were fixed on the gauzy silver wings now waving gently behind Ess's shoulders. Although he was utterly still, Kate had the impression of so much coiled energy, she braced herself for his spring, sharp teeth at her throat.

"Threatening our Kate too," Ess went on. "That's plain nasty." Her smooth brow creased, very slightly. "I'm disappointed in you, Comte."

"Yeah, but not surprised," said Tess. Her wings arching wide and glorious behind her shoulders, she fingered the chain between those proud dark nipples. The Comte hissed.

"We apologise, Kate," said Ess. "This is our failure."

"All this time," added Tess, frowning ferociously, "and he still won't do as he's told. We let you down, honey."

"I d-don't understand," faltered Kate, beginning to.

"You will." Ess pointed at the chair behind the desk. "Get comfy, sweetheart. And watch."

"No," rasped the Comte. The flush on his skin ebbed, then returned in a rush, hotter than ever. "Not in front of her."

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Tess's grin had pure devil in it. "It's funny," she murmured, "He does pain real well, but humiliation scares him rigid." She chuckled, rich and dark. "Rigid. Geddit?"

Ess reached up to draw the Comte's face down to hers. "You deserve this punishment, do you understand?" Lovingly, she brushed a lock of ink-black hair off his forehead.

The Comte made a negative noise in his throat, but Ess smiled as if he'd agreed wholeheartedly. "Hold still now," she murmured. "I want to kiss you."

Rising to her tiptoes, she fitted her soft pink mouth to the Comte's and proceeded to kiss him exquisitely slowly and with excruciating attention to detail.

Kate swore his toes curled in his shiny black shoes. When Ess drew back, he was breathing harshly.

Ess's voice was very low, her gaze intent. "We're here, my darling. Every moment, every second, every step of the way. You know that, don't you?"

The Comte gave a brusque nod. "What—" He stopped to clear his throat. "What are you going to do?"

"Show you off, big boy." Tess's teeth gleamed. "Not only to Kate, but to Rossetti and her readers. For their peace of mind, ya know. They need to know we have you under control." Her grin turned dirtier than a mud wrestler's behind. "And how."

Kate hadn't thought it possible for the Comte de Nothos to grow any paler than he was already. His ivory skin went sheet white. "No." Then more forcefully. "No!"

Tess merely raised a brow.

"All right," snarled the Comte. "So I deserve a punishment. Fucking fine! But in private, not - not here."

Ess linked arms with her sister, her gaze deceptively mild. "Your choice, Comte," she said, her soft voice harder than tempered steel. "Say the word and we're gone." An aching pause. "Forever."

"Your call, Nothy, love," said Tess. She blinked hard, her eyes very bright. "It always has been. Say goodbye and you're free." She clicked her fingers. "Like that!"

The Comte licked his lips, his dark gaze travelling from one pretty face to the other. "I- I..."

Kate held her breath.

Lifting one hand, he touched the edge of Tess's wing with fingers that shook. Then he took a slow step backward.

Oh God, thought Kate. *No, no, don't—*

His head dropped. "Don't leave me," he said to the carpet, his voice no more than a strained whisper. With none of his usual grace, he dropped to one knee. "Just...don't."

Tears trembled on Ess's lashes. Gently, she placed her hand under his chin and raised his chin. "All right."

The Comte's lips drew back from his teeth and his eyes flashed. "Because if you do, I'll hunt you down, I swear. Pulling your wings off will be the least of it."

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Tess's rich laugh echoed off the walls. "Ah, Nothy, love, you're so baaaad. Don't ever change." Her voice dropped a half-octave. "Stand up now and face Kate."

Visibly gritting his teeth, the Comte did so.

"Shoes," said Tess, and he pulled them off. "Socks too."

Ess walked around behind him and drew the shirt away, dropping a kiss on his shoulder as she did so.

Kate stared, something warm sizzling low in her belly. With every rapid breath, the recessed lighting glinted off the gold chain on his hard hairless chest, the golden hoops winking in his peaked nipples. Her mouth watered.

"Belt," said Tess, inexorable. "Give it to me."

With an insolent growl, the Comte unbuckled his belt and flipped it in Tess's general direction. But when she caught it, wrapping it around her hand, he swallowed hard.

"Trousers." That was Ess, from behind. "Slowly now."

The rasp of a zip and the fine fabric of his slacks pooled around his feet. He kicked them aside and Ess gathered them up, made a couple of neat folds, and laid them on the elegant drinks cabinet.

Kate didn't know what she'd expected, but it wasn't boxers of scarlet silk printed all over with vampire fangs. She choked.

Silly or not, they were deliciously tented, those mysterious chains running under the waistband.

Ess giggled. "Ah, sweetheart, you're a delight." She pressed a kiss to one nipple and the Comte froze. The front of the boxers twitched and he made a pained noise, deep in his throat. When Ess drew back, the small disk was peaked hard and fleshy, gleaming wet. The hoop sparkled wickedly and surrounding it on the Comte's smooth white skin was the perfect imprint of a pink lipsticked mouth.

Kate shifted in the big chair, stifling the urge to press the heel of her hand against her tingling clit. Holy shit, if she was this hot and wet, just watching, what must be it be like for the Hormone Harlots, *doing*?

"Keep goin'," That was Tess, as deep as a man. "But careful. Don't damage our property."

The Comte shot Kate a look of pure masculine panic. "No," he muttered. "Can't."

Ess sighed. "All right, we'll help. Just this once. Ready, Tess?"

One on each side, the Harlots slipped their fingers beneath elastic and pulled the boxers out and down, the Comte positively vibrating with anxiety and offense. Silk whispered to the floor and Kate's mouth fell open. Simultaneously, her clit seized up, nearly felling her with a dark spasm of pure lust.

Oh. My. Freaking. God.

The Comte was still as beautiful as ever, all pale perfect marble skin and long graceful muscle. His body was hairless, save for a small glossy black thatch, out of which reared a pale perfect cock, blushing prettily. Even his balls were hairless, round

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and plump and drawn up high between milk-white thighs. In fact, he reminded Kate of a statue, not a David, but one of those classical Greek statues, a gorgeous youth with lithe, faultless proportions, created with love by the hand of a master.

Except she'd never seen a Greek statue decorated quite that way.

His cock was encased in a set of seven golden rings, the smallest clasping him tightly right under the flange, the largest snugly at his base. A ladder connected them all and it was hooked into the chains that led to the nipple rings. God, that was evil, because the stiffer and heavier he got, the harder would be the pull on the sensitive flesh of his nipples.

If that wasn't enough, his balls were separated and cradled by a thicker, flatter chain that led to...

Kate squinted.

"You look gorgeous." Tess patted his hip. "Turn."

"No." An angry panther might growl like that.

Tess pulled something out of her jeans pocket that looked like a remote control. "Turn," she said.

A single wild-eyed glance and the Comte shuffled around.

The breath strangled in Kate's throat. The Comte's ass was as taut and perfect and pale as the rest of him, so that the contrast of the gleaming black butt plug situated between his cheeks drew the eye like a magnet. The shock of it thrilled down Kate's nerves, kinky and wicked and so downright dirty she could hardly believe it. No wonder his posture had been so perfect, so stiff the whole time they'd been talking! It had to be a specially made harness, because every item was linked by the gold chains, another set running up the cleft of his buttocks to slip around his waist.

"Nothin' but the best for our boy," smirked Tess.

"We have something new for you, dearest." Ess nuzzled the smooth swell of a biceps, meanwhile pulling a small flat box out of the pocket of her suit.

Kate's cell phone rang. Tearing her gaze away with an incredible effort, she glanced at the caller ID. Shit, shit, shit! Shazelle from the office. She couldn't not take it.

"Stop," she croaked. "Please. I have to...have to..."

"What?" she barked into the phone, her heart sinking as Shazelle spoke.

"The Cavanagh team are here already, Kate. In the boardroom. Mr Choke says to get your ass over here this minute." A giggle. "Well, that isn't exactly what-"

"Is Jack there?"

"You mean Mr Cavanagh? Why sure, but he looks real impatient. Wants to know where you are. I've sent out for coffee and pastries, Kate, but I don't know how long that'll hold him."

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Oh noooo! How do you want your gratification? Immediate or postponed? Race back to the office to whip Jack's ass -- in a legal kind of way of course -- or hang on to witness the Comte's well-deserved punishment?

Only two choices, excruciating though they may be.

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CHAPTER 28
Firm Hands

The story so far:

To Kate's astonished relief, the Hormone Harlots step in and take control of the entire situation. In fact, they seem to wield an extraordinary degree of control over the wicked Comte de Nothos. Talk about a firm hand!

Kate gripped the phone so hard, the plastic creaked. Her head spun. "Jack," she croaked at the Hormone Harlots. "Jack's in my office, he's—"

Ess turned her pretty head. "Do you trust us, Kate?"

Gulping, Kate nodded.

"This won't take long." She shot a sideways glance at the Comte's pale, brutally handsome face and sighed. "Unless we've miscalculated. It'll all be fine, I promise. Tell them you'll be there in thirty minutes."

"I'm with...with the client, Shazelle," said Kate into the phone. "Just finishing him off. I mean— Hell, say to Mr Cavanagh, another half hour, okay? Don't let him leave."

"I'll try," said Shazelle doubtfully. "Hope you know what you're doing, Kate." She rang off.

Tess's grin it looked a little ragged 'round the edges. "So we're cool. We got our witness. Do it," she said to her sister.

Ess pushed a stray wisp of hair off her forehead. Her fingers trembled.

What the—?

The Comte frowned down at her, his dark brows knitted. The gold of the cage enclosing his cock caught the lights. Clasped firmly just beneath the flange, his glans blushed rosily, embraced and offered like a smooth lickable fruit. Kate pressed her thighs together.

Ess flipped open the lid of the box she held. The Comte went absolutely still. In the silence, Kate could hear the faint hum of the air-conditioning, the muted roar of traffic on the street far below.

A golden collar gleamed, the soft yellow of the metal sumptuous against black velvet. In fact, it more like a torque, made of thick twisted ropes of gold, designed to sit low on a man's neck, so it didn't show above a shirt collar. Each end of the torque ended in a small padlock and engraved on each was a letter H.

Ess cleared her throat. "Gold," she said. "Won't irritate your skin."

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Tess reached up to take his chin in a small strong hand. "You need to be sure, Nothy," she said. "Because once it's locked, there's no way out without bolt clippers."

The Comte's black eyes flicked from one intent face to the other. "You're serious," he said, all the polish rubbed off. He sounded...raw. "You want this?" He swallowed. "You want...me?"

Ess blinked rapidly. Her lips trembled as she smiled. "Of course we do."

"But I'm—" He broke off, his lips compressed. "Not...not..."

Tess's eyes flashed. "Not good enough? Not worthy?" Going up on tiptoes, she dragged his head down until they were virtually nose to nose. "We know you're a bad man, Nothy. But we still want you."

"We have for a very long time," said Ess softly.

The Comte shook Tess off and stepped back. His lip curled. "What's the price?" he snarled.

Ess regarded him steadily. "You have something to put right with Kate, have you not? Not to mention Rossetti and her readers."

The Comte moistened his lips with a pointed tongue. His eyes darted to the belt Tess still held in her hand. "I don't think so," he said.

"Really?" Arching a brow, Tess extracted a small black box from the pocket of her jeans. She pressed a button.

"Shit!" The Comte stiffened all over, except for his cock, which jerked wildly in its cage. The smooth rosy head suddenly gleamed with moisture.

Gracefully, Ess sank to her knees before him and licked it off, her tongue as precise and delicate as a cat's.

"Nnngh!" His breath whistled between his teeth.

Crack! Tess brought the belt down across his buttocks.

"Fuck!" One white, long-fingered hand closed hard over Ess's shoulder.

Kate sat with her mouth open, her brain spinning.

"Apologise to Kate," said Tess. "And show us you mean it."

"Fuck you!"

Tess twinkled. "Later, Nothy boy." Handing the remote to her sister, she took a firmer grip on the belt.

Crack!

Working methodically, her underlip between her teeth, she applied one blow after another. A slow flush rose on the marble perfection of the Comte's chest, his fists clenched spasmodically with every strike and he bit his lip so hard it went white. Kate craned her neck. His buttocks and thighs glowed scarlet. She winced in sympathy, even as lust cramped low in her belly and between her thighs. Ow.

Every couple of strokes, Tess would pause and Ess would duck forward to run a small wet tongue the length of his cock, wiggling it in between the bars of the cage, bathing the head with liquid heat. Then she'd activate the remote for a few seconds.

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Some small part of Kate's brain wondered if the Comte would actually explode. She didn't think she'd ever seen a man so hard. The bars of his golden prison were cutting into the thick flesh of his shaft and the whole assemblage quivered and jerked. It looked exquisitely painful, but also incredibly hot.

Ess bestowed a quick kiss on his very tip and drew back. "Can you say it, sweetheart?"

The Comte shook his head. "N-not yet," he said through gritted teeth.

"Do you need more?" asked Tess, massaging her shoulder with one hand.

The Comte squeezed his eyes shut. He grunted something that might have passed for assent and braced himself, his thighs rock-hard with tension.

Tess let the belt drop to the carpet. "Let's step it up," she said to her sister.

Ess nuzzled the Comte's flat belly. "It's only a word," she murmured. "Two words, actually. 'Sorry, Kate.' That's all. So simple."

"And we'll take off the harness," added Tess. She gave his shoulder a leisurely lick.

"The collar?" said the Comte in a low hiss. "What about the collar?"

"All yours," murmured Ess, nudging into his navel with her nose. "Mmm." She patted his lean flank.

"And you? Are you mine too?"

Ess rose, until she stood shoulder to shoulder with Tess, gazing into his hard face. "Absolutely," she said quietly. "Forever."

The Comte clamped one hand on her shoulder and slid his other arm around Tess's waist. "Swear to it, both of you."

The Hormone Harlots turned their heads to glance at Kate. "We're Kate's," said Ess, turning back to the Comte. "Because without her, we have no existence." Her gaze locked with his. "Forever yours," she said. "I swear on Kate's name and she is my witness."

"Me too," said Tess.

Ess glared at her.

"Oh, all right. Nothy, I swear on Kate's name too." She took a nibble of his upper arm. "Forever yours."

For a searing instant, the Comte searched their faces. His eyes had gone completely black. Without warning, he grinned and Kate blinked, poleaxed. She hadn't thought it possible for that cold handsome face to look boyish, let alone joyful. But it did.

Lucky she was sitting down. The impact was extraordinary.

As quickly as it had bloomed, the smile vanished. The Comte's lips pulled back from his teeth. "Do your worst," he snarled. "I defy you." But his eyes sparkled and his lips twitched. Kate suspected he was biting the inside of his cheek.

"Huh!" snorted Tess. She moved swiftly, right into the Comte's back, sliding one arm around his trim waist. Kate couldn't see what she was doing with the hand that was out of sight, but when the Comte went up on his toes, swearing, she could guess.

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Ess simply dropped the remote, leaned forward and swallowed him to the root, cage and all.

The Comte's nostrils dilated and he began breathing like a blown horse.

If a man's need was desperate enough, wondered Kate distractedly, could he climax with the cage on?

"Is that good, hon?" crooned Tess, biting his neck. She was rocking into him now, her shoulder flexing.

"Can't...hold on," he gasped. "Fuck!"

Ess drew back, licking her lips. "Two words," she said, "and you'll be free to come. God, you're gorgeous like this."

The Comte whined, there was no other word for it. "S-s..."

Ess bent her shining blonde head again and he made a sound midway between a bark and a scream.

"Keep going, sweetcheeks, " said Tess. "Or I sure will."

"S-sorry," he squeezed out.

"Sorry who?" Ess blew a gentle puff of air over his cockhead and his whole body went into a wracking spasm.

The Comte flung his head back. "Sorry, Kate! Sorry for fucking everything!" The shout reverberated off the walls. He gripped Ess's shoulder, fingers digging in. "Now let me come, damn you!"

"Kate?" Ess and Tess looked inquiringly at her. "Is that good enough?"

Kate could barely see, her eyes were flooded with tears of sympathy. *Ow, ow, OW.* "Yes. Go on, go on. Poor man." She gestured weakly.

Ess reached down and unsnapped some sort of closure. The cage opened and fell away, the Comte sagging with relief. His shaft was indented with red impressions from the unyielding metal. But when he went to take himself in hand, Ess knocked his arm away.

Rising, she wrapped her fingers around him and went up on her toes to kiss the corner of his mouth. At her elbow, Tess mirrored her sister's actions. He was plenty long enough for two dainty fairy-sized hands.

"Love ya, Nothy," whispered Tess into his mouth. She licked.

"I love you more than words can say," murmured Ess with a lick of her own.

The Comte threw an arm around each waist and hauled them in tight. His mouth opened, at first silently, and then with an earth-shattering roar. Jerking violently, he sprayed the Harlots with jet after jet of seed.

But they were so busy with a messy and glorious three-way kiss, Kate didn't think it bothered them one iota.

The spasms slowed to ripples and groans, and then stopped. Still tangled together, the three slipped to their knees on the carpet.

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Blinking away the tears, Kate sprang forward. "Here," she said, scooping up the collar. "Comte?"

He looked up, dishevelled and panting, his hair in his eyes.

"Is this what you want?" Kate demanded.

His face softened, infinitesimally. He laid a trembling hand on each pretty head in turn. "More than anything," he murmured, so low Kate could barely hear him.

Gently, he set Tess away from him, dropping a kiss on her forehead. Then he did the same with Ess, kissing the tip of her pert nose. Very slowly and deliberately, he folded his arms behind his back and bowed his head. "You promised," he said to the carpet. "So do it." A pause. "Please."

Ess took the collar from Kate. "Last chance, darling. Are you sure?"

The Comte lost patience. "Yes, damn you!"

Ess took one end of the torque and Tess the other. "Forever," they said in unison, as they placed it around his neck and settled it comfortably.

"You are ours." Tess wove the two little padlocks together.

"And we are yours." Ess clicked the locking mechanism into place.

They sat back on their heels, both faces streaked with tears. Ess cried much more prettily than her sister, Kate noticed. Figured.

Ess lifted the Comte's chin and kissed his cheek. "Penthouse," she said succinctly. "Bed."

"Ooh yeah," muttered Tess. "Me first."

Ess pouted. "Like hell, sister mine. It's my turn."

Kate saw the Comte turn his head to hide a grin.

"Bye," she whispered from the door. "I love you. Be happy."

They didn't hear her. Smiling through her tears, Kate tore herself away and scurried off down the corridor to the elevators. She glanced at her watch. Five minutes left. The doors swished open and she dived inside, cursing. Her knees were still shaky.

She burst into Mr Choke's office in time to see him shrugging into his coat. "Mr Choke! I'm so sorry, I was with the client."

Mr Choke waved a hand. "Hmpf," he said. He bent a severe glance in her direction. "You advised our client to settle out of court, Ms O'Reilly, and it's going to be a bitch." He cleared his throat. "Ah, excuse the language."

Kate goggled.

"Get down to the boardroom this minute. I'd come with you, but Mrs Choke has signed us up for a charity dinner. Damn nuisance, but there it is. Well, go on," he added irritably. "What are you waiting for?"

What indeed? There was no time to check her hair or lipstick. Kate could only hope her afternoon of voyeurism wasn't written all over her face.

Composure. Right.

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Drawing a deep breath, she click-clacked the few steps to the boardroom. But when she put her hand on the door, her courage failed her. Her whole future was waiting in that room.

Breathe, Kate breathe, she told herself. *You're so much more than a character in a story.*

With a strange sense of detachment, she watched her fingers tighten on the door handle and press it down. She swung the door open.

***

Who is waiting in the boardroom?

Jack

Jack and Peter

Jack, Duka, Peter, Harley and Chan

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CHAPTER 29
Endings and Beginnings

The story so far:

Kate is a surprised but delighted witness to the Comte's Happy Ending with the Hormone Harlots. Tearing herself away, she rushes back to the boardroom to find...

From inside the boardroom came the rumble of masculine voices. A man laughed. It wasn't Jack. God, she wasn't ready for this. Kate tugged at the jacket of her nicely fitted lawyer suit. She glanced down. Buttons buttoned, shirt points still crisp, skirt smooth over her hips. She was even wearing matching bra and panties - she hoped.

You're not mad, she told herself. *The Comte is real, the Hormone Harlots are real*. Her breath caught. Boy, are they ever! Taking a firm grip on her case folder and notebook, she straightened her spine. *Therefore, Jack must...*

Oh, shit.

Tap, tap, tap. The sound echoed softly down the corridor. Shazelle, of course. Had to be. *Tap, tap, tappity...TAP!* Or possibly not.

A little reassured, Kate gripped the door handle in sweaty fingers. Now.

She threw the door open and took a single step into the room.

Five heads turned toward her, five pairs of eyes surveyed her trim form with deep masculine appreciation.

Kate stared back, frozen.

Her eyes met Jack's. He was seated in a large leather chair at the far end of the table, his hands resting on its arms, every inch a corporate pirate. He was clean-shaven now, but the russet brown hair was just the same, expertly cut to showcase its thickness and health. The gold shot hazel of his eyes still reminded her of a tiger's gaze, intent and predatory. His suit jacket had been tossed aside, his sleeves rolled up to show strong forearms, an expensive looking gold watch on one wrist. His tie was little askew, as if he'd been tugging at it.

Peter was seated on his left, documents spread before him on dark polished wood. Kate recognized the Comte's brochure. Harley and Chan were next to him, grinning at her, Harley's bad boy twinkle in full evidence. Across the table, Duka folded massive arms across his chest and leaned back with the air of a man about to enjoy a spectacle. His lips twitched.

"Ms O'Reilly," said Jack evenly.

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Kate's heart sank. "Mr Cavanagh." She cleared her throat, because her stomach seemed to have leapt up and lodged there.

"It's taken me some considerable time to find you." His brow was creased in a frown, his face unreadable. When he shifted slightly, Kate realized he was clutching the arms of the chair so hard his knuckles shone white. The butterflies in her stomach took a sharp right-angled turn.

Peter snorted. "That's hardly her fault." Shoving his chair back, he strode toward her smiling, blue eyes shining behind the gold-rimmed spectacles. "Kate," he said, taking the folder and notebook from her slack grasp and placing them on the table. He lifted one hand to his lips and kissed it. Then the other. "Are you all right?"

Kate blinked. Peter continued to hold her hands in a strong warm clasp.

"Uh, yes," she said. Then she rallied, freeing herself gently. "I've advised the Comte de Nothos to settle out of court," she said, addressing Jack. He's agreed."

A single brow rose. "Harley?"

Harley shot Kate a slashing grin. "Excellent," he said. "Perfect." He pulled a laptop closer, fingers poised over the keys. "Let's get started on the taking him for everything he's got part."

"You have the best ideas." Chan slung an arm over his shoulder, peering at the screen.

So that was the way Jack intended to play it. Depression swept over Kate in a great engulfing wave. He didn't want her. Perhaps he never had, or maybe he didn't remember her and all they'd meant to each other, or it was all in her head, or she was already locked up in a padded cell with the Rossetti woman, or—

"Not so fast," rumbled a voice like an avalanche in slow motion.

Kate stared. She wet her lips, hanging onto her composure with sheer bloody-minded determination. Duka wore a neat goatee, and a gold earring flashed in one ear. All African princes should wear Armani. "Ah, Mr Duke," she said, willing her voice not to shake. "What is your opinion?"

His white teeth flashed. "I think you should sit down." He extended a big brown paw.

Peter gave her a little push. "Go on."

Duka's hand enveloped hers and drew her forward until she tumbled right into his lap. Kate gave a sharp yip of surprise. Jack said sharply, "What the fuck?"

Duka ignored him. "Ah, Kate." Strong fingers cradled her cheek, his cologne teased her nostrils. "I'm so glad to see you." Without any preamble, he bent his noble head and pressed plush lips to hers.

It wasn't a token kiss, not in any sense. When Kate gasped in shock, Duka surged inside, all hot wet velvet and impeccable technique. He was making a deep crooning sound, one hand massaging the back of her neck in a soothing caress, as if trying to calm a fractious horse.

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Peripherally, she was aware of Jack surging out his chair with a roar, his hand landing hard on Duka's shoulder. She blinked. She'd never seen Jack look quite like that, his lips pulled back in a feral snarl, but deep in the tiger eyes was an expression she could only call...stricken.

"Let her go." The words emerged as a menacing whisper. "She's, she's—"

Duka lifted his head. "What?" A pause while their gazes locked. "Exactly what is Kate to ye, Jack my friend?" His accent had thickened.

Before Jack could answer, Peter chuckled, a sweet sexy sound filled with sunlight and uncomplicated happiness. "Forget him, sweetie. He's been a basket case since we found you." He took both of Kate's hands, drawing her out of Duka's lap and into his arms. "My turn," he said, removing his spectacles and shoving them in his pocket.

"You have no idea how bad it's been," he murmured, nuzzling along her jaw, dropping tiny sizzling kisses on sensitive skin as he went. "God, he's missed you."

Kate's head whirled. Were those spots she could see at the edges of her vision? Distractedly, she wondered if she were about to pass out. Oh well, Peter wouldn't have a problem catching her before she hit the corporate broadloom. And God, this must be what hysteria felt like. Digging her fingers into Peter's biceps, she hung on for dear life.

Peter nipped her earlobe. "Look at him," he whispered. He swung her around a little so she could peek over his shoulder. Jack was struggling with Harley and Chan, murder in his eye. One chair toppled over, then another. Jack elbowed Harley hard in the gut and he grunted, losing his grip. Only Chan was left, hanging on grimly, hissing curses in what Kate assumed must be Chinese.

"Enough!" Suddenly, Duka loomed behind Jack, as if he'd sprung out of the carpet. A huff of effort and he grabbed first one wrist and then the other, with Chan's enthusiastic assistance. A short flurry and the three men had Jack immobilized, Duka pressed into his spine, his arms twisted behind his back at a painful angle.

Peter slipped his arm around Kate's waist, giving her his unobtrusive support. Truly, he was a darling. "Thank you," she whispered, meaning it.

"Go on," growled Duka in Jack's ear. "Tell her, ye stupid bastard."

"Fuck you." Jack's eyes flashed. "In my own time, all right?"

"Aw." Harley gave a mocking smile. "Shy are ye?"

Jack trod on his foot.

Over the sound of Harley swearing, Jack's voice was so raspy, she could barely hear it. "It's been so long." He cleared his throat. "I didn't think I'd ever— I'd given up."

Kate took a tentative step toward him. "A month isn't too bad."

Jack shook his head. "Lifetimes for me, Kate." He was very pale. "A punishment perhaps. I don't know."

"But—" Kate frowned. "What about the Duchess?" she asked Duka.

"Venetia?" He grinned, brown eyes shining with pleasure. "Doing as she's told, the naughty little darlin'."

Kate turned to Peter. "How did it work out with Tom?"

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An adorable blush suffused Peter's cheeks. "He's fine. Commands the corporate yacht. She's called—"

Kate held up a hand. "Don't tell me. The *Brazen Hussy*, right?"

Peter grinned.

"He still has a cat?"

A nod. "The Lady Meroe's umpty-ump great grand-daughter. And just as snooty as her grandam."

Thoughtfully, Kate considered the four men before her. "Harley and Chan have each other."

Gravely, Chan inclined his head. Harley reached out to ruffle his inky hair, a gesture he avoided with the ease of long practice.

Which meant... Jack had had no one of his own, no one who loved only him, not for God knew how many years.

She didn't realize she'd spoken aloud until Harley said, "Well, just us. But only sometimes, when it got too bad." He sighed. "And his heart wasn't in it, even if the rest of him was." Shaking his head, he loosened the knot of Jack's tie and pulled it off.

"I don't believe it. No women?"

Jack was no longer pale, his high cheekbones ruddy with colour. "I didn't want—None of them were you."

"Idiot," said Harley fondly. He bestowed an affectionate lick under Jack's ear. "Never underestimate the magic of Sweet Sisters Isle."

The Isle. Of course! "The Comte's right. You did put pressure on the islanders, didn't you?"

Jack shot her a look she recognized of old. Pure arrogance and a hundred and ten percent pirate. "I explained what the sly bastard was doing." A fierce grin. "They understood."

"You've been trying to atone," said Kate slowly. "For what you did when you were a pirate. All these years." She caught his eye. "Haven't you?"

Deftly, Chan slipped the first two buttons on Jack's shirt, but he didn't notice. The flush intensified, but he held his head proudly. "Aye. And you, pretty Kate," he shrugged off Duka's grip and the big man stepped back, lips curving smugly, "you're my reward."

Kate raised her chin, meeting that tiger stare head on. "You think?" Though her knees shook, her blood bubbled with the joy of battle. With joy.

Tap, tap, tap.

Funny, she could swear the clicking had a kind of *you go, girl!* flavour to it.

Briskly, Jack tugged his shirt straight only to discover Chan's busy fingers had undone every button.

Kate didn't bother to repress the gurgle of laughter. "Don't worry," she murmured. "You look hot."

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Jack ignored her. "Leave," he ordered the others.

"Do we have to?" whined Harley. "Wanna watch the fireworks."

"That's an order."

"Huh." Harley's downcast expression brightened. He and Chan exchanged a conspiratorial glance. "C'mon, Captain." He stepped right up to Jack.

"Once more fer luck."

Capturing Jack's face in both hands, he took his mouth in a kiss as savage as it was through. No quarter given or asked. Simultaneously, Chan stripped the shirt off Jack's shoulders, eager fingers reaching for tight brown nipples.

Jack's curse of surprise morphed into a groan. Kate's knees turned to water. If it hadn't been for Peter's quick reflexes...

His dark eyes heavy-lidded, Harley pulled back. "Don't fuck it up, man."

Chan leaned forward to take a delicate bite out of a smooth muscular shoulder. "He won't. Will ye, Cap'n?" He ran an appreciative palm over the bulge in Jack's dress slacks.

Wordlessly, Jack shook his head.

Harley gave Kate a smile so sweet, her insides quivered. Then he kissed her, a no nonsense affair beautifully flavoured with Jack. "Ye'll be fine, sweetheart," he murmured into her mouth. "Go get him."

Chan followed, nibbling at Kate's lower lip in a thoughtful sort of way.

His elegant mouth smiled against hers when Jack growled his displeasure. "Be kind to him," he whispered. "Please."

A final pat on her bottom and he scooped up the laptop and papers. "C'mon, Harley. I need a drink." The door closed softly behind the pair of them.

Peter reached out to smooth a hand down Jack's bare chest. "I'm so glad," he said simply, and there were tears in his eyes. Then he wrapped his arms around Kate in an expansive hug. "See you later, sweetie." He pressed a kiss to her cheek, nuzzled her neck and departed, a definite spring in his step.

Silence fell.

"Try to kiss me and I'll deck you," snapped Jack.

Duka's booming laugh shook the walls. "Kissing Kate works much better." He sent her a naughty wink. "Tastes nicer too."

"Don't do it again," warned Jack. "She's mine."

Duka raised a dark brow. "See, ye can say it if ye're mad enough."

"You'll notice I haven't said any such thing," put in Kate, and Duka chuckled.

Engulfing Jack's hand in one of his, he wrung it hard. Then he clapped him on the shoulder, making him stagger. "Be happy, my friend."

He patted Kate gingerly on the shoulder. "You too, darlin'."

"Oh, Duka." Kate went up on tip-toe, flung both arms around his thick neck and tugged his head down so she could press her lips to his. "Thank you."

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Jack yanked her back into his arms, his naked chest hard and warm. "Go."

Duka threw up his hands. "I'm gone."

Footsteps. Another soft snick. Another silence.

For some reason, she couldn't look at Jack.

"Does that door lock?"

She nodded, her heart banging like a drum. Jack's warmth moved away. The lock clicked, such a decisive sound, ominous.

Jack's elegant Italian leather shoes appeared her field of vision. His fingers nudged her chin, forcing her head up. They trembled. "Ye're real, pretty Kate. Not a dream. I had so many dreams." His hazel gaze studied her face, lingering on her eyes, her lips. "When I touch ye—" He swallowed hard. "Oh God."

Kate caught his fingers in hers. No more struggling for dominance. The time for it was over, emotion raw in his expression. All those years of desperate hope and yearning while he paid his penance. Such loneliness.

"How much do you remember?" she asked.

"Every word, every glance, every gorgeous fuck." Jack's mouth twisted. "But I'd begun to think it was all a dream, something so beautiful, so bloody perfect, it could never have happened."

"But the others—"

"I forbad them to speak of you."

"Oh, Jack." The tears spilled over.

With a low cry, Jack caught her to him and his mouth claimed hers, the kiss deep and drugging, going on forever because although he let her up for an occasional breath, he'd take her under again as soon as she finished gasping.

An eternity later, he slowed down, breathing hard, his cheek pressed against hers, his arms like iron bands holding her close. Their skin was slick with tears and Kate wasn't certain they were all hers. Jack - her ruthless, clever pirate - was shaking, so hard that both their bodies vibrated with the tremors.

She found she was murmuring inanities, rocking him against her. "Sshh, I've got you. I'll never leave you, I promise. Oh, my darling, my darling."

It didn't seem possible, but he tightened his grip. "Swear to it," he said fiercely in her ear. "Swear on all you hold holy."

Kate pulled back so she could look deep into the brilliant tiger eyes. "Do you remember I told you I loved you? That I'd never said that to any man?"

"Aye. And I said it back." He let out a gusty breath. "I do love you, Kate. I did then. I do now. I will for eternity. There's no one like you."

"You said you'd have my heart and soul. Remember that?"

"Aye." He rubbed her lower lip with a gentle thumb. "Right after I kissed you. Arrogant shit, wasn't I?"

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Kate laughed. "Yes. But you were right." She cupped his cheek. "You do have my heart and soul. Now and forever."

"And I gave you mine in exchange. That being so..."

He smiled, but his brow was furrowed with tension.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Marry me, Kate?" The moment the words were out, his jaw set.

"Aye," she said, her heart leaping. "I mean yes. Anytime, any place."

He buried his face in the curve between her neck and her shoulder. "Oh, thank Christ." Two deep breaths and he was sliding the jacket off her shoulders, tugging at the buttons of her tailored shirt with urgent fingers.

"Sorry. Can't— Fuck, I can't— Not another minute." Taking the edges of the shirt in both hands, he ripped it open. Buttons pinged off in all directions. "Oh God," he mumbled into her cleavage, his breath searingly hot through the fabric of her bra. "Christ. Kate."

For answer, Kate dragged his head up and fastened her lips to his. She was burning up, erotic heat sizzling up her spine, then spilling down again to plump the lips of her sex. Her thighs were slick with it. So ready for it, for him.

"Yes," she chanted between biting kisses. "Yes, oh God yes!" Lust and love combined like a whirlwind, mind-numbing, blood-boiling, her body aching for him, her core aching to be filled, to be stretched to the point of pain by his hard girth.

Without any discernable effort, Jack hoisted her up onto the table and tilted her backward, one hand skating up under her skirt. Thank God for thigh-highs. One shoe fell off, landing with a muffled thud on the carpet. Kate curled her leg around Jack's waist, her back arching. "C'mon," she panted, reduced to single words. "Now. *Now!*"

But when she reached down, fumbling for his pants, he batted her hand out of the way, dealing with buckle, belt and zipper himself. Mindless, Kate fought, battling to shove her fingers into his briefs and grab.

Aaaah. She tightened her grip on the hot length of silk-steel that leaped into her hand. Every nerve between her legs quivered and shrieked, *Gimme, gimme*, but the effect on Jack was electric.

He threw his head back with a roar, every tendon in his neck taut.

"Let. Go," he gritted, his teeth clenched. "Right. Now."

A little awed, Kate withdrew her hand, unable to resist a slow stroke as she did so, her fingers gliding over the slick smooth head. Jack made an extraordinary whining sound. When he dug his fingers into the side of her panties and tugged sharply, the flimsy fabric parted. In a single motion, he surged forward. His eyes slitted with the intensity of his pleasure. "Fuck." Further. "God, Kate—" And yet further still. "Jaasus!"

She had no breath to scream, she was too full. Filled to the brim with Jack, his scent, his sound, his hard thick flesh. "Love," she gasped. "Love you."

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Slowly, he pulled out, every half inch thrilling against her nerves, her clit clamoring and aching. "Won't—" He slammed forward and she keened. "Last—" Another agonizingly gorgeous withdrawal. "Long."

Abruptly, he picked up speed, hammering into her, only the ferocity of his grip preventing her from sliding right across the polished table. "Sorry." Another anguished snarl. Sweat gleamed in the pit of his throat.

Kate reared up to lick it off, locking her ankles in the small of his back. "Rest of our lives," she panted. "Plenty of—" Jack slammed back in, all the way to the balls, his pubic bone catching her clit just right. "*Aaargh!*"

The climax burst like a rocket in her loins, sped up her spine, collided with the base of her skull and bounced back down, going on and on. Dimly, she heard Jack's shout of completion, felt him freeze, his cock flexing and rippling cradled deep inside. Gratefully, she closed her eyes, shuddering through the aftershocks, clutching him to her, his face buried in her neck.

"Kate, love." When he kissed the tip of her nose, she levered one eye open.

"Mmm."

"You all right?"

"Never better."

She blinked up at his face, redolent of male satisfaction. Except... When she brushed trembling fingers over his eyelashes, they came away wet. "Oh, Jack. Are you all right?"

He gave her a blinding grin. "Never better. See?" He flexed his hips and her eyes opened wide. He was still hard, wedged deep, deep inside. "All we did was take the edge off." His expression became positively feral. "We've got a lot of catching up to do."

"Uh, Jack?"

His face fell. "I did hurt you!"

Kate shook her head. She twinkled. "Could we, ah, stop to take some clothes off this time?"

Jack's startled gaze took in the remains of the shirt and jacket she wore, the bra still fastened and her creased skirt pushed up to her waist. Then he looked down at the briefs and trousers bunched around his thighs. "Good idea. But I'm not pulling out, not for anything."

Kate chuckled. "We'll manage," she said. "It'll be interesting."

Jack grinned like a boy, but the leisurely movement of his hips was all man.

Kate's eyes crossed, but she managed to mutter, "First one naked wins."

Jack's shout of laughter rattled the white board at the far end of the room. "That's my Kate. You're on!"

***

"Kate," said Alice firmly. "That's an incredibly bad idea. You know it is."

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Kate sipped her expresso. "Huh," she said. "I'm the bride. You'd think I might have something to say about the guest list."

Her best friend and prospective matron of honour leaned forward. The wedding band and diamond ring on her left hand caught the light as she tapped on the café table for emphasis. "Look, I'm fine with the beach ceremony on Pirates Island, especially as Jack's paying for travel and accommodation. I'll even let the choice of honeymoon go if Jack's happy with it." A furrow appeared between her brows. "You're sure about that, by the way?"

Kate smiled into her coffee. "Oh yes." Unobtrusively she crossed her legs beneath the table.

"Well, if I was him, I wouldn't want that lot anywhere near you."

"They're his crew," said Kate patiently. Orgies were for special occasions only, Jack had growled, but his eyes gleamed tiger bright at the thought and he'd fucked her so hard she'd had to brace her elbows and hang onto the headboard for fear of concussion. "Which is why they're all groomsmen."

"Which brings us right back to the guest list," persisted Alice. "*Rossetti?* Are you *nuts?*"

"I thought you liked her?" said Kate. "You said if it wasn't for Rossetti and her readers you wouldn't have Will."

Alice's smile took on a beautiful glow. "Yeah, okay, that's true. But she really is crazy, I'm sure of it."

"Oh, I don't know." Kate tilted her head. "Did you read the one about the guys with wings?"

Alice's eyes went all dreamy. "Lot to be said for a man with wings." Snapping out of it, she returned to the attack. "Katie, you can't invite Rossetti to the wedding. You just can't!"

"Don't worry about it." Kate put her cup down with a decisive click. "It's only a courtesy thing. Anyway, she lives in Australia. No chance. She'd never come all that way."

Meeting Alice's gaze, she frowned, biting her lip. "Would she?"

THE END!

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