

*Beneath A
Blazing Sun*



J.A. CLARKE

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To my husband, who braved the wilderness
of my childhood on our honeymoon,
and to my sons, who will experience
the African adventure soon.

Chapter 1



“*Damn*, it’s hot. I tell you, Kat, this is Sheila’s twisted idea of revenge for Italy last year. She decided to send us to Hell. She’s—”

“Oh, stop complaining, Ron! It’s not that bad. Besides, you *wanted* to come.”

Kat Feldman was fast losing patience with her companion. She was tired, sweaty, dirty, and in no mood for his whining. Another trickle of perspiration made its way down her damp side. She tugged again at the high mandarin collar of her neon pink blouse and visualized a large, cold drink.

The colder the better.

Frozen would work.

Then she could rub it all over her body. It crossed her mind that ice in this hotter-than-Hades place might not exist.

“If he doesn’t get here within the next thirty seconds, I swear I’ll sue him. I’ll make him wish he’d never heard of me. What does he think we’re paying him for anyway?”

Kat sighed and slid a tired glance at the tall man sprawled on the floor next to her. She decided the question was rhetorical. Ron Hallman was peeved and well on his way to becoming unreasonable. For the past half hour, he had alternated between trashing the judgement of Sheila, their boss, and

building up a grudge against some poor jerk he hadn't even met yet.

He sat with his back propped against a grimy wall; his belongings scattered in untidy disarray around him. His head was tipped back, his eyes half closed. The designer khakis he wore were crumpled and wilted and looked out of place—more like a poor attempt at a Halloween costume—on a lean, muscled body that typically filled a virgin wool suit to perfection. A full day's growth of dark beard covered the lower part of his face, obscuring the too-handsome features and lending him a piratical air. Sweat matted his curly hair and dripped off the tip of his perfect aquiline nose.

Most days, Ron—with his successful, sophisticated, well-groomed appearance—could have stepped out of the pages of GQ.

But not today. Today, he didn't look like anyone's idea of the consummate male cover model.

He looked distinctly frazzled.

Kat bit her lower lip and suppressed a hysterical urge to giggle. If only she had the energy, she'd try to find her camera. This picture would be outstanding blackmail material back at the offices of their decorating company, Designs and Dreams.

Not that, in her present condition, she would take any prizes.

This place was the pits. It had been pure torture getting here and her own bedraggled appearance testified to that. She could care less though after thirty-six long hours of grueling travel—of being bounced around in planes that rattled and groaned every time they hit an air pocket, of being stuck in a seat that refused to recline, of being forced to use a restroom that had become progressively grubbier and smellier, of delays and rescheduled flights.

The last layover hadn't been her idea of fun either. The welcome committee had consisted of guards toting some wicked looking weapons, and the pockmarked walls of the

airport had attested to their use. Any thought of sightseeing during their four hour wait had promptly died.

At least there were no guards or guns in evidence here. She should be grateful.

She followed her companion's example and leaned her head against the wall, too tired to care that it was less than clean. A fly buzzed with annoying persistence around her ear, and she felt its touch on her nose. Half-heartedly, she batted at it. She was entering a curious stage of apathy where all that mattered was the overwhelming desire to close her eyes and sink into oblivion.

Exhaustion made her body ache. Every muscle screamed with the need to be horizontal on a soft surface in a cool room. Preferably back in the United States. So far, this so-called business trip with its thin veneer of a vacation was not at all what Sheila had promised. Quite the opposite, in fact. And as soon as she got some sleep and had cleaned the sludge from her brains, she intended to tell her boss so in no uncertain terms.

Through a haze of fatigue-induced disorientation, she observed the scene around her. The lobby of the small airport was emptying out. Everyone on the small propeller plane that had delivered them here seemed to have been met or had made some other kind of arrangement.

A few yards away, the British couple from the seats directly in front of them on the plane was having a heated discussion with the car rental clerk—something about the vehicle he wanted to give them not being what they had reserved.

Two Indian women swathed in colorful saris walked by laughing and chattering, oblivious to two people half lying on the floor. A bored airline official leaned on the ticket counter and stared into space. The area was bare of furniture—in contradiction to the welcome signs hanging on every wall—no doubt a discouragement to loiterers who also had one or two signs dedicated to them.

A gust of air blew through the open doors. It brought with it another blast of heat and dust. The scent of livestock and the elusive, sweet perfume of some exotic bloom mixed with the unpleasant smell of stale urine. Curiosity and interest were briefly piqued. If she wasn't so tired, she'd be tempted to get up and go outside to—

“Ms. Katherine Feldman and Mr. Ron Hallman?” The voice, deep and gravel-rough, came from somewhere on the other side of Ron.

It produced an instant effect on Kat's tired body. A strange heat curled her toes and raced up her legs to the apex of her thighs, then even further to her breasts where it wrapped around her nipples until they tightened and hardened in pleasurable discomfort.

That Voice didn't belong here in the heat and brightness of day. It belonged in the deep, dark hours of the night, in her dreams, attached to all the male fantasy figures that had come and gone over the years. It was weird, she mused, the way fantasy and reality sometimes got all mixed up. Her eyes still observed her surroundings, but the rest of her seemed to have succumbed to unconsciousness.

In slow dream-motion, she swung her head around.

A pair of heavy hiking boots and thick socks came into her line of vision. And rising in glorious nakedness from them were two beautifully molded, heavily furred male legs. Her dreams, Kat thought with happy anticipation, had never been this exquisitely detailed before.

She examined the legs with care. A white scar slashed across one knee. Muscles bunched in the sturdy thighs. The legs shifted. The muscles flexed. She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue and continued her slow, intent perusal of the dream-image.

With a vague sense of regret, her eyes encountered the barrier of mid-thigh length khaki shorts, and traveled up over narrow hips and lean waist to a pale blue camp shirt. The

man's head, wearing some sort of a narrow-brimmed hat, was a shadowy outline against the brilliance of the day outside. It didn't seem to matter that she couldn't see his face. She would just lie here and stare at those gorgeous legs until she woke up.

"Roarke? Jackson Roarke? It's about time you showed up. I'm sweltering in this place. The air-conditioning is broken."

Good grief! What was Ron doing in her dream? And sounding pissed off, too.

The Voice was amused. "Welcome to Africa, Mr. Hallman. I'm Jackson Roarke, and, no, it isn't."

"What do you mean, 'it isn't'?"

"The air conditioning isn't broken." The Voice was also patient and very polite. And sexy. So very sexy.

"Well, if it isn't broken, why is it a hundred degrees in here?"

Ron wasn't at his brightest and there was no doubt he was becoming belligerent. Kat waited in eager anticipation for the answer from the Voice. The legs in front of her shifted. She blinked hard and focused with fierce concentration. The smooth front of the khaki shorts had taken on an interesting...

"This is Africa, Mr. Hallman. In these parts, air conditioning is a rarity. Are you ready to go?"

"Wha—? Wait just a damn minute. Do you mean to tell me that even *the hotel* doesn't have it?"

"No, not where we'll be tonight. Nor will most of the other places where we'll be staying. Don't worry. You'll get used to it. We really should go. Your friend, Ms. Feldman here, looks like she needs some rest. Is she all right?"

Kind, too, Kat thought dreamily. There was without a doubt a tinge of concern in the Voice.

"She's fine," Ron snapped. "And we're not staying. I'm booking us on the next flight out. *Damn* Sheila! What was she thinking? Next time she wants authentic 'primitive', she can get it herself!"

Ron's whine grew fainter and Kat felt a stirring of concern. He couldn't possibly mean what he said, could he? No way

could she climb back on a plane right away. It was just a mental impossibility, not to mention physical.

The legs shifted again and she watched in fascination as they bent at the knees. In one fluid motion, chest replaced legs in her line of vision.

“Ms. Feldman? Are you okay?”

“Umm.” Well, that was really intelligent. Kat tried without success to clear the fog from her mind. Not only her body, but now her mouth wouldn’t obey her brain signals. She wanted him to stand up again so she could go back to looking at his legs.

“Long trip, I know.” The Voice held an overtone of amusement again. “We’ll have you in bed in a jiffy. The hotel isn’t far. Wait just a moment while I see if I can help the couple at the car rental desk.”

Bed! What a wonderful thought. And the way he said it raised an image in her mind that caused a dozen different nerve endings to do an energetic little dance.

The hands hanging clasped between his legs moved to brace themselves on his knees as he prepared to rise. Kat felt a frisson of panic. He couldn’t go yet. There was something important she needed to ask. Pushing the intrusive image of two naked bodies aside, she managed to croak out, “Ron?”

“Don’t worry. He’s not going anywhere. There aren’t any more flights out today and, this time of year, most are booked up anyway. Excuse me, please.” The boots thumped away.

Unwilling to lose sight of the legs or their owner, who seemed prepared to take on the responsibility of getting her to the place she most wanted to be, Kat turned her head with some effort to follow their progress. As they strode further away from her and approached the British couple, it became evident the beautiful limbs were attached to an equally fascinating rear end. The roll and shift of tight muscles mesmerized her.

When the legs stopped all too soon, a deep groan of

disappointment welled out of her throat. The sound was way too loud in a sudden pocket of quiet. Much ritual hand shaking and gesturing commenced in the group of three, then the legs turned and started back toward her accompanied by two other pairs.

“God, I hate this place already.” Ron’s voice was an unwelcome intrusion into her fantasy. “No flights out today. The guy barely understood English—or pretended not to. Wasn’t about to put himself out to help me, either.”

“It’s okay. I just want to go to bed, anyway.” Three pairs of legs were almost upon them.

“Poor baby. You *do* look absolutely exhausted. Want me to carry you to the car?” Ron asked.

“Huh?” An unwelcome shaft of reality penetrated the fog of insulating exhaustion. Six years of friendship had taught her that a sympathetic and nurturing Ron wasn’t necessarily a good thing. She was too tired to figure out if his motivation, this time, was harmless or suspect.

“Come on!” He grasped her arm and hauled her to her feet. She was unprepared. Her legs felt like cooked spaghetti noodles and she sagged against him. “Whoa! Let’s get a little cooperation here,” he muttered in her ear. He grabbed her around her waist and pulled her close against his side.

“Need some help?” The Voice, a note of concern in it, came from behind them.

“No, I’ve got her. I’ll take care of her. Could you grab the luggage?”

Kat’s fuzzy brain tried to form an objection. Ron’s condescending tone was inexcusable and she didn’t appreciate becoming his possession. She made a feeble move in the direction of the Voice.

“Come *on*,” Ron hissed in her ear. “Or do you want Tarzan here slinging you over his shoulder?” His arm tightened around her waist. Her feet left the ground for an instant as he swung her around then proceeded to drag her toward the

source of blinding light.

“Wouldn’t mind, actually,” Kat mumbled, enthralled by the picture of herself hanging upside down with a close-up view of those delicious buns.

“You’re delirious, darling. He’s definitely not your type. But don’t worry. I’ll make sure he keeps his distance.”

Regret and puzzlement juggled in Kat’s tired brain. In all the time she had known him, Ron had never been wrong about any of her romantic choices. Rebellion sparked a brief energy surge. If she wanted to lust after someone, *goddamnit*, she would lust. Ron wasn’t her keeper and certainly didn’t belong in her fantasies. She opened her mouth to tell him so just as they stepped through the doors.

Instant fire enveloped her. The full blast of heat from the African sun at midday made her stumble and clutch at her companion, who didn’t seem to be faring much better. Brilliant color slashed and puddled randomly across an alien landscape. It seared her eyeballs and sent a piercing shaft of pain across her temples.

She heard Ron groan and curse under his breath. He tightened his grip around her waist and together they staggered toward the only vehicle in sight, a white mini-bus with *Spirit of Africa Tours* emblazoned on the side.

“Joseph?”

Jackson Roarke stood in the shade of the airport terminal’s overhang and watched as the tall man and petite woman reeled across the narrow street. They were a striking pair. The man, dark and lean, was a perfect contrast to the fragile, blonde beauty at his side. She was a porcelain doll if there ever was one.

Despite himself, he wondered at their relationship. Separate rooms all the way, but that didn’t mean anything. Something about Hallman made him think his sexual preferences might tend in another direction, but that didn’t always mean anything either.

And the expression on the blonde's face when she had given him a thorough inspection, then lingered on certain parts of his anatomy had indicated more than a slight interest—in him. She was exhausted—clearly not in control of her actions—and there wasn't any doubt in his mind he should ignore the whole incident. But there was the matter of his own reaction.

Fierce and instant arousal.

It mystified him.

She wasn't his type.

Impatiently, he dismissed the thought. Instead of wondering about his clients' sexual habits, he should be worrying about their stamina and ability to fit in. City born and bred, the both of them, trouble with a capital "T", he would wager a month's pay that neither one of them had a clue what the next three weeks would hold.

He glanced at the British couple at his side. Sensibly dressed in cool cotton clothing, they both wore sturdy walking shoes. Hats and sunglasses were now in evidence. Their faces bore looks of eager anticipation.

A curse drifted across the road. Jackson looked around in time to see Miss Porcelain stumble in her high heels. He winced.

What had his cousin been thinking when she'd maneuvered him into making a place for the two of them on the tour? Knowing Sheila, it could be payback for some childhood offense he'd long forgotten. Or maybe he'd missed her birthday, although God only knew he had it written down in enough places.

"Joseph?" he called again with a touch of impatience.

"Yes, sir?" A smiling dark face materialized from somewhere behind him.

"There you are." With a sense of relief at having to deal with the mundane tasks of his job, Jackson introduced his chauffeur/guide/cook to the British couple at his side, then motioned toward the bus. "Help Ms. Feldman, Mr. Hallman, and the Gordons here, then come back for the rest of their

luggage, will you?"

An unaccountable curiosity made him delay long enough to watch Joseph run across the street. His assistant opened the door of the mini-bus with a cheerful greeting and a flourish. Hallman promptly abandoned the woman and tumbled into the vehicle. Without hesitation, he chose the best seat for himself.

The woman seemed uncertain about what to do and Jackson understood her dilemma instantly. In that bright pink silk blouse and pearl gray skirt, she was dressed as if she planned to spend a day at the office—an office in a big city. She even wore pantyhose, for God's sake, and the skirt couldn't have been much tighter. It was the kind of skirt that turned heads—male heads—when it was worn on the right body. There was no question it had found the right owner.

But it was just tight enough that she would have a challenge navigating the high step into the bus.

His interest fully engaged now, he folded his arms, propped himself against the wall and waited to see what she would do.

Predictably, she twisted first one way then the other. She tried to raise a leg high enough to lever herself into the vehicle. Just as predictably, her attempts failed. With a sudden, impatient movement, she hiked the skirt up to mid-thigh and knelt on the narrow step of the bus. Swinging her legs around, she reached for the bar to pull herself up. Unfortunately, Joseph decided at that particular moment that Madam needed help. His grasp on her arm made her lose her balance. She fell face first into the vehicle.

What ensued was an undignified scramble, a spectacular display of flashing, slender legs, abject apologies and more useless help from an embarrassed Joseph, polite pretense of not noticing from the Gordons and complete indifference from the man in the bus before the petite blonde was ensconced firmly in her seat.

Grinning, Jackson turned away and strode back into the airport to collect several suitcases from the large assortment of

luggage his charges had deemed necessary for the trip. With a sense of grim satisfaction, he looked forward to the moment he would have to remind them they were restricted to two pieces each on the tour.

As he walked out into the blazing sun and heat again, he hoped the blonde had brought more suitable clothing. Pantyhose and high heels were a rare enough sight on the streets of the town here and never in evidence where they would be traveling except, perhaps, on women of doubtful character.

On the short trip to the hotel, he gave the standard welcoming speech and pointed out features of interest in the simmering African landscape to an interested audience of two. Hallman, sprawled in his seat, had adopted an air of boredom and clearly wasn't listening to anything. Katherine Feldman, wilted and listless, her honey-blonde head drooping on her slender neck, sat with eyes half closed, equally oblivious.

It was going to be a helluva trip.

Chapter 2



Something wrenched Kat from a deep, restorative sleep. Heart racing, she jerked upright and blinked at the shadowed room.

A series of terrible, gut-wrenching screeches came from outside the window. Someone pounded on the door and Ron's voice, impatient and loud, called, "Kat? *Katherine?* Time to wake up, darling. Come on, open—" *Bang!* "—the—" *Bang!* "—door!" *Bang!*

Another blood-curdling screech made her freeze in terror. Visions of naked savages from ancient movies flashed through her mind. Forgotten news reports of attacks on tourists somewhere on the Dark Continent sprang to life. The realization that she was in Africa convinced her she was about to be murdered in her bed.

"Kat, are you in there?"

She forced her mouth open. Not a sound, not even the smallest squeak, came out.

"*Katherine!*"

Another screech unlocked her frozen limbs. Galvanized to action, she threw back the bed covers, only to discover she was naked. In desperation, she surveyed the room but failed to see clothes or luggage in evidence anywhere. Snatching up the bed

cover, she wrapped it around herself and stumbled to the door.

The bolt proved stubborn and she ripped a nail before it finally slid back. Flinging open the door, she launched herself at the tall male body on the other side. Long arms wrapped around her and lent momentary comfort.

“Ron! What’s happening? Are we being attacked?”

“Attacked? What are you babbling about, darling?”

“D—don’t you hear it? Outside my window. Someone’s being beaten up. Do—?”

“It’s the resident monkeys, Ms. Feldman. They’re just playing.” The deep, gravel voice, soothing, reassuring and oh, so faintly amused, came from somewhere behind Ron.

Kat stilled. All her senses went into high alert. Her face was buried in Ron’s shirt. She was standing half-naked in a public hallway with two men, maybe more for all she knew. And she had a terrible suspicion she had just made an incredible fool of herself.

The faint hope that she was still in the grip of a nightmare vanished when she sneezed suddenly, bumping her nose on the unyielding surface of a male chest. Ron’s very expensive cologne saturated her nostrils. Her dreams had never smelled before.

“Hey, Kat.” Ron’s arms still hugged her. “We just wanted to bring you your luggage. For some reason, it all got dumped in my room last night, and your door was already locked by the time I discovered it.”

“Oh.” Kat could care less about the luggage. She was busy wondering how in the world she was going to get herself out of this predicament with whatever dignity she had left still intact. Unable to help herself, she turned her head to one side and encountered the most piercing gaze she had ever seen.

Jackson Roarke.

Her bare toes curled on the hard, cool surface of the cement floor. All her nerve endings seemed to be vibrating at once. This wasn’t the first time her body had reacted this way. A dis-

tinct memory from the day before made her drop her gaze. Today, the legs were covered by tan pants. Reluctantly, she looked up.

Slate gray eyes marbled with cobalt blue examined her from a tanned, square-jawed face. His nose was crooked, perhaps it had been broken at some point, but that only lent interest to the strong masculine features. Thick medium-brown hair, an unremarkable shade, swept back from his forehead and was tinged with silver at his ears. Ron had two to three inches on him in height and beat him hands down in the beauty department. But, Kat told herself, as she tried not to stare and failed—Ron had never been her fantasy man.

An awkward silence was broken when Roarke said, “I trust you slept well, Ms. Feldman. You were pretty beat yesterday.”

“Ah, yes, thank you.” Kat gathered her courage and pushed herself away from the dubious anchor of Ron’s chest. Clutching the cover to her breasts with both hands, she jerked her head in the direction of the room behind her. “Please excuse me. I think, ah, I should get dressed now.”

She started to back into the room. To her horror, the two men seemed to think they had been issued an invitation and followed with her belongings. Roarke bore the biggest pieces.

He set them down by the bed and strolled back to the door. “You missed breakfast but, if you’re hungry, I’ll have the dining room leave something for you.”

In response, her stomach gave a loud rumble. “Th-Thank you. I’d appreciate that.” Good grief, what time *was* it?

Ron had established himself on her bed looking, for all intents and purposes, as if he belonged there. “Go ahead.” He waved a casual hand. “I’ll wait while you get dressed.”

For an instant, Kat was stymied. Then, with a quick glance at Roarke’s departing back, she pointed at the door and hissed, “*Out!*”

“It’s okay.” Ron lay back with his hands under his head. “I really don’t mind waiting.”

Kat lost her patience and stamped her bare foot on a floor that was too hard. “What’s the matter with you? *Out! Now!*”

Ron grinned, rolled off the bed and followed Roarke to the door. “What’s the matter with *you*, darling. It isn’t as if I haven’t seen you in the nude before.”

Yes, he had, she thought, reminded of the time Ron had caught her in Sheila’s hot tub, but Roarke didn’t need to know that. Outraged, she slammed the door behind them both. The cover dropped to the floor as she used both hands to massage her temples.

In utter disbelief, she heard the door open again.

“Jackson thought you might want to know how to get to—Whoops! Sorry, darling.”

Through spread fingers, she saw both men do a thorough survey of her naked body. Then Roarke smiled—a slow, unapologetic, *interested* smile—before he reached around Ron to pull the door closed.

She shuddered and took a deep breath.

Another primal screech came from outside.

The nightmare, it seemed, was determined to continue.

She stretched out a trembling hand and wrestled with the bolt on the door. The bed would be an excellent place to hide out for a day or so until she could arrange to flee into the country. Not that she could expect to get any sleep with mayhem in process. Her stomach chose that moment to send a loud reminder.

Food! *Coffee!*

That’s what she needed. Good old room service. Once she had something in her stomach, the world would appear rational and sane again. She looked around the room for a phone.

There wasn’t one. Nor was there a TV or even a radio.

The room contained minimal furnishings in the form of a single bed with a mosquito net hanging above it, a ceiling fan, a small wicker bedside table, a rattan floor mat and a narrow wardrobe. An open doorway next to the wardrobe raised a

vague memory from the night before of a bathroom and a cool shower. Enough light edged around the multi-colored, rough-weave drapes to indicate it was another bright sunny day—in *Africa!*

All of a sudden, the commotion outside took on a whole new meaning. Excitement and natural curiosity gripped her. She was in untamed, exotic Africa and there were wild animals right outside her room. Snatching up the cover again, she hurried over to the window and parted the curtains. As her eyes adjusted to the brightness, she stared in delight.

And fell in love.

A lush, emerald green lawn stretched away to a tall dense hedge over the top of which she could see the peaks of a forested mountain. The lawn was dotted with brilliant bougainvillea, frangipani and deserted guest tables topped by thickly thatched umbrellas. Outside her window, a large, flat-canopied tree cast a wide circle of dappled shade. And on the ground beneath it, three furry little creatures squabbled with fierce concentration over a small pile of bananas.

Her stomach rumbled in protest again. Sighing, she dropped the curtain, turned back into the room, and noticed for the first time the clothes she had worn yesterday half kicked under the bed. The only way *she* was going to get any food, it seemed, was to brave this strange world and find the dining room—and hope that her host had made himself scarce.

The bathroom was even more Spartan than the bedroom, but it was clean and serviceable. She stepped into the shower stall, yanked the plastic curtain closed and twisted both faucets. An ominous rumble sounded right before a spray of icy water hit her mid-chest. It took some coaxing and a minute of fluctuating extremes before she achieved the perfect temperature.

Sighing in contentment, she tilted her head back and stared straight at the largest spider she had ever seen out of a cage. Flat and brown, it hung menacing and motionless in a corner of the shower, a predator waiting for opportunity. Kat was not

fond of spiders.

She edged backwards where she could keep an eye on it better. Only to discover the spider was not the sole creature with which she shared her shower.

A flicker of motion a few inches away from the web became a colony of black ants travelling in a thin, regimented line across the top of the wall. The line disappeared somewhere beyond the confines of the stall.

Kat reached for the soap and inspected the rest of the small area. When it revealed no other surprises, she turned a wary eye back on the spider. A shriek escaped her before she could help it. A small reptilian head poked through a vent near the ceiling. Snakes were at the top of the list of things that didn't give her warm fuzzies. She froze, the soap her only weapon. But when the creature slithered out of the vent, it revealed it had legs, which it used to disappear behind an exposed rafter.

Kat had never showered so fast in her life.

The contents of her suitcase puzzled her.

What had she been thinking when she packed? Certainly not about *this* trip, her fourth so far this year. The last three weeks had been a roller coaster of crazy, hectic confusion ever since Sheila had announced that she and Ron had to go to Africa to source genuine handcrafts for an important client who was redecorating an entire wing of her house. And why not combine it with some fun while they were at it? Sheila knew of a tour company that would show them Africa in all it's raw magnificent beauty while, at the same time, provide invaluable assistance with their search.

"Raw, magnificent beauty—right!" Kat muttered, rejecting one piece of clothing after another. Sheila's phobias about things that crawled and slithered were worse than hers. She was beginning to understand why her boss hadn't made the trip herself.

Trying to finish up a major job, Kat had been working twelve to thirteen-hour days and had almost not made it to the

clinic to get her necessary shots. Three hours before the plane left, she had run from her client to her safe-deposit box to grab her passport, and thrown clothes into her suitcase without even thinking about it. Her unconscious choice of clothes was more suited to business lunches in London than the dusty wilds of Africa.

She gave up trying to find a piece of clothing with even a hint of cotton in it. She would have to go shopping.

For the first time, she realized she didn't have a clue what their schedule was. The packet of tour literature that had sat unopened on her coffee table for days didn't seem to have made it into her suitcase. She dressed in the most casual outfit she had—a dramatic, mid-calf length, black and brown patterned silk skirt gathered at the waist, and its companion long-sleeved black silk top. Remembering the stifling heat of the day before, she ignored the pantyhose in the suitcase and dug out the only pair of flat shoes she had brought along, black pumps that made up in looks what they lacked in comfort. From habit, she brushed her hair back and fixed it in a tight knot at her nape, then quickly applied minimal make-up.

By the time she was finished, the clamoring in her stomach was making her nauseous. It wasn't just that she was hungry, she dreaded having to face Roarke again. Even now the hour-old memory of their last encounter warmed her face. She faced the door, clenched her hands into fists and took a deep breath. She would *not* let it bother her. Why should she care that he had seen her naked? He was nothing to her.

If only her body would forget his molten lava look.

She shuddered, screwed up her courage and opened the door.

The short walk from her room to the main building was a feast for the senses. Bougainvillea rioted in a colorful bower of magenta blossoms over the walkway and kept off the worst of the blazing sun. Flower beds, filled to overflowing with lush tropical blooms of every hue, spilled down shallow banks and created a magnificent contrast to the clipped perfection of the

lawn. Birds she didn't recognize darted about in shrubs and trees voicing their presence in sometimes-melodious warbles and sometimes-discordant squawks. The air was saturated with the freshness of a rainstorm that must have come and gone overnight. But there was a faint tang of smoke as well, an odor of cooking food, a whiff of scent from some flower. A smiling gardener, the only person in sight, pointed her in the direction of the dining room.

A few minutes later, she settled into a wicker chair, relieved there was no sign of Roarke. There was no sign of anyone, for that matter, and she was starving. She looked around. A buffet table to one side held several carafes of juice and large serving bowls of cereal.

She sighed and got up again. This must be the food Roarke had requested be left for her. So much for hot croissants or perhaps a bagel. She helped herself to a bowl of Cornflakes and orange juice and picked up a newspaper left on another table. Coffee, it seemed, was too much to expect.

Nothing much outside of local politics and sports was reported in the paper. There was a small article on poaching and a half page description of some society event. She was munching on Cornflakes and looking through the advertisements trying to figure out what town she was in, when an all too familiar voice said, "Feeling better?"

She dropped the spoon with a clatter into the almost empty bowl as Roarke slid his big body into the delicate chair beside her. It released an alarming creak. He clutched a steaming cup of coffee in one fist.

"Fine. Thanks." Except for the cartwheels in her stomach.

"A good night's sleep and food can do wonders." Amusement lurked in his gray eyes. Amusement and a certain knowing, as if he realized all too well what his presence did to her.

She looked away. Her heart pounded so hard she could hardly breathe. Her palms had become slippery with sweat.

The heat that swept in a wave across her face had nothing to do with the warmth of the day. She *had* to get a grip. The man was far too confident and she wasn't about to get sucked into some sexual mind game to satisfy his male ego.

"Everything okay with your room?"

She nodded. "Yes, thanks. Except for the audience in the bathroom." The words popped out of her mouth of their own accord and, as soon as they were uttered, she realized how they sounded. Her face burned. She risked a glance at him.

One eyebrow was lifted. His eyes still held a glint of amusement, but his face was otherwise expressionless. "Audience?"

"Bugs and... things."

"Ah. Spiders, ants, mosquitoes—that kind of audience?"

She nodded again and darted another look at him to see if he was making fun of her.

He said with perfect seriousness, "Get used to it. This is Africa. All part of the experience. I hope you're not squeamish about that sort of thing?"

"No, of course not," she lied. She eyed the mug cradled between his two large hands. The delicious, compelling aroma that wafted from it was driving her crazy. "Where'd you get that?"

His fingers tightened on the handle, then relaxed. "It's yours. I thought you might like some and had Joseph bribe the kitchen staff. Instant, I'm afraid." He pushed the cup toward her.

She ducked her head and murmured her thanks. The man was downright scary. Now he was reading her mind and had guessed her one addiction. Her day couldn't start without coffee and couldn't continue without multiple cups. With some reluctance, she picked up the mug that, just moments before, she had coveted so fiercely.

"It won't poison you. At least I don't think it will. Don't care for coffee myself."

Strike one, Kat thought. She watched him over the rim of the cup. And anyone who didn't share her passion for coffee was bound to have other peculiarities. Strike two—he seemed to find much about her to amuse him. Why was it...? She took a sip of the steaming liquid, gagged and burst into a fit of coughing.

“Steady!”

A sharp whack between her shoulder blades made her eyes water even more. She heaved in a great gulp of air and scowled at her would-be savior. “I'm *not* choking, thank you. It's the coffee or whatever it is. It's the most godawful stuff I've ever tasted.”

“Yeah?” The expression on Roarke's face was suspect as he peered at her cup. She could have sworn she saw a twitch at the corners of his mouth. “I suppose I should have warned you. Joseph does have a reputation for making a, er, *robust* cup of coffee. Sorry!”

He looked anything but, Kat thought. In fact, he looked rather smug. And she detested smugness almost as much as she detested being put under a microscope. Which is how she felt every time he pinned her with that gray gaze. Strike three.

She shifted. How could she be so attracted to the man and so repelled at the same time? And how on earth was she going to tolerate three weeks of his company?

“Did you see the Vervets?”

The question interrupted her brooding contemplation of the mystery liquid. She stared at him. “I beg your pardon.”

“Did you see the Vervets? The monkeys?”

“Oh, ah... yes.” She felt another wave of heat race across her face. She didn't appreciate the reminder of that most embarrassing incident.

In silent desperation, she prayed for her uninvited companion to go away and took an unconscious gulp of the dark liquid in the cup. The second time around, the flavor wasn't such a shock.

Roarke sat relaxed in the wicker chair and didn't look as if he planned on going anywhere any time soon. His clothes were the same style as yesterday—practical, comfortable, only different in color. He seemed content to just sit and observe her.

Didn't he, Kat thought in mounting irritation, have anything else to do? And where were the others in the tour group? Ron, had made himself scarce. She glanced around the deserted room, hoping someone would materialize and get her out of what was becoming the most awkward situation of her life.

"They've gone into town."

The calm statement had an extraordinary effect. Kat's nerves shattered. She slammed the cup on the table and swung her head back to Roarke. "You are *the* most... How do you *do* that?"

"Do what?" He hadn't moved. The big body was still relaxed. But his eyes had narrowed, making it difficult to interpret his expression.

"You know what I'm talking about. *That!* Reading my mind." She was appalled to find she had leaned over the table to emphasize her point. The cool gray eyes were just inches away.

A slow smile crossed his face. *Sexy. Potent. Lethal.*

"You have a very transparent face," was all he said in a mild tone.

"And you find me quite amusing, don't you?"

"Among other things." His face was expressionless again but the Voice sent its own message racing through her body, heating her insides, raising her heartbeat to an uncomfortable rate. She was confused to the point of tears. The man thought she was an idiot and her body wanted to jump into bed with him. She *had* to get away from him.

"Well, go find someone else to entertain you." Kat broke eye contact with great effort and pushed herself up from the table. "I have other things to—"

"Sit, please!" He hadn't moved, and his tone and posture

conveyed calm expectancy as if it never occurred to him that she would resist.

Rebellion whipped through her. Dominating males did not go over big in her book. With great deliberation, she focused at a point just above his head and started to step away from the table. Her hand caught on something. She looked down, horrified, just in time to see her half-empty glass of orange juice spill across the table, soaking the pristine white cloth. She reached for a napkin.

“Leave it!” A vice clamped around her forearm and jerked her back into her seat.

Open-mouthed with shock, Kat stared at the hard masculine face now so close she felt his breath caress her skin. The gleam was gone from his eyes. He was no longer amused.

“We’re not done talking, and I don’t need any prima donnas on this trip.”

“How dare you. Take your hands off me.”

“I will if you promise not to run away.” For some odd reason, the softening of his face and voice reassured her, warmed her, calmed her temper. He must have sensed the change in her mood because he gave a slight nod and withdrew his hand, but kept his position as intimately close as a lover’s.

“What I find,” he said very softly, “is that I have an extraordinary attraction to you. But I do intend to ignore it because I have a job to do, and to become involved with a customer would be unethical. You also have a job to do and I will provide you with all the assistance I can. We’re going to be seeing a lot of each other over the next three weeks, Ms. Feldman. I assure you that will not be a problem for me. Will it be one for you?”

Kat studied her torn fingernail and tried to find a coherent thought. She managed to shake her head.

“Good. I also find that you are incredibly unprepared for this trip which *is* a problem. Did you read any of the tour literature?”

Kat heard the words, but her mind was more interested in listening to her body. It was a mass of raw nerve endings. The place where he had held her wrist screamed a need to have that warm, hard touch back. No one had ever been so honest and direct, or aroused such instant and inexplicable feelings before. And he wasn't going to *do* anything about it. She didn't know whether to be relieved, insulted or disappointed. She reached for the mug and took another gulp of the stygian brew. The thick, heavy flavor was growing on her.

"Kat?"

"What?" She blinked and focused her gaze on his chin.

"Did you read the tour literature?"

She thought of the stack of mail sitting on her coffee table. "I didn't have time. I'm sorry," she said weakly.

"Did you get your shots and are you taking prophylactics for malaria?" His voice sharpened.

"Yes," she said, relieved she had done something right and only because Sheila and Ron had reminded her enough times. It didn't seem to make much difference with Roarke. His face bore an expression of faint disapproval.

She felt compelled to justify herself. "I didn't want to make this trip. I was busy and way overbooked with other projects."

"So why did you make the trip?"

Good question, Kat thought. Why had she let Sheila talk her into it? Ron was Sheila's assistant for this particular client, and Ron should have been able to handle it by himself. But the client, apparently, had been quite specific and Sheila had been convinced Kat's special touch was needed. Ron, far from being offended, had added his own entreaties.

Roarke looked expectant. Kat sighed. "Because the client is very important to us. We get a lot of referrals from her. And because Sheila asked me to." Bullied described it better. This time Sheila had been like a dog with a bone, brushing aside all Kat's objections that she had a full schedule.

"Your boss? Couldn't you have refused? Last I checked, the

United States was still a free country. Would you have lost your job?"

"Of course not!" He was starting to irritate her again. "Sheila is a terrific boss. She just... gets these wild ideas... sometimes."

"I see. Well, since you're here, we'll make the best of a wild idea, I suppose. Let's start with your clothing." He leaned forward and his eyes made a deliberate sweep of her body, leaving her feeling as if she'd been stripped and found wanting. "Is that your idea of comfortable dress?"

"It's the best I have," she snapped. "I told you. I was busy and didn't plan very well."

"No kidding." He sat back again. "We're going to be travelling in some rough areas, Ms. Feldman. I suggest you use this afternoon to acquire a more suitable wardrobe. And be sure to include some sturdy walking shoes."

Kat narrowed her eyes. It didn't help her temper to be told to do something she had already decided to do. "Are you always this overbearing with your guests, Mr. Roarke?" She kept her tone polite.

"No, Ms. Feldman, just with the ones who don't seem to be able to take care of themselves." The gleam was back in his eyes. The bastard was enjoying himself at her expense again!

"You know something? You're an insufferable, arrogant jerk!"

Roarke threw back his head and laughed. It was a deep-throated roar of genuine amusement and it sent shivers running down her spine and into the tips of her toes. Her traitorous body *still* hadn't got the message.

"We're beginning to understand each other, Ms. Feldman. I'll have Joseph drive you into town." He rose to his feet with a fluid, lazy grace. "The group meets after dinner tonight on the veranda to review the itinerary. It would be good of you to grace us with your presence."

Jackson almost laughed out loud again as he strode through the swinging doors to the kitchen where he knew he'd find his assistant. The prissy blonde had some backbone. He hadn't enjoyed a skirmish like that with a woman in a long time. Hadn't ever been called an insufferable, arrogant jerk by one either.

The next few weeks might prove more entertaining than he'd thought.

If he could keep his damn libido under control.

Her face, only inches away from his just minutes ago, had been an almost uncontrollable temptation. He had badly wanted to taste that perfectly made-up mouth. His lips still tingled with frustrated anticipation.

"Joseph, Ms. Feldman needs a ride into town. Drop her off at Bartel's, please. She's got some clothes shopping to do."

"Yes, sir." Joseph rose with obvious reluctance to his feet, and dug in the pocket of his shorts for the mini-bus keys.

Jackson grinned. "It's all right, Joseph. You redeemed yourself after yesterday with your coffee. She loved it." This exaggerated reassurance didn't seem to improve his employee's confidence any. Joseph threw him a doubtful look and left the room, a look of pure apprehension on his face.

With a nod to the skeleton kitchen staff enjoying a lazy pre-lunch break, Jackson walked out the back door and down the path leading to the guestrooms. His grin faded as he thought about the petite blonde now in Joseph's care.

If he thought it would do any good, he would call his conniving cousin and demand an explanation. But he was beginning to understand all too well the motivation behind the presence of his cousin's two employees on this particular tour. The acquisition of a few handcrafts was a thin excuse. Sheila was up to her matchmaking again. What puzzled him was where Hallman fit into it all.

A monkey scampered fearlessly across his path. With idle interest, he turned his head to follow its progress. The image of

a terrified Kat throwing herself into Hallman's arms this morning was seared into his mind. He wondered why Sheila thought he would be attracted to the fragile, helpless blonde type. Sheila, better than anyone, knew his tastes in women. But then the memory of his own body's reactions to the petite woman reared up to taunt him. He still remembered the incredible rush of hot, primitive lust that had gripped him moments after laying eyes on her at the airport yesterday.

She had been propped against the wall, sky-blue eyes dazed with exhaustion, honey-blonde hair escaping in charming untidy tendrils from what no doubt had once been a sophisticated knot at the back of her head. She had inspired in him an instant desire to put her to bed.

His bed.

His reaction still shocked him. An avid outdoorsman, he had no place in his life for a porcelain doll with delicate pretty features, flawless pale skin and a dainty body that looked like it could be snapped in two with the slightest pressure.

The delicious view he'd had of her this morning in her natural state confirmed two things—that the liquid gold of her hair didn't come out of a bottle, and that she did have the body of a Venus. And his body had reacted a second time with the same raw, heated rush of desire. What he didn't understand was the simultaneous and just as strong urge he had felt to plant a fist in Hallman's face as he stood there ogling her. From Hallman's comments, the man had had the privilege of seeing that beautiful body naked before.

He used his key to open the door to his room. It was at the far end of the corridor, several rooms away from Kat's and was considered a deluxe suite by the hotel's management. Among other things, it boasted a double bed, desk, two wicker armchairs and a phone. The phone was ringing off the hook.

He crossed the room in a half-dozen swift strides. "Roarke here."

"Jackson, dear, how are things going?"

Jackson smiled. There were a hundred questions wrapped up in his mother's warm voice. "Just fine, Mom. Everything's under control. How are you two doing?"

"Having an absolutely wonderful time. Now that I finally persuaded your father to do this, he won't stop. He's running me off my feet. I swear we've seen half of London already! Thank goodness we're headed off to the Lake Country tomorrow. At least, I can sit down for more than five minutes in the car. How is my favorite granddaughter, and what's your latest group like?"

Jackson turned to look out the window. His mother wasn't to be distracted for long. "Your favorite granddaughter has her grandmother's adventurous spirit, Mom. She's a great kid. Sandra's done a wonderful job with her. She's in town right now, no doubt shopping her little heart out under the very indulgent eyes of two of our older ladies—seasoned travelers, both of them."

His mother laughed. "And the rest of the group?"

"It's a good group. A few novices, but nothing Joseph and I can't handle."

"And Sheila's proteges?"

Damn! There was an odd note in his mother's voice. Surely she wasn't in on Sheila's little scheme too? If there was a scheme. "Sheila's employees, Mom. They're here to do a job. They seem like a nice enough couple."

"A couple? I thought... well, never mind. Here's your father. Have fun, dear. I love you. Kisses to both of you."

Jackson had barely said his good-byes before his stepfather's deep voice said, "Hello, son. Don't believe everything your mother tells you. She's loving this trip as much as I am and I don't think I could slow her down if I tried. Everyone's arrived safe and sound, I take it? You're ready to leave tomorrow?"

"Everyone's here," Jackson confirmed. His father, it seemed, couldn't leave the business behind, even on his first real vacation in years. "I even picked up a couple extra guests

at the airport. They were having trouble with a rental and decided the tour sounded more their thing. So I have a full house.”

“Good show. Now, I’ve talked to David and he’s promised to—”

“Dad, it’s all right. We’re adults. We can handle this. What happened, happened a long time ago and I’m over it. Everything will be fine.”

“It’s not you I’m worried about, son.” His stepfather’s voice held a tinge of sadness and Jackson felt a pang of sympathy. It was one of life’s ironies that a father shared more of an affinity, trust and common ground with a stepchild than his own natural son.

“Dad,” he said, “David and I will be fine. Don’t worry. You and Mom have a great time and I’ll see you in three weeks.”

After exchanging a few more pleasantries, he hung up the phone, turning as he did so to look at the framed photograph of a family of four on the desk. Taken two years after his mother’s second marriage to a South African, it had captured and frozen one of the happy times. Two teenage boys, close in age, knelt, hamming it up for the camera in front of a great bear of a man and his slender wife.

One boy was painfully thin with gangly arms and legs; face spotted with acne. There was nothing to show the promise of the man he would become. The other boy was more mature. Muscles thickened his limbs and body. Curly blond hair crowned an already handsome face. David had been squinting, Jackson realized for the first time with a start. The camera hadn’t been able to capture the expression in those pale green eyes.

David, his step-brother. His only brother. They had first met at their parents’ wedding when they were both fifteen years old and there had been an immediate hostility between them. The depth of it had shocked Jackson who, in his naiveté, had expected to like the son as much as he had come to like and respect the father.

Over the years, he and David had never grown to like each other any better. And in time, they had become the bitterest of enemies.

In a few days, he would see David for the first time in seven years.

Chapter 3



Kat was preoccupied all the way into town, grateful that Joseph's bright chatter required little response. Why was she *always* attracted to the wrong type of man? And she didn't understand this attraction at all. Jackson Roarke had clearly put her into the 'helpless female' category and added the damning label, 'without an intelligent thought in her head.'

Joseph dropped her off at a store called Bartel's. As she wandered through the racks of clothing poking and prodding without much interest, her determination grew to show Mr. Roarke how wrong he was. By the end of the trip, he was going to eat his words. She was no prima donna and she *was* going to enjoy herself, no matter how many bugs and other creepy crawlies she had to endure. And no disapproving tour guide was going to spoil it for her either.

Two hours later, she sailed out of the front doors of the store harboring a sense of immense satisfaction. The prices had been outrageous and she had spent a small fortune on clothes she wouldn't wear anywhere else. But at least she was now prepared for any adventure in Roarke's so-called 'rough areas.'

She paused to allow her eyes to adjust to the brightness of the day. For the life of her, she couldn't remember what Joseph had said about picking her up. But the trip into town from the

hotel hadn't seemed that long. She figured she could walk back if she had to... when she was good and ready.

The sky was a deep azure blue, unmarred by any trace of clouds. Heat simmered in the uncrowded street down which only one or two cars crawled. On the corner, a large tree shed an occasional blossom to join the gorgeous lavender carpet underneath it.

Kat took a deep breath and allowed a wave of excitement and exhilaration to break free. She was worlds away from Chicago and all its intensity, pressure, crowds, traffic and fast living. This sleepy, lazy scene invited a slow exploration. Hefting her two bags, she looked around. The sari-clad store clerk in Bartel's had told her about a street market two blocks away and she intended to head there, but first she had to cash some traveler's checks.

It wasn't hard to find a bank. There were three within a stone's throw of each other on the main street. None, however, were open. Signs outside declared the hours of business to be eight-thirty to thirteen hundred. It was one-thirty. Undaunted, Kat followed the directions she had been given to the street market. She could always hit Ron up for some cash and come back later if she saw something she liked.

She heard it before she saw it and, when she rounded a corner, she discovered where all the action was. The market was a colorful, noisy crush of vendors and customers haggling and gesturing over a variety of wares. Whole fish lay next to ears of corn on a ragged mat on the ground, which in turn lay next to a small table of tiny, brilliantly patterned beadwork. Fresh vegetables mixed with a variety of carved goods, gourds, clever raffia toys, and woven reed wares. It was a largely native crowd, but here and there Kat saw a few white and Asian faces. A group of tourists had gathered around one attraction, which Kat was too far away to see.

Odors assaulted her nostrils. Heat, dust, sweat, the pungency of raw fish, the sweetish scent of reed. Hesitating for only a

moment, Kat tightened her grip on her bags and stepped into the noisy throng. Immediately, she made herself the newest target of determined purveyors. A ripe fish was waved in her face. Someone thrust a small, carved elephant into her free hand. Someone else entreated ‘Madam’ to view his display of straw hats. Kat felt a tug on her skirt and looked down to see a ragged urchin, hand outstretched in silent plea.

Helpless against the dark, liquid eyes filled with hope, she reached for her purse.

“Don’t do it,” a deep, accented voice warned from behind her. “You’ll have two dozen before you know it, and they won’t leave you alone.”

She whirled around in time to see a bare, muscled arm make a sharp gesture and, from the corner of her eye saw the urchin melt into the crowd. “Ah, thank you. I didn’t—”

She looked up and forgot what she was going to say. The face looming over her was the most beautiful masculine face she had ever seen. Carved by a master craftsman, the straight nose, chiseled lips, pale green eyes, and thick blond hair combined into one lethally attractive, quintessential male specimen. And the green eyes were studying her with more than a little interest. Kat felt her knees wobble as the noise, smell, and crowds melted away.

“Think nothing of it. Just helping out a lady. Kat Feldman? I’m David Carroway.” He proffered a hand. It engulfed her own as she warily extended it.

“Y-yes,” Kat stammered. “How did you know?”

“You missed your ride back to the hotel. I told Joseph I’d look for you and bring you back. It wasn’t hard to find you.”

He hadn’t let go of her hand, and Kat’s knees hadn’t stopped shaking. *What in the world was going on here?* She’d had her fair share of dates and attractive men seeking her company, but her relationships had always seemed to take second place to her work. She couldn’t remember a single instance in the last couple of years when someone had over-

whelmed her senses, turned her legs to wobbling, useless appendages, erased all coherent thought from her brain, made her feel giddy and *foolish* at the same time. Why did she have to come all the way to Africa to find *two* men who had such an instant impact on her?

This one was looking at her with intent expectancy.

“I, ah, forgot what time I was supposed to meet him,” she said, feeling the heat creep across her cheeks. That was another thing! She never blushed, and here she was firing up like a silly schoolgirl in front of both of them. “But I just thought I’d walk back.”

“In this heat? Looks like you’re a little burdened. May I?” Without waiting for an answer, he reached down and relieved her of her bags. “Have you had lunch yet? No? It’s quite late, but we could probably find a sandwich around the corner.”

“I don’t know, I...” Kat tore her gaze away from the mesmerizing face and looked around her. She wasn’t the least bit interested in eating, but she didn’t want him to go just yet either. The small voice in her head that warned against being picked up by strange men was ruthlessly beaten back.

“You have to eat,” her would-be rescuer announced. “And I’d be glad to show you around afterwards. You should be careful in a place like this. It’s the ultimate in tourist traps and you stick out like a sore thumb. Follow me!”

As if, Kat thought, she had any choice. He tugged on the hand he still hadn’t released and forged through the crowd, clearing a path with ease. This man, on close reflection, seemed no different from the other. On short acquaintance, he had also tagged her as helpless. And at the bargaining table, she was far from it, having honed her skills in the fierce, competitive auctions and antique marts of North America and Europe.

“Here we are. Sit down and rest, and I’ll go have a talk with the owner.”

He pulled out a chair on the side of a table shaded by an umbrella, seated her and disappeared inside the shadowy interior

of the restaurant. ‘Here’ was a surprise. A little bistro that could be found on the street corner of any city in Europe.

Kat heaved a deep breath, feeling as if she’d just been run over by a freight train. It was a beautiful freight train though. She watched David come back through the doors. She could stare at him all day, and not get tired of looking.

“Hope you don’t mind. I ordered something for you.” His smile dazzled her. He pulled out the chair next to her and sat down.

“Not at all,” she murmured. It was impossible to care about something as unimportant as food when you were on the receiving end of a smile like that.

“You’re with Roarke’s group on the ‘Spirit of Africa’ tour, hmm?” He reached for her hand, turned it over and traced a light path on her palm.

Kat’s limbs dissolved as she tried to think of something intelligent to say. “D-do you know Roarke?”

“The tour company is well-known here in town. Tell me about yourself, Kat Feldman.”

Afterward, Kat could never remember much of that conversation. But what she said must have been fascinating, because David’s eyes never left hers the whole time. He said very little about himself, only that he made his home close by, was a South African by birth and had gone to boarding school in South Africa when his family moved to this country to start a coffee plantation.

He kept his word and showed her around the market, pointing out the better quality carvings and raffia crafts. Then, when she grew tired and wilted from the heat, he installed her in a jeep parked nearby and roared off—much too fast, in Kat’s opinion—to the hotel.

Drawing up to the entrance, he kept the engine running while he leaned over so close she thought he was going to kiss her. But his eyes flickered beyond her for an instant and he hesitated.

When he focused on her again, the green gaze was all-consuming. “Thank you, Kat Feldman, for missing your ride. You’re a special lady and I very much enjoyed your company.” He covered her hand resting on her thigh with his own. “I’ll see you again soon.”

He reached past her to open the door. She said her thanks and climbed out of the jeep, somewhat bemused by the abrupt ending to the afternoon. But as he handed her the shopping bags, he smiled. It was a slow, beautiful smile that devastated her senses. It held a wealth of meaning; contained a thousand promises; convinced her in that brief moment she was the only woman in the world for him.

Bereft, as if a good friend had just abandoned her, Kat stood in the driveway and watched him speed away. What had he meant by seeing her again soon?

The jeep disappeared from sight. She turned and slammed into a solid wall of muscle. The bags flew out of her grasp. Clothes scattered in the dust.

“Oh, no,” she wailed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know—” Looking up, she encountered frigid slate-gray eyes.

“Ms. Feldman.” The Voice was calm and polite—too polite. “I trust you had a successful shopping trip.” His eyes shifted for an instant to the disaster on the ground. “But I’d thank you not to inconvenience my staff and other guests again. Please try to pay more attention to rendezvous times in the future.”

Kat’s mouth dropped open as she watched Roarke turn on his heel and walk away. She’d made a mistake. She felt terrible and she’d have apologized if he’d given her the chance. But surely it wasn’t worth all that icy anger simmering in those eyes.

She glanced down to see a white cotton blouse covered in red dust. Her temper, fueled by an extraordinary day of powerful emotions, threatened to break free. She clenched her fists and restrained herself just in time to keep from kicking at one of the bags.

A laugh sounded from nearby. "Having a bad day, darling?" Ron stood propped in the bougainvillea-draped entryway. "Who was the delicious hunk?"

"None of your business," Kat snapped. She wasn't in the mood for a friendly chat right now, least of all with Ron, who sometimes was far too perceptive.

"Okay." Ron shrugged his shoulders. "But I'd say our illustrious host just displayed a nice little fit of jealousy. This trip could be far more... *interesting*, shall we say, than I ever expected?"

"You're crazy!" Kat was getting angrier by the second. She planted her hands on her hips. "Why would he be jealous? He doesn't know me. I'm beginning to think I've gone back a century in time and all these macho, chauvinistic men around here think they're the lord and master of helpless, fragile little women."

"An intriguing picture. It has definite possibilities. What do you think about...?"

"Oh, shut up and help me," Kat yelled, completely out of patience.

"Tsk, tsch, darling. *Something* has your feathers ruffled." A grin on his face, Ron strolled over and began stuffing clothes into one of the bags.

Kat watched for a second. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be taking my temper out on you. It's just that a lot's happened today and—"

Ron waved a hand. "Don't worry about it, darling. My shoulders are broad and available any time you need them. You know that."

"I know. You're a good friend."

"Please, sweetie. You're going to give me a guilty conscience. Just make sure you share the juicy details."

Kat sighed and bent silently to work on the other bag.

Ron finished, straightened up and handed her his bag. The amusement was gone from his face. "A word of advice, Kat. Don't play around with Roarke. You may not like the

consequences.” He gave her a mock salute. “See you at dinner.”

This was just great. Furious and frustrated, Kat watched yet another man leave her in the space of five minutes. Ron’s little pearls of wisdom had an extremely irritating way of coming true. Not that she had any intention of playing around with Roarke.

Then why did she feel like Alice must have felt in Wonderland?

Topsy-turvy and upside down.

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J.A. Clarke is an award-winning author of futuristic and contemporary romance novels. She grew up in Africa where weekly trips to the library were highly anticipated and the main entertainment event of the week. She has traveled on three continents but is now firmly grounded in the Pacific Northwest. Together with her husband and two sons, she frequently explores the beautiful scenic attractions of the area. Someday, she plans to take her family on an adventure in Africa. Please visit her at her website, www.jaclarke.com.



J.A. Clarke

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