



MODERN™

CAROL MARINELLI

Playing the Dutiful Wife



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Аннотация

‘We have made an application on behalf of Niklas Dos Santos to exercise his conjugal rights...’ Learning that the husband she’s tried to forget has spent the past year falsely imprisoned in Brazil and needs her to visit him is the last thing Meg Hamilton wants. But she will play her part in exchange for Niklas’s signature on the divorce papers! Except she hasn’t bargained on their mind-blowing connection being as undeniable as ever. Last time it led usually sensible Meg into a Las Vegas wedding chapel. This time the consequence of giving in to their chemistry will bind her to Niklas for ever... ‘Carol is at the top of her game, I couldn’t put this book down!’ – Maurine, Maryland, USA

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‘I’ve missed you so much.’

Meg was playing a part, Niklas got that, but as her lips met his cheek it did not matter that she was playing, for it was the first reprieve to his senses in months.

It was a kiss for others, and his mind tried to keep it at that—except her breath tasted of the outside. He drank it in, and the feel of her in his arms allowed temporary escape.

It was Meg who pulled back. Meg who stood with her cheeks burning red. There were tears of shame and hurt and anger in her eyes, and her lips pressed closed as one guard said something that made the other one laugh, and then a door opened and they walked into a small, simply furnished room. She couldn’t stand for very much longer, so she sat on a chair for a moment, honestly shaken.

Not just at the sight of him—not just at the shock of seeing Niklas with his hair cropped almost as short as the dark stubble on his chin, dressed in rough prison denim—but because he was still the most beautiful man she had ever seen.

‘Why would you come here?’ he demanded, and then she looked at him. He could see her green eyes flash with suppressed rage, and he heard the spit of her words when finally she answered him.

‘You’re *entitled* to me, apparently.’

About the Author

CAROL MARINELLI recently filled in a form where she was asked for her job title and was thrilled, after all these years, to be able to put down her answer as ‘writer’. Then it asked what Carol did for relaxation and, after chewing her pen for a moment, Carol put down the truth: ‘writing’. The third question asked, ‘What are your hobbies?’ Well, not wanting to look obsessed or, worse still, boring, she crossed the fingers on her free hand and answered ‘swimming and tennis’. But, given that the chlorine in the pool does terrible things to her highlights, and the closest she’s got to a tennis racket in the last couple of years is watching the Australian Open, I’m sure you can guess the real answer!

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**Playing the
Dutiful Wife
Carol Marinelli**



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CHAPTER ONE

‘I’M GOING TO have to go,’ Meg said to her mother. ‘They’ve finished boarding, so I’d better turn off my phone.’

‘You’ll be fine for a while yet.’ Ruth Hamilton persisted with their conversation. ‘Did you finish up the work for the Evans purchase?’

‘Yes.’ Meg tried to keep the edge from her voice. She really wanted just to turn off the phone and relax. Meg hated flying. Well, not all of it—just the take-off part. All she wanted to do was close her eyes and listen to music, take some nice calming breaths before the plane prepared for its departure from Sydney Airport—except, as usual, her mother wanted to talk about work. ‘Like I said,’ Meg said calmly, because if she so much as gave a hint that she was irritated her mum would want to know more, ‘everything is up-to-date.’

‘Good,’ Ruth said, but still she did not leave things there.

Meg coiled a length of her very straight red hair around and around one finger, as she always did when either tense or concentrating.

‘You need to make sure that you sleep on the plane, Meg, because you’ll be straight into it once you land. You wouldn’t believe how many people are here. There are so many opportunities ...’

Meg closed her eyes and held on to a sigh of frustration as

her mum chatted on about the conference and then moved to travel details. Meg already knew that a car would meet her at Los Angeles airport and take her straight to the hotel where the conference was being held. And, yes, she knew she would have about half an hour to wash and get changed.

Meg's parents were prominent in Sydney's real estate market and were now looking to branch into overseas investments for some of their clients. They had left for Los Angeles on Friday to network, while Meg caught up with the paperwork backlog at the office before joining them.

Meg knew that she should be far more excited at the prospect of a trip to Los Angeles. Usually she loved visiting new places, and deep down Meg knew that really she had nothing to complain about—she was flying business class and would be staying in the sumptuous hotel where the conference was being held. She would play the part of successful professional, as would her parents.

Even though, in truth, the family business wasn't doing particularly well at the moment.

Her parents were always very eager to jump on the latest get-rich-quick scheme. Meg, who could always be relied on for sensible advice, had suggested that rather than all of them flying over maybe just one of them should go, or perhaps they should give it a miss entirely and concentrate on the properties they already had on their books.

Of course her parents hadn't wanted to hear that. This, they had insisted, was the next big thing.

Meg doubted it.

It wasn't that, though, which caused her disquiet.

Really, when she had suggested that only one of them go—given that she dealt with the legal side of things—Meg had rather hoped they might have considered sending only her.

A week away wasn't just a luxury she required—it was fast becoming a necessity. And it wasn't about the nice hotel—she'd stay in a tent if she had to, just for the break, just for a pause so that she could think properly. Meg felt as if she were suffocating—that wherever she turned her parents were there, simply not giving her room to think. It had been like that for as long as she could remember, and sometimes she felt as if her whole life had been planned out in advance by her parents.

In truth, it probably had.

Meg had little to complain about. She had her own nice flat in Bondi—but, given that she worked twelve-hour days, she never really got to enjoy it, and there was always something at work that needed her attention at weekends: a signature to chase up, a contract to read through. It just never seemed to end.

'We're actually going to look at a couple of properties this afternoon ...' Her mum carried on talking as there was a flurry of activity in the aisle beside Meg.

'Well, don't go agreeing to anything until I get there,' Meg warned. 'I mean it, Mum.'

She glanced over and saw that two flight attendants were assisting a gentleman. His face was blocked from Meg's vision

by the overhead lockers, but certainly from his physique this man didn't look as if he required assistance.

He was clearly tall and extremely fit-looking, and from what Meg could see he appeared more than capable of putting his own laptop into the overhead locker, yet the attendants danced around him, taking his jacket and offering their apologies as he went to take the seat beside Meg.

As his face came into view Meg, who was already struggling, completely lost her place in the conversation with her mother. The man was absolutely stunning, with very thick, beautifully cut black hair worn just a little too long, so that it flopped over his forehead. He had a very straight Roman nose and high cheekbones. Really, he had all the markings of a *very* good-looking man, but it was his mouth that held her attention—perfectly shaped, like a dark bruise of red in the black of his unshaven jaw, and even though it was a scowling mouth, it was quite simply beautiful.

He threw a brief nod in Meg's direction as he took the seat beside her.

Clearly somebody wasn't very happy!

As he sat down Meg caught his scent—a mixture of expensive cologne and man—and, though she was trying to focus on what her mother was saying, Meg's mind kept wandering to the rather terse conversation that was taking place beside her as the flight attendants did their best to appease a man whom, it would seem, wasn't particularly easy to appease.

‘No,’ he said to the attendant. ‘This will be sorted to my satisfaction as soon as we have taken off.’

He had a deep, low voice that was rich with an accent Meg couldn’t quite place. Perhaps Spanish, she thought, but wasn’t quite sure.

What she *was* sure of, though, was that he demanded too much of her attention.

Not consciously, of course—she just about carried on talking to her mother, her finger still twirling in her hair—but she could not stop listening to the conversation that was none of her business.

‘Once again,’ the flight attendant said to him, ‘we apologise for any inconvenience, Mr Dos Santos.’ Then she turned her attention to Meg, and although friendly and polite, the flight attendant was not quite so gushing as she had so recently been to Meg’s fellow passenger. ‘You need to turn off your phone, Ms Hamilton. We are about to prepare for take-off.’

‘I really do have to go, Mum,’ Meg said. ‘I’ll see you there.’ With a sigh of relief she turned off her phone. ‘The best part of flying,’ she said as she did so—not necessarily to him.

‘There is nothing good about flying’ came his brusque response as the plane started to taxi towards the runway. Seeing her raised eyebrows, he tempered his words a little. ‘At least not today.’

She gave him a small smile and offered a quick ‘Sorry,’ then looked ahead rather than out of the window. After all he

could be in the middle of a family emergency and racing to get somewhere. There could be many reasons for his bad mood and it was none of her business after all.

She was actually quite surprised when he answered her, and when she turned she realised that he was still looking at her. ‘Usually I do like flying—I do an awful lot of it—but today there are no seats in first class.’

Niklas Dos Santos watched as she blinked at his explanation. She had very green eyes that were staring right at him. He expected her to give a murmur of sympathy or a small tut tut as to the airline’s inefficiency; those were the responses that he was used to, so he was somewhat taken aback at hers.

‘Poor you!’ She smiled. ‘Having to slum it back here in business class.’

‘As I said, I fly a lot, and as well as working while flying I need to sleep on the plane—something that is now going to be hard to do. Admittedly I only changed my plans this morning, but even so ...’ He didn’t continue. Niklas thought that was the end of the conversation, that he had explained his dark mood well enough. He hoped that now they could sit in mutual silence, but before he could look away the woman in the seat next to him spoke again.

‘Yes, it’s *terribly* inconsiderate of them—not to keep a spare seat for you just in case your plans happen to change.’

She smiled as she said it and he understood that she was joking—sort of. She was nothing like anyone he usually dealt with. Normally people revered him, or in the case of a good-looking

woman—which she *possibly* was—they came on to him.

He was used to dark-haired, immaculately groomed women from his home town. Now and then he liked blondes—which she was, sort of. Her hair was a reddish blonde. But, unlike the women he usually went for, there was a complete lack of effort on her part. She was very neatly dressed, in three-quarter-length navy trousers and a cream blouse that was delicate and attractive. Yet the blouse was buttoned rather high and she wore absolutely no make-up. He glanced down to nails that were neat but neither painted nor manicured and, yes, he did check for a ring.

Had the engines not revved then she might have noticed that glance. Had she not looked away at that moment she might have been granted the pleasure of one of his very rare smiles. For she seemed refreshingly unimpressed by him, and Niklas had decided she was not a *possibly* good-looking woman in the least

...

But she spoke too much.

He would set the tone now, Niklas decided. Just ignore her if she spoke again. He had a lot of work to get through during this flight and did not want to be interrupted every five minutes with one of her random thoughts.

Niklas was not the most talkative person—at least he did not waste words speaking about nothing—and he certainly wasn't interested in her assumptions. He just wanted to get to Los Angeles with as much work and sleep behind him as possible. He closed his eyes as the plane hurtled down the runway, yawned,

and decided that he would doze till he could turn on his laptop.

And then he heard her breathing.

Loudly.

And it only got louder.

He gritted his teeth at her slight moan as the plane lifted off the runway and turned to shoot her an irritated look—but, given that her eyes were closed, instead he stared. She was actually fascinating to look at: her nose was snubbed, her lips were wide and her eyelashes were a reddish blonde too. But she was incredibly tense, and she was taking huge long breaths that made her possibly the most annoying woman in the world. He could not take it for the next twelve hours, and Niklas decided he would be speaking again to the flight attendant—someone would have to move out of first class.

Simply, this would not do.

Meg breathed in through her nose and then out through her mouth as she concentrated on using her stomach muscles to control her breathing as her ‘fear of flying’ exercises had told her to do. She twisted her hair over and over, and when that wasn’t helping she gripped onto the handrests, worried by the terrible rattling noise above her as the plane continued its less than smooth climb. It really was an incredibly bumpy take-off, and she loathed this part more than anything—could not relax until the flight stewards stood up and the seatbelt signs went off.

As the plane tilted a little to the left Meg’s eyes screwed more tightly closed. She moaned again and Niklas, who had been

watching her strange actions the whole time, noted not just that her skin had turned white but that there was no colour in her lips.

The minute the signs went off he would speak with the flight attendant. He didn't care if it was a royal family they had tucked in first class; someone was going to have to make room for him! Knowing that he always got his way, and that soon he *would* be moving, Niklas decided that for a moment or two he could afford to be nice.

She was clearly terrified after all.

'You do know that this is the safest mode of transport, don't you?'

'Logically, yes,' she answered with her eyes still closed. 'It just doesn't feel very safe right now.'

'Well, it is,' he said.

'You said that you fly a lot?' She wanted him to tell her that he flew every single day, that the noise overhead was completely normal and nothing to worry about, preferably that he was in fact a pilot—then she might possibly believe that everything was okay.

'All the time,' came his relaxed response, and it soothed her.

'And that noise?'

'What noise?' He listened for a second or two. 'That's the wheels coming up.'

'No, that one.'

It all sounded completely normal to him, yet Niklas realised *she* probably wasn't quite normal, so he continued to speak to

her. ‘Today I am flying to Los Angeles, as are you, and in two days’ time I will be heading to New York ...’

‘Then?’ Meg asked, because his voice was certainly preferable to her thoughts right now.

‘Then I will be flying home to Brazil, where I am hoping to take a couple of weeks off.’

‘You’re from Brazil?’ Her eyes were open now, and as she turned to face him she met his properly for the first time. He had very black eyes that were, right now, simply heaven to look into. ‘So you speak ...?’ Her mind was all scrambled; she could still hear that noise overhead ...

‘Portuguese,’ he said and, as if he was there for her amusement—which for a moment or two longer he guessed he was—he smiled as he offered her a choice. ‘Or I can speak French. Or Spanish too, if you prefer ...’

‘English is fine.’

There was no need to talk any more. He could see the colour coming back to her cheeks and saw her tongue run over pinkening lips. ‘We’re up,’ Niklas said, and at the same time the bell pinged and the flight attendants stood. Meg’s internal panic was thankfully over, and he watched as she let out a long breath.

‘Sorry about that.’ She gave him a rather embarrassed smile. ‘I’m not usually that bad, but that really was bumpy.’

It hadn’t been bumpy in the least, but he was not going to argue with her, nor get drawn into further conversation. And yet she offered her name.

‘I’m Meg, by the way.’

He didn’t really want to know her name.

‘Meg Hamilton.’

‘Niklas.’ He gave up that detail reluctantly.

‘I really am sorry about that. I’ll be fine now. I don’t have a problem with flying—it’s just take-off that I absolutely loathe.’

‘What about landing?’

‘Oh, I’m fine with that.’

‘Then you have never flown into São Paulo,’ Niklas said.

‘Is that where you are from?’

He nodded, and then pulled out the menu and started to read it—before remembering that he was going to be moving seats. He pushed his bell to summon the stewardess.

‘Is it a busy airport, then?’

He looked over to where Meg sat as if he had forgotten that she was even there, let alone the conversation they had been having.

‘Very.’ He nodded, and then saw that the flight attendant was approaching with a bottle of champagne. Clearly she must have thought he had rung for a drink—after all, they knew his preferences—but as he opened his mouth to voice his complaint Niklas conceded that it might be a little rude to ask to be moved in front of Meg.

He would have this drink, Niklas decided, and then he would get up and go and have a quiet word with the attendant. Or an angry one if that did not work. He watched as his champagne was poured and then, perhaps aware that her eyes were trained

on him, he turned, irritated.

‘Did you want a drink as well?’

‘Please.’ She smiled.

‘That is what your bell is for,’ he retorted. She didn’t seem to realise that he was being sarcastic, so he gave in and, rolling his eyes, ordered another glass. Meg was soon sipping on her beverage.

It tasted delicious, bubbly and icy-cold, and would hopefully halt her nervous chatter—except it didn’t. It seemed that a mixture of nerves about flying and the fact that she had never been around someone so drop-dead gorgeous before resulted in her mouth simply not being able to stop.

‘It seems wrong to be drinking at ten a.m.’ She heard her own voice again and could happily have kicked herself—except then he would perhaps have her certified. Meg simply didn’t know what was wrong with her.

Niklas didn’t answer. His mind was already back to thinking about work, or rather thinking about all the things he needed to get finalised so that he could actually take some proper time off.

He *was* going to take some time off. He had not stopped for the last six months at the very least, and he was really looking forward to being back in Brazil, the country he loved, to the food he adored and the woman who adored him and who knew how it was ...

He would take two or perhaps three weeks, and he was going to use every minute of them indulging in life’s simple but

expensively prepared pleasures—beautiful women and amazing food and then more of the same.

He let out a long breath as he thought about it—a long breath that sounded a lot like a sigh. A bored sigh, even—except how could that be? Niklas asked himself. He had everything a man could want and had worked hard to get it—worked hard to ensure he would never go back to where he had come from.

And he *had* ensured it, Niklas told himself; he could stop for a little while now. A decent stretch in Brazil would sort this restless feeling out. He thought of the flight home, of the plane landing in São Paulo, and as he did he surprised himself. His champagne was finished. He could get up now and have that word with the flight attendant. But instead Niklas turned and spoke with *her*.

With Meg.

CHAPTER TWO

‘SãO PAULO IS very densely populated.’

They were well over the water now, and she was gazing out at it, but she turned to the sound of his voice and Niklas tried to explain the land that he loved, the mile after mile after mile of never-ending city.

‘It is something that is hard to explain unless you have seen it, but as the plane descends you fly over the city for very a long time. Congonhas Airport is located just a couple of miles from downtown ...’

He told Meg about the short runway and the difficult approach and the physics of it as she looked at him slightly aghast.

‘If the weather is bad I would imagine the captain and crew and most *paulistanos* ...’ He saw her frown and explained it a little differently. ‘If you come from Sao Paulo or know about the airport then you are holding your breath just a little as the plane comes into land.’ He smiled at her shocked expression. ‘There have been many near-misses—accidents too ...’

What a horrible thing to tell her! What a completely inappropriate thing for him to say at this moment! And she had thought him so nice—well, nice-looking at least. ‘You’re not helping at all!’

‘But I am. I have flown in and out of Congonhas Airport more times than I can remember and I’m still here to tell the tale ...’

You really have nothing to worry about.’

‘Except that I’m scared of landing now too.’

‘Don’t waste time in fear,’ Niklas said, and then stood to retrieve his computer. He did not usually indulge in idle chatter, and certainly not while flying, but she had been so visibly nervous during take-off, and it had been quite pleasant talking her around. Now she was sitting quietly, staring out of the window, and perhaps he did not have to think about moving seats after all.

The flight steward started to serve some appetizers, and Meg had an inkling that Mr Dos Santos was being treated with some tasty little selections from the first-class menu—because there were a few little treats that certainly weren’t on the business class one—and, given that she was sitting next to him, by default Meg was offered them too.

‘Wild Iranian caviar on buckwheat blinis, with sour cream and dill,’ the flight attendant purred to him, but Niklas was too busy to notice the selection placed in front of him. Instead he was setting up a workstation, and Meg heard his hiss of frustration as he had to move his computer to the side. Clearly he was missing his first-class desk!

‘There is no room—’ He stopped himself, realizing that he sounded like someone who complained all the time. He didn’t usually—because he didn’t have to. His PA, Carla, ensured that everything ran smoothly in his busy life. But Carla simply hadn’t been able to work her magic today, and the fact was between here and LA Niklas had a lot to get done. ‘I have a lot of work to

do.’ He didn’t have to justify his dark mood, but he did. ‘I have a meeting scheduled an hour after landing. I was hoping to use this time to prepare. It really is inconvenient.’

‘You’ll have to get your own plane!’ Meg teased. ‘Keep it on standby ...’

‘I did!’ he said. Meg blinked. ‘And for two months or so it was great. I really thought it was the best thing I had ever done. And then ...’ He shrugged and got back to his laptop, one hand crunching numbers, the other picking all the little pieces of dill off the top of the blinis before eating them.

‘And then?’ Meg asked, because this man really was intriguing. He was sort of aloof and then friendly, busy, yet calm, and very pedantic with his dill, Meg thought with a small smile as she watched him continue to pick the pieces off. When the food was to his satisfaction there was something very decadent about the way he ate, his eyes briefly closing as he savoured the delicious taste entering his mouth.

Everything he revealed about himself had Meg wanting to know more, and she was enthralled when he went on to tell her about the mistake of having his own plane.

‘And then,’ Niklas responded, while still tapping away on his computer, ‘I got bored. Same pilot, same flight crew, same chef, same scent of soap in the bathroom. You understand?’

‘Not really.’

‘As annoying as your chatter may be ...’ he turned from his screen and gave her a very nice smile ‘... it is actually rather nice

to meet you.’

‘It’s rather nice to meet you too.’ Meg smiled back.

‘And if I still had my own plane we would not have met.’

‘Nor would we if you were lording it in first class.’

He thought for a moment. ‘Correct.’ He nodded. ‘But now, if you will forgive me, I have to get on with some work.’ He moved to do just that, but just before he did he explained further, just in case she had missed the point he was making. ‘That is the reason I prefer to fly commercially—it is very easy to allow your world to become too small.’

Now, that part she *did* understand. ‘Tell me about it.’ Meg sighed.

His shoulders tensed. His fingers hesitated over the keyboard as he waited for her to start up again.

When she inevitably did, he would point out *again* that he was trying to work.

Niklas gritted his teeth and braced himself for her voice—was she going to talk all the way to Los Angeles?

Except she said nothing else.

When still she was quiet Niklas realised that he was actually *wanting* the sound of her voice to continue their conversation. It was at that point he gave up working for a while. He would return to the report later.

Closing his laptop, he turned. ‘Tell *me* about it.’

She had no idea of the concession he was making—not a clue that a slice of his time was an expensive gift that very few could

afford, no idea how many people would give anything for just ten minutes of his undivided attention.

‘Oh, it’s nothing ...’ Meg shrugged. ‘Just me feeling sorry for myself.’

‘Which must be a hard thing to do with a mouthful of wild Iranian caviar ...’

He made her laugh—he really did. Niklas really wasn’t at all chatty, but when he spoke, when he teased, when she met his eyes, there was a little flip in her stomach that she liked the feeling of. It was a thrill that was new to her, and there was more than just something about him ...

It was *everything* about the man.

‘Here’s to slumming it,’ Niklas said. They chinked their glasses and he looked into her eyes, and as he did so somehow—not that she would be aware of it—Niklas let her in.

He was a closed person, an extremely guarded man. He had grown up having to be that way—it had meant survival at the time—yet for the first time in far too long he chose to relax, to take some time, to forget about work, to stop for a moment and just be with her.

As they chatted he let the flight steward put his laptop away. They were at the back of business class, tucked away and enjoying their own little world.

The food orders were taken and later served, and Meg thought how nice Niklas was to share a meal with. Food was a passion in waiting for Meg. She rarely had time to cook, and though she ate

out often it was pretty much always at the same Italian restaurant where they took clients. They'd chosen different mains, and he smiled to himself at the droop of her face when they were served and she found out that steak tartare was in fact raw.

'It's delicious,' he assured her. 'Or you can have my steak?'

At the back of her mind she had known it was raw, if she'd stopped to think about it, but the menu had been incredibly hard to concentrate on with Niklas sitting beside her, and she had made a rather random selection when the flight steward had approached.

'No, it's fine,' Meg said, looking at the strange little piles of food on her plate. There was a big hill of raw minced steak in the middle, with a raw egg yolk in its shell on the top, surrounded by little hills of onions and capers and things. 'I've always wanted to try it. I just tend to stick to safe. It's good to try different things ...'

'It is,' Niklas said. 'I like it like this.'

Something caught in her throat, because he'd made it sound like sex. He picked up her knife and fork, and she watched him pour in the egg, pile on the onions and capers, and then chop and chop again before sliding the mixture through Worcestershire sauce. For a fleeting moment she honestly thought that he might load the fork and feed her, but he put the utensils down and returned to his meal, and Meg found herself breathless and blushing at where her mind had just drifted.

'Good?' Niklas asked when she took her first taste.

‘Fantastic,’ Meg said. It was nice, not amazing, but made by his hands fantastic it was. ‘How’s *your* steak?’

He sliced a piece off and lifted the loaded fork and held it to her. This from a man who had reluctantly given her a drink, who had on many occasions turned his back. He was now giving her a taste of food from his plate. He was just being friendly, Meg told herself. She was reading far, far too much into this simple gesture. But as she went to take the fork he lifted it slightly. His black eyes met hers and he moved the fork to her mouth and watched as she opened it. Suddenly she began to wonder if she’d been right the first time.

Maybe he *was* talking about sex.

But if he had been flirting, by the time dessert was cleared it had ended. He read for a bit, and Meg gazed out of the window for a while, until the flight attendant came around and closed the shutters. The lights were lowered and the cabin was dimmed and Meg fiddled with her remote to turn the seat into a bed.

Niklas stood and she glanced up at him. ‘Are you off to get your gold pyjamas?’

‘And a massage,’ Niklas teased back.

She was half asleep when he returned, and watched idly as he took off his tie. Of course the flight attendant rushed to hold it, while another readied his bed, and then he took off his shoes and climbed into the flight bed beside her.

His beautiful face was gone now from her vision, but it was there—right there—in her mind’s eye. She was terribly aware of

his movements and listened to him turn restlessly a few times. She conceded that maybe he did have a point—the flight bed was more than big enough for Meg to stretch out in, but Niklas was easily a foot taller than her and, as he had stated, he really needed this time to sleep, which must be proving difficult. For Niklas the bed was simply too small, and it was almost a sin that he sleep in those immaculate suit trousers.

She lay there trying not to think about him and made herself concentrate instead on work—on the Evans contract she had just completed—which was surely enough to send her to sleep. But just as she was closing her eyes, just as she was starting to think that she might be about to drift off even with Niklas beside her, she heard him move again. Her eyes opened and she blinked as his face appeared over hers. She met those black eyes, heard again his rich accent, and how could a woman not smile?

‘You never did tell me ...’ Niklas said, smiling as he invited her to join him in after hours conversation. ‘Why is your world too small?’

CHAPTER THREE

THEY PULLED BACK the divider that separated them and lay on their sides, facing each other. Meg knew that this was probably the only time in her life that she'd ever have a man so divine lying on the pillow next to hers, so she was more than happy to forgo sleep for such a glorious cause.

'I work in the family business,' Meg explained.

'Which is?'

'My parents are into real-estate investments. I'm a lawyer ...'

He gave a suitably impressed nod, but then frowned, because she didn't seem like a lawyer to him.

'Though I hardly use my training. I do all the paperwork and contracts.'

He saw her roll her eyes.

'I cannot tell you how boring it is.'

'Then why do you do it?'

'Good question. I think it was decided at conception that I would be a lawyer.'

'You don't want to be one?'

It was actually rather hard to admit it. 'I don't think I do ...'

He said nothing, just carried on watching her face, waiting for her to share more, and she did.

'I don't think I'm supposed to be one—I mean, I scraped to get the grades I needed at school, held on by my fingernails at

university ...’ She paused as he interrupted.

‘You are *never* to say this at an interview.’

‘Of course not.’ She smiled. ‘We’re just talking.’

‘Good. I’m guessing you were not a little girl who dreamed of being a lawyer?’ he checked. ‘You did not play with wigs on?’ His lips twitched as she smiled. ‘You did not line up your dollies and cross-examine them?’

‘No.’

‘So how did you end up being one?’

‘I really don’t know where to start.’

He looked at his watch, realised then that perhaps the report simply wasn’t going to get done. ‘I’ve got nine hours.’

Niklas made the decision then—they would be entirely devoted to *her*.

‘Okay ...’ Meg thought how best to explain her family to him and chose to start near the beginning. ‘In my family you don’t get much time to think—even as a little girl there were piano lessons, violin lessons, ballet lessons, tutors. My parents were constantly checking my homework—basically, everything was geared towards me getting into the best school, so that I could get the best grades and go to the best university. Which I did. Except when I got there it was more push, push, push. I just put my head down and carried on working, but now suddenly I’m twenty-four years old and I’m not really sure that I’m where I want to be ...’ It was very hard to explain it, because from the outside she had a very nice life.

‘They demand too much.’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘They don’t listen to you.’

‘You don’t know that either.’

‘But I do.’ He said. ‘Five or six times on the telephone you said, “Mum, I’ve got to go.” Or, “I really have to go now ...”’ He saw that she was smiling, but she was smiling not at his imitation of her words but because he had been listening to her conversation. While miserable and scowling and ignoring her, he had still been aware. ‘You do this.’ He held up an imaginary phone and turned it off.

‘I can’t.’ she admitted. ‘Is that what you do?’

‘Of course.’

He made it sound so simple.

‘You say, *I have to go*, and then you do.’

‘It’s not just that though,’ she admitted. ‘They want to know everything about my life ...’

‘Then tell them you don’t want to discuss it,’ he said. ‘If a conversation moves where you don’t want it to, you just say so.’

‘How?’

‘Say, I don’t want to talk about that,’ he suggested.

‘He made it sound so easy. But I don’t want to hurt them either—you know how difficult families can be at times.’

‘No.’ He shook his head. ‘There are some advantages to being an orphan, and that is one of them. I get to make my own mistakes.’ He said it in such a way that there was no invitation

to sympathy—in fact he even gave a small smile, as if letting her know that she did not need to be uncomfortable at his revelation and he took no offence at her casual remark.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You don’t have to be.’

‘But ...’

‘I don’t want to talk about that.’ And, far more easily than she, he told her what he was not prepared to discuss. He simply moved the conversation. ‘What would you like to do if you could do anything?’

She thought for a moment. ‘You’re the first person who has ever asked me that.’

‘The second,’ Niklas corrected. ‘I would imagine you have been asking yourself that question an awful lot.’

‘Lately I have been,’ Meg admitted.

‘So, what would you be?’

‘A chef.’

And he didn’t laugh, didn’t tell her that she should know about steak tartare by now, if that was what she wanted to be, and neither did he roll his eyes.

‘Why?’

‘Because I love cooking.’

‘Why?’ he asked—not as if he didn’t understand how it was possible to love cooking so much, more as if he really wanted her tell him why.

She just stared at him as their minds locked in a strange

wrestle.

‘When someone eats something I’ve cooked—I mean properly prepared and cooked ...’ She still stared at him as she spoke. ‘When they close their eyes for a second ...’ She couldn’t properly explain it. ‘When you ate those blinis, when you first tasted them, there was a moment ...’ She watched that mouth move into a smile, just a brief smile of understanding. ‘They tasted fantastic?’

‘Yes.’

‘I wanted to have cooked them.’ It was perhaps the best way to describe it. ‘I love shopping for food, planning a meal, preparing it, presenting it, serving it ...’

‘For that moment?’

‘Yes.’ Meg nodded. ‘And I know that I’m good at it because, no matter how dissatisfied my parents were with my grades or my decisions, on a Sunday I’d cook a meal from scratch and it was the one thing I excelled at. Yet it was the one thing they discouraged.’

‘Why?’ This time he asked because he didn’t understand.

“‘Why would you want to work in a kitchen?’” It was Meg doing the imitating now. “‘Why, after all the opportunities we’ve given you ...?’” Her voice faded for a moment. ‘Maybe I should have stood up to them, but it’s hard at fourteen ...’ She gave him a smile. ‘It’s still hard at twenty-four.’

‘If cooking is your passion then I’m sure you would be a brilliant chef. You should do it.’

‘I don’t know.’ She knew she sounded weak, knew she should

just say to hell with them, but there was one other thing she had perhaps not explained. ‘I love them,’ Meg said, and she saw his slight frown. ‘They are impossible and overbearing but I do love them, and I don’t want to hurt them—though I know that I’ll probably have to.’ She gave him a pale smile. ‘I’m going to try and work out if I can just hurt them gently.’

After a second or two he smiled back, a pensive smile she did not want, for perhaps he felt sorry for her being weak—though she didn’t think she was.

‘Do you cook a lot now?’

‘Hardly ever.’ She shook her head. ‘There just never seems to be enough time. But when I do ...’ She explained to him that on her next weekend off she would prepare the meal she had just eaten for herself and friends ... that she would spend hours trying to get it just right. Even if she generally stuck with safer choices, there was so much about food that she wanted to explore.

They lay there, facing each other and talking about food, which to some might sound boring—but for Meg it was the best conversation she had had in her life.

He told her about a restaurant that he frequented in downtown São Paulo which was famed for its seafood, although he thought it wasn’t actually their best dish. When he was there Niklas always ordered their *feijoada*, which was a meat and black bean stew that tasted, he told her, as if angels had prepared it and were feeding it to his soul.

In that moment Meg realised that she had not just one growing

passion to contend with, but two, because his gaze was intense and his words were so interesting and she never wanted this journey to end. Didn't want to stop their whispers in the dark.

'How come you speak so many languages?'

'It is good that I do. It means I can take my business to many countries ...' He was an international financier, Niklas told her, and then, very unusually for him, he told her a little bit more—which he never, ever did. Not with anyone. Not even, if he could help it, with himself. 'One of the nuns who cared for me when I was a baby spoke only Spanish. By the time I moved from that orphanage ...'

'At how old?'

He thought for a moment. 'Three, maybe four. By that time I spoke two languages,' he explained. 'Later I taught myself English, and much later French.'

'How?'

'I had a friend who was English—I asked him to speak only English to me. And I—' He'd been about to say looked for, but he changed it. 'I read English newspapers.'

'What language do you dream in?'

He smiled at her question. 'That depends where I am—where my thoughts are.'

He spent a lot of time in France, he told Meg, especially in the South. Meg asked him where his favourite place in the world was. He was about to answer São Paulo—after all, he was looking forward to going back there, to the fast pace and the

stunning women—but he paused for a moment and then gave an answer that surprised even him. He told her about the mountains away from the city, and the rainforests and the rivers and springs there, and that maybe he should think of getting a place there—somewhere private.

And then he thanked her.

‘For what?’

‘For making me think,’ Niklas said. ‘I have been thinking of taking some time off just to do more of the same ...’ He did not mention the clubs and the women and the press that were always chasing him for the latest scandal. ‘Maybe I should take a proper break.’

She told him that she too preferred the mountains to the beach, even if she lived in Bondi, and they lay there together and rewrote a vision of her—no longer a chef in a busy international hotel, instead she would run a small bed and breakfast set high in the hills.

And she asked about him too.

Rarely, so rarely did he tell anyone, but for some reason this false night he did—just a little. For some reason he didn’t hold back. He just said it. Not all of it, by any means, but he gave more of himself than usual. After all, he would never see her again.

He told her how he had taught himself to read and write, how he had educated himself from newspapers, how the business section had always fascinated him and how easily he had read the figures that seemed to daunt others. And he told her how he loved

Brazil—for there you could both work hard and play hard too.

‘Can I get you anything Mr Dos Santos ...?’ Worried that their esteemed passenger was being disturbed, the steward checked that he was okay.

‘Nothing.’ He did not look up. He just looked at Meg as he spoke. ‘If you can leave us, please?’

‘Dos Santos?’ she repeated when the steward had gone, and he told her that it was a surname often given to orphans.

‘It means “from the Saints” in Portuguese,’ he explained.

‘How were you orphaned?’

‘I don’t actually know,’ Niklas admitted. ‘Perhaps I was abandoned, just left at the orphanage. I really don’t know.’

‘Have you ever tried to find out about your family ...?’

He opened his mouth to say that he would rather not discuss it, but instead he gave even more of himself. ‘I have,’ he admitted. ‘It would be nice to know, but it proved impossible. I got Miguel, my lawyer, onto it, but he got nowhere.’

She asked him what it had been like, growing up like that, but she was getting too close and it was not something he chose to share.

He told her so. ‘I don’t want to speak about that.’

So they talked some more about her, and she could have talked to him for ever—except it was Niklas who got too close now, when he asked if she was in a relationship.

‘No.’

‘Have you ever been serious about anyone?’

‘Not really,’ she said, but that wasn’t quite true. ‘I was about to get engaged,’ Meg said. ‘I called it off.’

‘Why?’

She just lay there.

‘Why?’ Niklas pushed.

‘He got on a bit too well with my parents.’ She swallowed. ‘A colleague.’ He could hear her hesitation to discuss it. ‘What we said before about worlds being too small ...’ Meg said. ‘I realised I would be making mine smaller still.’

‘Was he upset?’

‘Not really.’ Meg was honest. ‘It wasn’t exactly a passionate ...’ She swallowed. She was *so* not going to discuss this with him.

She should have just said so, but instead she told him that she needed to sleep. The dimmed lights and champagne were starting to catch up with both of them, and almost reluctantly their conversation was closed and finally they slept.

For how long Meg wasn’t sure. She just knew that when she woke up she regretted it.

Not the conversation, but ending it, falling asleep and wasting the little time that they had.

She’d woken to the scent of coffee and the hum of the engines and now she looked over to him. He was still asleep, and just as beautiful with his eyes closed. It was almost a privilege to examine such a stunning man more intently. His black hair was swept back, his beautiful mouth relaxed and loose. She looked at his dark spiky lashes and thought of the treasure behind them.

She wondered what language he was dreaming in, then watched as his eyes were revealed.

For Niklas it was a pleasure to open his eyes to her.

He had felt the caress of her gaze and now he met it and held it.

‘English.’ He answered the question she had not voiced, but they both understood. He had been dreaming in English, perhaps about her. And then Niklas did what he always did when he woke to a woman he considered beautiful.

It was a touch more difficult to do so—given the gap between them, given that he could not gather her body and slip her towards him—but the result would certainly be worth the brief effort. He pulled himself up on his elbow and moved till his face was right over her, and looking down.

‘You never did finish what you were saying.’

She looked back at him.

‘When you said it wasn’t passionate ...’

She could have turned away from him, could have closed the conversation—his question was inappropriate, really—only nothing felt inappropriate with Niklas. There was nothing that couldn’t be said with his breath on her cheek and that sulky, beautiful mouth just inches away.

‘I was the one who wasn’t passionate.’

‘I can’t imagine that.’

‘Well, I wasn’t.’

‘Because you didn’t want him in the way that you want me?’

Meg knew what he was about to do.

And she wanted, absolutely, for him to do it.

So he did.

It did not feel as if she was kissing a stranger as their lips met—all it felt was sublime.

His lips were surprisingly gentle and moved with hers for a moment, giving her a brief glimpse of false security—for his tongue, when it slipped in, was shockingly direct and intent.

This wasn't a kiss to test the water, and now Meg knew what had been wrong with her from the start, the reason she had been rambling. This thing between them was an attraction so instant that he could have kissed her like this the moment he'd sat down beside her. He could have taken his seat, had her turn off her phone and offered his mouth to her and she would have kissed him right back.

And so she kissed him back now.

There was more passion in his kiss than Meg had ever tasted in her life. She discovered that a kiss could be far more than a simple meeting of lips as his tongue told her exactly what else he would like to do, slipping in and out of her parted lips, soft one minute, rougher the next. Then his hand moved beneath the blanket and stroked her breast through her blouse, so expertly that she ached for more.

Meg's hands were in his hair and his jaw scratched at her skin and his tongue probed a little harder. As she concentrated on that, as she fought with her body not to arch into him, he moved his hand inside her top. Now Niklas became less than

subtle with his silent instructions and moved his hand to her back, pulling her forward into his embrace. She swallowed the growl that vibrated from his throat as beneath the blanket he rolled her nipple between his fingers—hard at first, and then with his palm he stroked her more softly.

To the outside world they would appear simply as two lovers kissing, their passion indecent, but hidden. Then Niklas moved over her a little more, so all she could breathe was his scent, and his mouth and his hand worked harder, each subtle stroke making her want the next one even more. Suddenly Meg knew she had to stop this, had to pull back, because just her reaction to his kiss had her feeling as though she might come.

‘Come.’ His mouth was at her ear now, his word voicing her thought.

‘Stop,’ she told him, even if it was not what she wanted him to do, but she could hardly breathe.

‘Why?’

‘Because,’ she answered with his mouth now back over hers, ‘it’s wrong.’

‘But *so* nice.’

He continued to kiss her. Her mouth was wet from his but she closed her lips, because this feeling was too much and he was taking her to the edge. He parted her lips with his tongue and again she tried to close them, clamped her teeth, but he merely carried on until she gave in and opened again to him. He breathed harder, and his hand still worked at her breast, and she

was fighting not to gasp, not to moan, to remember where they were as he suckled her tongue.

Meg forced herself not to push his hand far lower, as her body was begging her to do, not to pull him fully on top of her as Niklas made love to her with his mouth.

She hadn't a hope of winning.

He removed his hand from her breast and prised her knotted fingers from his hair. Then he moved her hand beneath his blanket, his body acting as a shield as he held her small hand over his thick, solid length. Her fingers ached to curl and stroke around him, but he did not allow it. Instead he just flattened her palm against him and held it there. His mouth still worked against hers, and she tried to grumble a protest as her hand fought not to stroke, not to feel, not to explore his arousal.

He won.

He smothered her moan with his mouth and sucked, as if swallowing her cry of pleasure, and then, most cruel of all, he loosened his grip on her hand and accepted the dig of her fingers into him. He lifted his head and watched her, a wicked smile on his face, as she struggled to breathe, watched her bite on her lip as he too fought not to come. And he wished the lights were on so he could watch her in colour, wished that they were in his vast bed so the second she'd finished they could resume.

And they would, he decided.

'That,' Niklas said as he crashed back not to earth but to ten thousand feet in the air, 'was the appetiser.'

She'd been right the first time.

He *had* been talking about sex.

She put on a cardigan and excused herself just as the lights came on.

As she stood in the tiny cubicle and examined her face in the mirror she fastened her bra. Her skin was pink from his prolonged attention, her lips swollen, and her eyes glittered with danger. The face that looked back at her was not a woman she knew.

And she was *so* not the woman Niklas had first met.

Not once in her life had she rebelled; never had she even jumped out of her bedroom window and headed out to parties. At university she had studied and worked part-time, getting the grades her parents had expected before following them into the family business. She had always done the right thing, even when it came to her personal relationships.

Niklas had been right. She hadn't wanted her boyfriend in the way she wanted Niklas, and had strung things out for as long as she could before realising she could not get engaged to someone she cared about but didn't actually fancy. She had told her boyfriend that she wouldn't have sex till she was sure they were serious, but the moment he'd started to talk about rings and a future Meg had known it was time to get out.

And *that* was the part that caused her disquiet.

She wasn't the passionate woman Niklas had just met and kissed—she was a virgin, absolutely clueless with men. A few

hours off the leash from her parents and she was lying on her back, with a stranger above her and the throb of illicit pulses below. She closed her eyes in shame, and then opened them again and saw the glitter and the shame burned a little less. There was no going back now to the woman she had been, and even if there were she would not change a minute of the time she had spent with Niklas.

She heard a tap against the door and froze for a second. Then she told herself she was being ridiculous. She brushed her teeth and sorted her hair and washed in the tiny sink, trying to brace herself to head back out there.

As she walked down the aisle she noticed her bed had been put away and the seats were up. She attempted polite conversation with Niklas as breakfast was served. He didn't really return her conversation. It was as if what had passed between them simply hadn't happened. He continued to read his paper, dunking his croissant in strong black coffee as if he *hadn't* just rocked her world.

The dishes were cleared and still he kept reading. And as the plane started its descent Meg decided that she now hated landing too—because she didn't want to arrive back at her old life.

Except you couldn't fly for ever. Meg knew that. And a man like Niklas wasn't going to stick around on landing. She knew what happened with men like him, wasn't naïve enough to think it had been anything more than a nice diversion.

She accepted it was just about sex.

And yet it wasn't just the sex that had her hooked on him.

He stretched out his legs, his suit trousers still somehow unrumpled, and she turned away and stared out of the window, trying not to think about what was beneath the cloth, trying not to think about what she had felt beneath her fingers, about the taste of his kisses and the passion she had encountered. Maybe life would have been easier had she not sat next to him—because now everything would be a mere comparison, for even with the little she knew still she was aware that there were not many men like Niklas.

Niklas just continued reading his newspaper, or appeared to be. His busy mind was already at work, cancelling his day. He knew that she would have plans once they landed. That she probably had a car waiting to take her to her hotel and her parents. But he'd think of something to get around that obstacle.

He had no intention of waiting.

Or maybe he would wait. Maybe he'd arrange to meet up with her tonight.

He thought of her controlling parents and turned a page in the paper. He relished the thought of screwing her right under their nose.

She, Niklas decided, was amazing.

There was no *possibly* about it now.

He thought of her face as she came beneath him and shifted just a little in his seat.

'Ladies and gentlemen ...' They both looked up as the

captain's voice came over the intercom. 'Due to an incident at LAX all planes are now being re-routed. We will be landing in Las Vegas in just over an hour.'

The captain apologised for the inconvenience and they heard the moans and grumbles from other passengers. They felt the shift as the plane started to climb, and had she been sitting next to anyone else Meg might have been complaining too, or panicking about the prolonged flight, or stressing about the car that was waiting for her, or worried about what was going on ...

Instead she was smiling when he turned to her.

'Viva Las Vegas,' Niklas said, and picked up her remote, laid her chair flat again and got back to where he had left off.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘IT WAS A false alarm.’

They were still sitting on the plane on the tarmac. The second they had landed in Vegas Niklas had pulled out his phone, turned it on and called someone. He was speaking in Portuguese. He had briefly halted his conversation to inform Meg that whatever had happened in Los Angeles had been a false alarm and then carried on talking into his phone.

‘*Aguarde, por favour!*’ he said, and then turned again to Meg. ‘I am speaking with my PA, Carla. I can ask her to reschedule your flight also. She will get it done quickly, I think.’

And make sure he’d sit next to her too, Niklas decided.

‘So?’ he asked. ‘When do you want to get there?’

Of course the normal response would be as soon as possible, but there was nothing normal about her response to him. Niklas was looking right at her, and there was undoubtedly an invitation in his eyes, but there was something he needed to know—somehow she had to tell him that what had happened between them wasn’t usual for her.

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