

LEAKAGE

A FRIENDS-TO-LOVERS ROMANCE

Karen Harley

EXCERPT

EPISODE 1

CURTAIN UP

TO: JasmineFrazier
FROM: Sara Brogan
SUBJECT: Favor please

Hi Roomie,

My boss is making me stay late because of some last minute clients. Could you walk Pencil? He just needs fifteen minutes or so outside so he's not too spastic. Oh and for once IT'S NOT RAINING! And it's a FULL MOON so you should have no problem seeing the poop in the dark so I don't even feel too guilty asking you. Or should I?? I know how busy you are. Also is there any beer left in the fridge or should I pick some up on the way home? I think the guys were swinging by tonight.

-Sara

TO: Sara Brogan
FROM: JasmineFrazier
SUBJECT: Re: Favor please

I just got home. I don't mind walking Pencil. Yes, Matt came by for some laundry soap and said he and Harrison would come over as soon as Harrison got home. No need to stop for beer because I just found my parents' bribe for the crap they're piling on me while they're gone. A lovely bottle of port. I think you'll like.

-Jasmine

Text Transcript

MATT: Jasmine says they have port. Quality. We're invited.

HARRISON: Thank fuck. Coming home late.

MATT: Sucky day?

HARRISON: Whole week. Females mystify me. I need a how-to manual.

MATT: Cry on Sara's shoulder about it.

HARRISON: I just might. Any hope you cleaned the stove?

MATT: None.

HARRISON: Then I'm stopping for dinner. You going over to the girls' place now?

MATT: No, I'm eating/working now. I'll wait till you get here. Saw Sara this morning, BTW. Looking tasty in skinnies.

HARRISON: I honestly don't need to know that.

MATT: Just sayin'

HARRISON: Jasmine's earrings are still on the table. One of us should remember to bring them over.

HARRISON: You there?

MATT: Busy

HARRISON: One more thing, did she have laundry detergent?

MATT: Yeah. Donated a big tub.

HARRISON: Port and laundry soap. We're due to recompense.

MATT: Port was a gift from her folks. Gave her money for soap.

HARRISON: Did she snark?

MATT: Always

HARRISON: Am I imagining that she's snarkier with you?

MATT: Nope.

HARRISON: Any clue why?

MATT: Yup.

HARRISON: One day I'll understand women.

MATT: That's what Sara's for. She's your link to the female mind.

HARRISON: She's the most confusing of all.

MATT: Beg to differ

HARRISON: Besides, I wouldn't want to even go there with Sara. Platonic friendships with women = peace and calm. Don't rock the boat.

HARRISON: You there?

HARRISON: Matt?

HARRISON: Later

THE SCHEME

"Wow, Jas," Sara burst out. "I've never actually seen you drunk before. Or you either, Harrison."

Neither Jasmine nor Harrison answered. And that was just one of the things wrong with tonight.

It had started so well, too. Cozy nights with the guys were always fun. This Tuesday in Seattle it was weirdly clear and cold even for January. When Matt and Harrison, her across-the-hall neighbors, had wandered by her and Jasmine's apartment a couple of hours ago, Sara had pumped up the furnace to high. Now it was blazing hot and Pencil, her fluffy Havanese dog, was whining.

Everyone had started the evening doing their usual thing. It was comfortable. But then things had...changed.

Maybe it was the port. Sara preferred beer. She had to admit the liquor, courtesy of her roommate's rich parents, was very nice, but she didn't like sweet stuff nearly as much as Jasmine did. Jasmine's sweet tooth maybe explained why she was no longer sitting at the dining room table tapping on her small laptop computer with her elegant, red-tipped fingers but instead was draped ass-up over the arm of the high fake leather sofa, clawing at the carpet and whimpering, "They're gone, they're gone."

Which in itself was very wrong. Jasmine did not do drunk. Sara's roommate was always, but always, cool and reserved.

Everyone seemed lost in their own world. Not that that never happened. Keeping company with Matt and Harrison had become a regular thing for her and Jas, a kind of convenience. But usually they randomly shot the breeze in between doing their own thing.

Tonight, though....

It was depressing.

They were in a rut.

It was worse than depressing. Because Harrison was drunk, too. And awfully cute. She had never seen him like this. Usually he sat formally on the sofa frowning at his tablet, looking like the professor he would probably be one day. One day after they had all moved away from the building and he lived in a big house with a similarly brilliant wife, probably on Mercer Island...

But right now he was plopped on the floor not far from Jasmine's legs, slumped back along the front of the sofa, a drink in hand, staring into space. Over the course of the night, the Russian history documents he'd been thumbing through had scattered themselves across the floor.

Sara's eyes soaked him up. Even in those conservative chinos and the button-down shirt, the man was a thing of wonder. His dirty blond hair was tousled and boyish, but the body down below wasn't the least boyish. She felt like crawling over to him, grabbing him by the collar and ripping that preppie shirt right off his hunky chest. Unfortunately, fancy-schmancy doctoral students like Harrison Thomasson didn't interest themselves *that* way with down-to-earth massage therapy assistants like Sara. Especially this one, who treated her like a little sister.

So no shirt-ripping, she thought sadly. No jumping him to hump him. Just being good old platonic Sara as always....

It was *really* beginning to get old.

"Gone, gone..." Jasmine's husky voice whined. She leaned down even further, almost bumping her head on the floor.

Sara smiled ruefully. Jasmine was tall, slim, and *usually* elegant and graceful. If it had been a normal day—if it had been *Sara's* semi-sheer blouse unbuttoned down to her cleavage—the guys would have had something to say. Matt would have whistled and Harrison would have called her out for indecency.

But this was Jasmine, spared a risqué reveal since she sported two cupcake tops instead of boobs. Women with flat chests just never had to think about certain things.

And they were all ignoring each other.

From her side-lying position on the floor, she scratched Pencil's neck. "Come on, everyone. What happened to you guys tonight? Is it the full moon or what? Matt, have you ever seen either of them like this?"

"Mm." Matt, at least, was doing his usual thing. He'd hooked one lean, muscular, jean-clad leg casually over the arm of the recliner and was zooming his hand through the air with some metallic toy. He twiddled a lever up and down. With his tousled black hair, he managed to look boyish even with his loose-limbed, athletic build. Matt had the angular body of an Olympic diver, which was odd, because it was the bulkier Harrison, not Matt, who was the resident swimmer.

"Matt!" Sara snapped her fingers.

Matt's lazy-lidded gaze drifted her way. "Say what?"

"You, too! Honestly, what is it with everybody tonight? Just look at them." Sara gestured towards the two zombies by the sofa. "Jasmine's emptied nearly the whole bottle of port and your roommate's been sitting like that for the past twenty minutes."

"What are you—ah." Matt studied the two by the sofa for a minute, especially Jasmine. "No comment."

"They're gone," Jasmine moaned. "They're just gone."

Sara couldn't help but giggle. "Who's gone, Jas?"

"My *shoes*." Jasmine sounded seriously traumatized.

"Try looking under the sofa," Matt suggested blandly.

Something in his tone made Sara glance his way again. He was still watching Jasmine, absently stroking the toy he held in his hand. Sara was pretty sure she knew what held his attention. Her roommate seemed unaware that her formerly immaculate skirt was now hiked up past the edge of her black panties.

"No!" Sara said quickly. "Don't look under the sofa or you'll fall over. Come on, sit down, Jasmine. Your skirt needs fixing. Matt, don't tease her. She's totally wasted."

"I'm not wasted, I'm mad," Jasmine corrected, wriggling around until she was sitting almost properly, except for her skirt, which despite her tugging barely covered the region of her crotch.

"Why are you mad?" Sara asked.

"Because that asshole cheated on me. They *all* cheat, those bastards. Is it hot in here or is it just me?" Jasmine slipped two more buttons out of the buttonholes of her blouse, and now her black bra was pretty much obvious. Between the bra and the panties, she was exposing basically everything, but Sara didn't think she was aware of it.

Should she say something? Nah. If Jasmine wanted to get wild drunk, then she didn't need a bossy parent-type hanging over her. Besides, it was just the guys, and they were all good buddies.

She was kind of surprised, though, that Matt shifted his leg but said nothing more. He usually took every opportunity to casually flirt with the girls on nights like this.

Not that he ever made a serious move toward either of them. He didn't need to. Matt had more than his share of females falling all over him because of his sexy dark Irish looks, his blue eyes and mischievous smile, and the fact that in his own laid-back way, he oozed sexual confidence. The fact that he had plenty of opportunity elsewhere was a relief as far as Sara was concerned, because she had trouble looking at him as anything but a pal.

Now, his roommate, on the other hand....

"Harrison! Yo!" Matt said.

Harrison jerked his head around. "Sorry. Zoning."

"You're looking like someone kicked your cat. If you had one."

"She left me," Harrison explained morosely. "She said I've been boring ever since I came back from Russia. She wanted a party animal. I can't be a party animal. She *knows* I'm defending my dissertation this spring."

"You're talking about Jean whatsername?" Matt yawned. "Blond? No-wasabi-on-my-sashimi-thanks Jean?" Matt tossed down the toy and gave a long cat stretch of his body. Sara eyed his form with appreciation. He really was yummy in those tight jeans. So why was it Harrison she daydreamed over, rather than the far-more-accessible Matt? "So you guys were a thing."

Harrison shrugged. "She liked curling up with hot chocolate with marshmallows, so I assumed...."

"Oh, puhlease," Sara snorted, and Matt rolled his eyes. Harrison was something of an idiot when it came to reading women. At 28, he might be the oldest of all of them, but sophistication-wise, he was even younger than Sara. Harrison just didn't get women at all. He thought the way to court a girl was to read passages from Dostoyevsky over coffee.

Now, Sara wouldn't mind that kind of thing a bit. She could happily listen to his charismatic timbre reciting dictionary entries all night if that's what rocked his boat. But it wasn't people like Sara he went for.

He didn't exactly *go* for any of them, actually. He didn't have to. They went for him. His Nordic good looks and absent-minded green-eyed gaze drew passersby like magnets. Harrison got more social media friendings and sexual offers from frisky women *and* men than anyone they knew. He seemed mystified by it.

"I miss her. Jean was very good at sex," Harrison said clearly. "But I don't think I satisfied her."

Sara heard Matt's muffled laughter and glared at him. He raised one eyebrow at her.

"I think Harrison's sweet to be concerned," she said. "All men should try to satisfy women in bed."

Matt's eyes gleamed. "Try? Or succeed?"

Which made Harrison sigh.

"I think you're wasted in academia, Harry," Jasmine said in a sing-song voice. "Honestly, with your classic good looks, you should have been a movie star. You can always take acting lessons." She leaned forward and patted his head, something she never would do normally.

That settled it for Sara. Jasmine was officially having an off day.

Sara remembered the day almost three years ago when she'd met Jasmine in Sara's boss's office for a therapeutic massage, when both girls were 21. Jasmine was still in college; Sara had just finished community college the previous year. Sara had coaxed Jasmine into lunch and learned it had been Jasmine's first—and, as it turned out, last—massage. It seemed Jasmine really disliked casual touching. She kept a definite distance between herself and other people—in all ways. Occasionally she took men as lovers, but they never stayed around long, probably, Sara thought, because of Jasmine's problem with intimacy.

"So you both just got dumped." Sara shook her head in sympathy. "Well, that explains everything. I'm sorry, guys, that truly sucks. As for me, I swore off men last month."

"Seriously, gorgeous?" Matt said. "Come on over here. I'll fix what ails you."

Sara wrinkled her nose at him, knowing he didn't mean it. "Don't tempt me. I love male type people way too much."

"That's for sure, Sara," Harrison said somberly, his voice slurred. "I keep telling you. You need to be more discriminating about your dates or it'll get you into trouble one day."

"I know I shouldn't go out with every guy that asks me," she admitted. She was well aware of her flaws but only a little concerned about them. "Men are just so lovely, even the big old cuddly ones. So warm, so strong. So..."

"Quick to take advantage of you," Jasmine said loudly. "People are always taking advantage of

you, Sara. Your bosses, your family..." Sara winced, because it was true that she spent a lot of time on the phone helping her mom through some man problem or other. "Even me, your own roommate. But especially *men*."

Jasmine said "men" like it was a bad word. Sara caught Matt's gaze fixed curiously on Jasmine.

"I guess so," Sara said wistfully. "But I like being with them anyway."

"*And* cooking for them. And giving them rubdowns, and running errands. While they don't do anything for you in return."

"Yeah, well. I've been listening to you guys, all right? That's why I decided to swear 'em off for a while. I can't say 'no.' To anything."

"Why bother saying 'no'?" Matt said. "Life is for living. Sex is good. Play is good. Life's short. Look," he went on in low voice, "why don't you just take off that shirt?"

A heartbeat of shock reverberated around the room. It took Sara a moment to realize it was Jasmine Matt was looking at.

"What?" Jasmine's jaw had dropped.

"You keep unbuttoning it, Jas. Isn't that where you're headed? Taking the whole thing off?"

Jasmine's chin rose. There was already something of a flush on her honey-brown skin, and now the color deepened. Her fingers began shakily to re-button the shirt. "Sex is all you think about, Matt, isn't it?" she asked with a trace of her normal coolness.

"I think about toys, too," he said innocently, raising his brows. "The soft, plush ones and the hard plastic ones mostly, Jas."

"Stop teasing her," Sara told him again.

"Why?" Matt asked. Sara wasn't sure whether he was seriously asking or not.

"Because it's not the least bit funny," Jasmine interjected, and Sara thought her alcoholic fuzz must be wearing off at last. She sounded more like her usual stiff self.

Matt's lips twitched. He rolled smoothly to his feet and swooped down to pick up the fallen toy figure, then sank back down, frowning as he examined it.

"Why do women keep leaving me?" Harrison said suddenly. "Does my breath smell bad? I maybe don't floss as much as I should."

Sara wanted to hug him. "Your breath could not be more perfect," she said honestly.

Harrison looked at her sorrowfully. "I think you lie."

"Oh, give me a break," Jasmine said, combing her fingers through her hair. "Women adore you. You have nothing to complain about. The question is, why do men cheat on me?"

As ridiculous as she thought Harrison was being, Sara felt a stab of sympathy for him. "We all have something to complain about, Jasmine," she argued. "Really. To outsiders it may look like you're beautiful, successful, and confident, doing exactly what you want to do. Yet we all know how you feel about your job, and here you are—coldly dumped by a loser guy—"

"I didn't get dumped. I dumped him. Cheating bastard."

"And Harrison. He's this whiz in his field, has the most sophisticated women stalking him, has a lovely family and the nicest manners ever, and then he goes and gets dumped by a bitch who can't appreciate how sweet he is. As for me—I have lots of great friends and a fun job and live in the best city in the world and I totally can't say no to guys who use me. And Matt...Matt's the smartest dude ever with godlike powers with women and squeezes every bit of fun out of life and yet...yet..." Sara paused, studying Matt, who seemed not to be listening. As jokey as he was, Sara realized he'd always been something of a dark horse to her. Did he even *want* to have a real relationship with a woman? Because he sure didn't act like it.

Jasmine cleared her throat and spoke with a surprising articulateness for being so toasted. "Why don't I take this one? Matt is an indiscriminate, noncommittal, never-had-a-serious-moment-in-his-life

hedonist, and one day it'll all blow up in his face."

That earned everyone's stare. Except Matt's. He just poked his tongue in his cheek and started to disassemble the toy robot.

"Hey, I think we're getting a bit personal here," Sara said uneasily.

"He started it," Jasmine said.

"Come on," Sara pleaded. "Hasn't anyone else noticed that all we do lately is bicker? We're all so *tense*." No response. She sighed. "It's been a long week. I had to work an extra shift 'cause a coworker called in sick and then there was tonight. Thanks for walking Pencil, by the way, Jasmine."

"Sure."

"You have to admit you've been extra stressed," Sara said pointedly. "Didn't you have to facilitate that meeting because your parents are out of town?"

Jasmine sighed. Her folks owned the fan manufacturing company where she worked long hours already, even before she'd taken on the extra duties they'd sprung on her at the last minute. "You're right. I'm sorry, everyone. I'm...not quite myself tonight. Damn, it *is* hot in here. That furnace is doing it again, isn't it?"

Sara jumped up and went to the wall to fiddle with the dial. "We're seriously on edge these days. You know what we should do is *help* each other with our problems instead of snap at each other all the time."

The moment she said it, she felt a shift in her attitude. A feeling of hope. And the seed of an idea began to germinate in her mind.

"We do help each other," Harrison said. "It's not a picnic, being stalked. You ladies don't stalk me. I can relax around you. You're like the sisters I've never had."

Jasmine smiled, though Sara was quite offended at Harrison's words. *I'm not your sister, mister*, she wanted to protest. But she brushed it aside, taken over now by the idea that had just occurred to her. "You know, Harrison, it's interesting seeing you drunk like this. It wouldn't hurt you to loosen up a bit more often. Usually you're too repressed to talk about your personal life. I only ever see you brood over things. I think it's good for you to get it out in the open."

"You may be right." Harrison patted Pencil, who'd wandered over.

Sara nibbled her lip, then turned to her roommate. "And Jasmine, I love you to death, but look at you—you have to get drunk to say what you really think. I think *both* of you need to let go more. And I have the perfect idea how."

She hesitated. The idea really was absolutely brilliant, for so many reasons. But...

"Your face is all red," Harrison told her. "You should splash water on it."

"Go on," Matt drawled, his eyes narrowed into slits. "Speak."

Sara's hand pressed against her own cheek. Harrison was right. It felt hot. "Well, you're all saying I'm—what did you call it—indiscriminate? And Matt is a ho, the worst kind of manwhore. Sorry, Matt. No offense."

"None taken." He grinned.

"So here's me and Matt, just totally out of control. And there you two are, too inhibited. It's kind of beautiful, in a way. What if we all—you know—took on the challenge ourselves?"

For a moment there was absolute silence.

"Challenge?" Matt said slowly.

Sara sank to her knees. "Yeah. It's obvious we need help. All we've done lately is whine. What we need is action!"

"It is?" Harrison said. His look said she'd grown another head.

"Sure. It's time to stop making the same mistakes over and over. We're our own best resources, guys."

"We are?" Jasmine said.

"Sure. I realized the other day we've all become really good friends, living here. I mean, maybe we don't spill all our deepest, innermost thoughts to each other all the time but how many hours do we hang out together every day? We do so much together. We actually know each other pretty damn well. I mean, I feel you all know me better than any of my other buddies do. And I trust you guys."

No disagreement came, and if she wasn't mistaken, their expressions had relaxed.

"Y'all," Harrison said, smiling faintly. "Not 'you all.' To be pedantic about it."

"Right, southern boy," Sara said happily. "So why don't we just put our money where our mouth is and show each other how to be happier? It'll be like the Good Deed Birthday Challenge we did last year."

The silence descended again, this time with cautious stares.

"Or the Great Gluten Ban," she added. "We all liked that, didn't we? Well, except Matt, the pizza fiend."

Then, from Jasmine: "I don't quite understand what you're suggesting."

Sara turned to her. "Look. You should just stop dating those rich, egomaniac assholes, but you won't. I should stop going out with user guys, but how can I? I don't even know how to do it any other way. But here's the thing. What if you trained yourself to open up to a different kind of man? I mean, look at Matt and Harrison here. They're good regular guys. If they both took you to bed, like, over and over and over and over again—"

"Took me to *what*?" Jasmine shrieked.

"Took you to bed. Got in the sack with you. One at a time, obviously," she added reassuringly.

"Then you'd learn to *expect* to be treated nice. With respect. They're both sweet guys. They'll treat you great. And," she turned to them, "if I slept with you guys, you'd still be on my side, right? You'd help me make the wise decision, maybe show me how not to jump on any man that looked at me? Remind me I deserve better and all that stuff?"

Harrison and Matt were now both open-mouthed.

"Right?" she prompted.

"Right," Matt echoed. He looked utterly blank.

They still weren't with her. Sara sucked in air for courage and looked to the ceiling for guidance. "We girls could help you guys, too. I'll bet Jasmine and I could knock some decency into you, Matt. You do go too far sometimes. One-night stands aren't really cool anymore. Plus, as Jasmine says, you tend to lead with your, uh, you know."

She paused. There was a grunt from Matt's direction. They were listening.

"And Harrison—you need to let go. Have fun. You're always in a race to do something or go somewhere. I'm great at kicking back and having fun." She hurried on, in case she expanded on that one too much. "Jasmine...well, the two of you are both so reserved. If we do this, you'll each have to come out of your shells. By the end of it all, you'll know how to have relationships with the kind of person who could make you really happy. We'll all know ourselves better. We'll be more fulfilled individuals. It'll be awesome."

"Sara, what is your idea exactly?" Matt clipped.

Now she had to spell it out. This was the hard part. "We all have sex with each other. Make a habit of it."

"You want us to start having fuck buddy orgies," Matt said.

Sara rolled her eyes. "No. Not orgies. We give each other lessons. Boy-girl lessons. In bed. Like, on a schedule." She tried again. "Matt and I try to loosen you two up. You—Harrison and Jasmine—try to teach me and Matt some self-discipline. And we all learn how to have better relationships."

Sara heard the echo of her own words in the long minutes it took for her friends to absorb them.

"That's the most ridiculous idea I've ever heard, Sara," Harrison said finally. "I'm perfectly happy the way things are. My love life is fine."

"Yeah, way to break up a friendship." Jasmine tossed her head. "I am never going to have sex with Matt, on or off a schedule, in any universe, thank you. Or Harrison," she added as an afterthought.

Matt drew in a breath. Sara gaped at her roommate. She thought the direct cut at Matt was pretty cruel, even for Jasmine, especially on a subject as sensitive as sex.

"Hear, hear. I don't want to have sex with either of you ladies," Harrison said mildly. "You're my only female friends. I'd like to keep it that way."

Sara didn't even try to hide her disappointment. But she shrugged. "Oh, well. I thought it was a good idea. But what do I know?"

"You're way too impulsive," Harrison said irritably. "I wish you'd work on that."

Sara expelled a breath. "But Harrison, that's exactly what I was trying to do with my idea. The whole point—aargh! You drive me *crazy*."

Matt spoke languidly into the awkward lull. "I kind of like it."

Every pair of eyes flew his way.

"What?" Jasmine squeaked.

"It could work. I admit it's a weird idea. It's a bit too much like fucking my sister." Matt winked at Sara. "But yes, I think it could work."

"You *want* to do it?" Jasmine couldn't seem to wrap her mind around it. She was staring at Matt as if he were an alien.

He shrugged. "Whatever. I'm like Pencil. Give me good food, good sex, good sleep, and I'm fine. But *you* could use it, Jas. A lot. Wouldn't hurt you, either, Harrison. As for Sara —" He considered her.

"I'd love it," Sara admitted. "Are you kidding? Two drop-dead guys who'll let me do anything I want to their yummy...umm."

"You terrify me," Matt said wryly. "But maybe we *could* knock some sense into you. All right. I'm in. My schedule's open, except for Saturdays. Date night."

And he went back to fiddling with the action figure.

"Well, mine's not." Jasmine kept staring at Matt with a kind of horror. Her expression reminded Sara of the way Eve in the Garden of Eden must have looked at the serpent, or maybe the apple.

"It's a really, really bad idea," said Harrison. "Damn. My head hurts like fuck."

"So it's just you and me, Matt?" Sara pouted. "That's no fun."

"Sara, you're being stupid." Harrison looked really angry now. "Incredibly, mind-numbingly—"

"You wanna teach me to be smarter?" Sara challenged. "Then get on the schedule and *teach* me."

Harrison's nostrils flared. "I should."

Oh-*ho*, thought Sara.

"Okay, children," Matt said soothingly. "Jasmine, go ahead. Tell Sara you're in."

"I'm not in. You're insane. You're out of your ever-loving bloggery buggery buggery *mind*."

Matt smiled. "Jasmine's in. What about it? Sundays? Fridays?"

"Tuesday or Friday." Harrison spoke reluctantly. He still sounded mad.

"Tuesday or Friday for me, too," Sara said quickly. "Actually Sundays would be okay, too."

They all looked at Jasmine.

"Well?" Matt said, sounding bored.

"Listen, you guys," Jasmine said tightly. "You know you're my best friends."

Harrison reached around and gave her a friendly punch on the arm, and Sara stuck out her tongue.

"And you know my parents."

Sara nodded. She knew Jasmine's folks were rich—not billionaire rich, but they were *seriously* into heating and cooling. And making more and more money was pretty much *all* they cared about. That

and treating their only daughter like a princess, which was more about controlling her than indulging her. Which was probably why Jasmine had seemed almost grateful when Sara had made the roommate offer. Jasmine said that living in their modest Green Lake apartment made her feel normal and *free*.

"They're assholes," Matt dismissed. "What's your point?"

"My point, Matt, is that sex could ruin everything about this living situation. I don't want to go back there."

"You don't ever have to live with your parents again."

"I know, but..."

"Tuesdays or Fridays, Jasmine?"

"Stop hounding her, Matt," Harrison inserted. "She's right. This is a big decision. I mean, we're proposing to...to...with..."

Jasmine closed her eyes and visibly swallowed. "Fridays."

There were a few beats of silence. Sara had to admit she was unnerved that Jasmine had actually agreed to this.

That they all had agreed to it.

Something in the air.

The port.

Or...?

Then Harrison said, "Okay. So we need to set a time and then make some rules."

"Like?" Sara prompted. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Matt roll to his feet. He wandered out of the room, disappearing through the doorway to the kitchen.

There was more discussion. Sara admitted to herself that she paid attention to only some of it as Jasmine and Harrison crisply negotiated the logistics, with Harrison occasionally tapping on his mini tablet. Time. Place. Details. Who with what. Her head was swimming. They were going to do this. Every Friday night. For who knows how long.

The Challenge, they were calling it.

From eight to midnight.

According to a schedule.

No orgies.

Just one man, one woman. Alternating. Back and forth. Separate rooms.

Eight to midnight.

Every Friday.

"And it's not, absolutely not, going to leak into our regular lives. If it starts to, we stop." Harrison's firm utterance penetrated her fog. "Everyone get that? *Before* it goes out of control. When we're not doing the Challenge, we're same-old, same-old. Friends and buddies. That's more important than anything else."

Behind the sofa, Sara saw that Matt had returned. He was looking down at them all with no expression on his face.

"So no leakage?" Harrison said.

"No leakage," Sara agreed.

"No leakage," said Jasmine.

Matt said nothing.

Oh, boy, Sara thought.

What the hell had she done?

The two women didn't say much to each other after the guys left, but retreated into their own worlds. Sara gave Pencil a quick quarter-lap walk around Green Lake. When she came back, the

bathroom was damp and scented from Jasmine's shower, and there was a light shining under Jasmine's bedroom door.

Sara brushed her teeth and used the toilet, then disappeared into her own bedroom and stared unseeingly at the unmade bed.

She tossed off her clothes, tossed on a nightshirt, and straightened the sheets just enough to make them comfortable. Then she flopped down on the bed and rested her hands together behind her neck.

In three days, she'd be in bed with Harrison.

She wondered if the tiny drop of port *she'd* taken tonight had had more of an influence on her than she'd realized. Otherwise, she had no explanation for how she'd come up with the crazy idea in the first place. Had she actually told her small but precious group of friends that she wanted to jump all over Harrison's body?

Not that it wasn't a splendid idea. It was. For everybody. She really believed that.

But...had she really proposed that she and Harrison...

Oh, God.

Her hands came up to squeeze the ache out of her breasts. This was mad. Awful, in fact.

Nobody suspected a thing, of course, but the truth was, Sara'd had a killer crush on her scholarly male neighbor from the very first day she'd met him.

Matt had moved into the building the previous year and had already become a good friend, so when Jasmine told her his new roommate was giving a lecture at the university, Sara had gone along. Even though she couldn't give a rat's ass about Russian history.

So for an hour she'd watched the bespectacled instructor stride back and forth behind the podium gesticulating with his pointer, pausing only to answer breathless questions from female attendees. He'd obviously been enthusiastic about his subject—which was so, so boring. But *he* wasn't. He was adorable, a true loosen-your-collar hottie, and Sara had instantly fallen in lust.

The problem was, the lust hadn't only not gone away over time, but deepened into more as she'd gotten to know him. Because even though he was well aware she was clueless about his subject and not even remotely near the level of his intellect, he was a total darling. He was unfailingly helpful and just plain nice. He never made her feel stupid about anything, not even her random animal rescues. That time he'd cheerfully given her a lift with that big German Shepherd she'd needed to bring across town....

Within the short span of a year, Harrison had become a good friend. A friend who stubbornly looked at her like a brother, almost paternally, even though he was only four stinking years older than her.

Sara jumped out of bed and rummaged in her nightstand drawer. Her little purple silicone friend was freshly cleaned. Being without a boyfriend for almost a month had meant taking the thing out of hibernation where it had been gathering dust. She held it up and tilted her head, trying to find it sexy.

It would be if Harrison were here to use it on her...

Three more days. Just three more days....

The furnace was out of control in Jasmine's room.

Jasmine lay on the bed on top of the covers, aware of a film of sweat covering her naked body from head to foot. She stared up at the ceiling. Behind the dusty ceiling fan, the plastering job was pathetic. Sheet rock under mud and tape, she assessed. Her parents would be disparaging if they could see the apartment she was living in.

Her mother would say she lived in a slum, even though it was hardly the cheapest neighborhood in Seattle. Her dad would try to bribe her to come home to Bellevue.

You don't ever have to live with your parents again.

Damn that man. Damn Matt.

He was basically a lazy bum. He spent all his days doing just what he said. Sleeping, eating, and having sex. And playing with his toys. And blogging reviews about them, she supposed—if you called that work.

It was easy for him.

She closed her eyes, letting her limbs go wide to cool off as best as she could. Warm air blew down from the ceiling over her clammy skin.

The port had been a bad idea. Sweet. So delicious. Jasmine never could resist sweet things. And with the guys for company, and Sara, who was always wonderful, she'd felt cheered after a stressful week and a half covering for her parents and discovering all the asshole things they did to their employees at work.

But then the room had gotten hot, and what with one thing and another, she'd ended up basically stripping in front of all her friends. It hadn't even occurred to her what she'd done. It had just felt natural. Not a big deal. After all, it's not like she didn't have her underwear on.

She could still see Matt's gaze on her breasts.

Her sex was hurting, swollen. Jasmine's slender fingers eased down her slim hip and slid into her own slick, wet folds. She moaned and turned her head, because she didn't want to do this. Solitary orgasms felt nice but they were purely selfish things, and she wasn't selfish. She didn't *want* to be.

But her fingers worked quickly, bringing herself to a swift culmination. As the waves pulsed deep inside, then rippled outward, she tried to forget them.

Jasmine wasn't a fan of sex. It wasn't fun, and on the whole, it was a nasty reminder of everything in her life she couldn't control.

Yet somehow she had allowed herself to agree to Sara's absolutely ridiculous scheme. Even worked out the itinerary so that she didn't have so much as a week's grace period. In three days she was supposed to have sex with Matt? In his apartment?

She could just see it. He was going to have a fine time making digs. Making her feel stalked.

Matt was a great friend...when he wasn't flirting.

My lap is your lap, angel.

Sticks and stones, Jas, but I have a pair of velvet blindfolds reserved just for you...

You have my heart, you want my rum-soaked pound cake, too?

To him, it was a casual bit of amusement. He had no idea she took him seriously. No idea how she felt about him.

He thought it was playful fun, to steal food off her plate. To smile at her like he knew *everything* she was thinking. To flirt. He flirted with Sara, too, even more than with her. But Sara didn't seem nervous about the whole idea, just eager to get started. Only she didn't have to start with Matt the first time. Jasmine did.

And Jasmine was terrified. The more she thought about it, the more she was sure she knew exactly what would happen, come Friday. He'd grin wickedly in that seductive way he had and say something sarcastic, like, "Don't you want to take off your clothes in front of me, Jas?"

And when she refused to take the bait, he'd shrug and proceed to ignore her. Maybe forget the whole thing and spend the hours from eight to midnight on his computer, which would be humiliating.

Tears seeped out of her eyes. This was going to be a disaster.

Wearing a pair of plain boxers, Harrison got grimly into bed. His head was killing him. He'd been drunk only a couple of other times in his life. The first time had been in high school, and he'd decided then that he greatly disliked the feeling of losing control. The second time, a fellow college student had advised guzzling down a quart of water before he passed out. He'd had to admit it worked to prevent

the hangover. But he still didn't like being drunk.

But he didn't do the water thing tonight. He didn't particularly want to get rid of the pain. His headache was the only thing keeping him from thinking about...

Well, dammit. It wasn't working. He *had* to think about it.

How the hell had he let himself get talked into this nutso scheme of Sara's? He should have known she'd do something like that, too. She was always coming up with mad schemes to try to save "dire" situations. Paying for people's groceries in random acts of kindness. Giving little old ladies her seats on buses *and* walking them home *and* making lunch dates with them. Basically getting involved where most people would quietly slink on by, pretending not to notice there was even a problem.

Sara, with her fluffy, short red hair and her juicy, bouncing breasts, those tight skinny jeans and flowing dresses all with that silly embroidery and flowers....

The very idea of having sex with her made his belly clench. Arousal was part of it. But the other part was that he didn't *want* to treat her as anything but a friend. Women were *always* driving him crazy. He didn't understand them. They made no sense, with their games and manipulations.

The fact that Sara and Jasmine were the only two women in his life who were not out to hit on him meant he could trust them. Sara was an inveterate do-gooder. He could always count on her to be totally honest. But only as long as she was his *friend*. He did not want to put his cock in her. Have her breasts spill over into his hands. Just...no. That was a one-way street.

As for Jasmine...well, she wasn't exactly an open book like Sara, but she was a good kid. She always did nice things for them, especially Sara. Last week, he'd caught Jasmine smilingly putting her finger to her lips to shush him as she sneaked something into Sara's room. Turns out, her roommate had lost her headphones and Jasmine had spent all afternoon looking for them—as far as Harrison could tell, just to make her happy. Yeah, behind her cool facade, Jasmine was just plain nice.

But sex. With each one of them.

Jasmine was actually lovely, with her slim, tall figure and dark sweep of thick hair. Her exotic looks were hard to place without knowing her background, but Harrison had met her parents when he'd picked Jasmine up from work one day when her car was in the shop. Jasmine's dad was an Oregon-born ex-Marine with a mostly-African-American, smidgen-of-Alaskan-native lineage and her mother was a second-generation Japanese Bostonian who spoke Japanese less well than Harrison, who had spent three months in Japan during undergrad, did.

Physically, he found no fault with her, except her poise was kind of off-putting sometimes. She really was like a sister to him. Just no chemistry there. And he was fairly sure the feeling was mutual.

But Sara. Sara didn't bother to disguise her outright enthusiasm for men. That annoyed him, along with her nonexistent sense of self-preservation. She *seemed* resilient when her loser guys disappointed her. But Harrison wished she wouldn't be so foolish in the first place.

And she wanted *him* to teach her control.

That was unfortunate. He wasn't exactly an expert at all this boyfriend stuff, himself. A stellar lover he was not. Distractions tended to affect his performance in bed. And not just in bed, either. He was rarely all present and accounted for when he was with a woman.

He was pretty sure that was why women kept leaving him—his lack of focus. Even while he was fucking, half the time he was thinking about some reference he needed to track down, or a logical point he'd need to cover in his thesis defense.

Not to mention his bewilderment with women in general and what they expected of him.

He felt around, then grabbed a small towel out of the drawer in his bedside table and unfolded it. His dick was hard, predictably. It often got that way when he got frustrated with Sara. She was his friend, but he was still a man.

Get on the schedule and teach me.

He wondered if she'd be as plump between her legs as she was on her sweet little belly and her voluptuous tits. If her pubic hair was red, or...

This was going to be a disaster. But then, he'd known that all along. He had really only one goal, and he was going to have to focus all his energies on accomplishing it. *Do not disappoint Sara or Jasmine.*

He could not bear the idea of losing them.

Matt had delayed as long as he could. It was past midnight, and he'd replied to some comments on his blog, researched a few things, and generally procrastinated going to bed like a pro.

But tomorrow he needed to get up before sunrise. He was going to need a long run in the morning. Hell, he needed a long run *now*.

What the hell. What was the point in living just blocks from a freaking lake with a path around it if he couldn't go on midnight runs?

Swiftly, he changed into loose cotton running pants, a long-sleeved tee, and a hoodie and grabbed his keys. The light was out under Harrison's door, so he closed the door softly behind him.

Green Lake Park had a lit, wooded path around the lake, but the lights did more to increase night blindness than offset it. He focused away from them. As his eyes adjusted, he could see one person up in the distance. He recognized the guy, a regular, an older man who tended to come out for a brisk walk at the odd and unpopulated hours, like in the rain. Matt started running in his direction, passed him and gave him a friendly nod.

There was a subtle etiquette at work at the park that he liked, at least among the loner types who came when the crowds weren't there. You went in the same direction as other runners, so as to minimize face-to-face contact, and you acknowledged each other once. That was it. Then you could ignore each other.

Matt didn't think of himself as a loner. But he didn't like to interact when he ran. Running was how he kept his sanity.

The night air was frigid, but he quickly warmed up. He did one lap, then another. Five miles. He wanted to go on. But he knew he'd need the release running offered come the morning, too.

Coming back, though, he did something stupid. He glanced up at the apartment building as he was rummaging around for his key card. Saw the light on in the third story apartment. It was a dim light. Either her computer, he thought, or a night light. He'd always wondered which it was.

And then he felt the bolt shudder through him. Electric, like a storm. Yeah. Stupid.

Don't think about it.

Three. Long. Endless. Days.

Sara was still half-asleep when she bundled up Pencil in his sweater and took him out before dawn the next morning, ready for his frigid morning walk. One quick walk, then it would be back to her room, back to bed, and a good snuggle with her comforter before she had to get ready for work.

About to head down the stairs, she suddenly stopped short, pulling up on the lead and making Pencil yelp.

Harrison. He was just locking the door of his apartment, his back to her. Sara felt the heat creep into her face. She'd forgotten that he left for his swim pretty much every morning around this time. *Whoa, boy.* What was she going to say to him? After what they'd all decided to do last night, a casual encounter promised to be too, too embarrassing...

He swung around and didn't look surprised. Of course, he'd heard the dog bark so he had full warning she was there.

He looked wary. "Good morning."

"Hi, there." She tried to sound bright and chipper and searched around for something to say.
"Going on your swim?"

"Yes." He paused. "Going to walk the dog?"

"Yes."

They stared at each other.

Then Sara couldn't help it; she burst out laughing.

He looked startled. Then, as if reluctantly, he grinned. "We're a pair of idiots, aren't we? We're doing this crazy thing in a few days. But not yet."

"No," she said and let Pencil pull her forward. "Not yet. And it doesn't matter, anyway. We're still gonna be buds. Nothing will change *that*." To prove it, she jabbed an elbow into his ribcage as she passed.

Harrison mock-gasped and fell back, as if injured.

No leakage.

A good start.