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The best thing about traveling alone is you get to be the person you want to be because no one knows any different.

Jo Duval

THAD HAD SEEN the flashing lights as he made his way from the barn to the bunkhouse, and something had drawn him over. Had he known the dog hater would be naked—apparently she wasn't *all* arms and legs—he'd have steered clear.

Probably.

“Just press that button one more time and the lights will go off,” he said as he backed up a step to give her some privacy. He could be a gentleman if he had to be.

The lights inside the tub went out and the woman became nothing more than a shadow surrounded by a cloud of fog. “Thanks. You can—”

“It's nice, isn't it?” Thad murmured to the hazy outline of the woman. “Ms. Gloria and Dillon just got the soaker last week. Haven't tried it out yet myself, but I installed it, so I know how it works.”

“Right. Um, would you mind—”

“So, how long are you here for?” Thad asked, biting down on his lip to control his grin. He could be a gentleman, but he could also be a right jackass. Why he felt the need to torture this woman, he couldn't say exactly.

“Oh, um...eleven days.” She cleared her throat. “I don't mean to be—”

“Right on into the New Year? That’s a nice long stay.” Thad was having a hard time containing his enjoyment as he pressed on. “Do you enjoy winter sports? Skiing, ice-skating? That sort of thing?”

“I’m sure they’re fine, but—”

“Lots to do around here. I’m your man if you’re interested.” That sounded like a come-on, which was not his intention, but he couldn’t seem to stop himself from tormenting this woman.

“Look, Mr....what did you say your name was again?”

“Thad. Thaddeus Knight, at your service.”

“Mr. Knight. I’m all good. You can leave now.”

“Of course. Didn’t mean to disturb you, miss,” he lied.

“You didn’t disturb anything.” Her voice was high. Nervous.

“Okay then. You enjoy your soak and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Mmm-hmm. Bye, now.”

He glanced over his shoulder only when he hit the edge of the deck. Sound always traveled better at night, and he clearly heard the ornery woman swearing beneath her breath as he took his leave, the very mutts she scorned waiting for him at the bottom of the steps.

He shouldn’t have done it, shouldn’t have taunted her, particularly when he realized she was bathing in the raw. His grandmother would have said the devil possessed him, and that might be true. But he didn’t think that was all there was to it. There was something about the woman, something that drew him, something he couldn’t quite put his finger on.

JOLIE LAY SNUG under the covers, existing in that space between sleep and wakefulness. It was her preferred mode of waking every day because it was when her imagination took over, ungoverned

by inhibitions and the critical internal editor who was her regular companion during the rest of the day—though so far, this morning had remained completely silent.

Perfect.

Jo revisited the scene in the hot tub, but this time she wasn't embarrassed by her state of undress. This time she was bold and flirty. This time she flaunted her nakedness, turning the lights on in the tub—to red—instead of turning them off.

“What did you say your name was?”

“Thaddeus Knight. At your service.”

“You said you're a hand. What does that mean, exactly?”

“I could tell you, but showing you would be way more fun.” His gaze swept over her body, his blue eyes dark with desire.

“Then you'd better show me.”

“It'd be my pleasure.”

He removed his hat and winter jacket—

It was one of those cowboy-style ones. They had a name, oilskin or something? She'd have to look it up later...

“Shh,” she muttered to herself as her internal editor started to rouse. She willed herself to focus once more on the vivid scene playing out behind her closed lids.

“Close your eyes,” he said in that deep Southern drawl.

She obliged him, then rested her head against the edge of the tub, feeling the

submersion of his body by the way the water lapped higher up her chest.

“Give me your hand.”

Languidly, she lifted her hand out of the tub and presented it to him.

“You have nice fingers. A nice hand.”

“Thank you.” She sighed with pleasure as he began to massage her palm. “So do you.”

He did have nice hands. Big and strong—she remembered how they’d felt when he’d tried to help her up after she’d freaked out.

“Shh,” she said aloud, working a little harder this time to slip back into her fantasy.

Thad worked the tender part of flesh between thumb and forefinger before sliding his hands up to her forearm, massaging as he went.

“You’re very good at this.”

“I’m good at a lot of things.”

“I bet you are,” she purred.

“Do you want me to show you?”

“Yes.”

His hands moved up higher to her shoulders, pausing to massage before caressing her collarbones and then dipping down her chest to her breasts.

“Is this okay?”

“It’s wonderful.”

He fondled over and under before gently pinching a nipple.

She groaned.

“You’re so beautiful. I wanted you from the moment I saw you.”

Jolie’s eyes popped open.

I wanted you from the moment I saw you?

Seriously?

Creating sexual fantasies featuring a virtual stranger as a sort of ranch gigolo? Ridiculous. How did she ever expect to make it as a serious journalist when she wiled away her spare time coming up with this sort of nonsense?

Jo sat up, threw off the quilts and swung her legs out of bed. She went to the French doors and drew back the blinds.

“Beautiful,” she said matter-of-factly. The view was exactly like the panoramic shot on the webpage.

While she might not be an acclaimed journalist yet, she was still here to do a job, so she sat down, opened her laptop and called up her travel article. After tapping out a few awkward sentences and random ideas, she stared at the screen.

Screw it.

Going over to her bag, Jo took out her leather-bound journal, a gift from her father last year.

I know writers do everything on computer, but I thought you might like this. Or not. Here’s the gift receipt if you decide to return it.

She hadn’t returned it. It was the best gift her father had ever given her. Opening the journal up to her last entry, she reread what she’d written a couple of days ago and then began writing—

longhand. She didn't even have to think; the words just poured out of her as she filled page after page, like she was merely the conduit for ideas coming from another realm.

The aroma of fresh coffee and bacon drew her out of the story and back to reality, her stomach growling.

After dressing, she joined her host in the dining room, where breakfast was already laid out.

"I hope you slept okay," Gloria said while she poured the coffee.

"Amazing."

"The rest of the guests arrive today. Festivities begin once everyone's here. We'll go out and cut a tree and then decorate it tonight while we celebrate Tip's Eve."

"Tip's Eve?" Jo was thankful to have something else to discuss.

"It's a tradition of Thad's, from his Catholic roots, I think. Anyway, it's a pre-Christmas party, always on the twenty-third. We thought it would be fun for the guests."

"Sounds like it." Jolie smiled as warmth infused her, starting at her core and radiating out to her extremities. The sensation had to do with the thought of celebrating any kind of Christmas tradition and had nothing to do with the mention of Thad's name.

Nothing whatsoever.

"How many guests do you expect?"

"Only five, including you. It's our first time opening up the ranch to guests over the holidays."

Jolie nodded and took a bite of omelet, which she'd drowned in ketchup.

"So," Gloria said, drawing out the one-syllable word as she sat opposite her. "You're a writer?"

"Journalist." Why did she correct her? She liked the title of writer.

"And you're doing an article about the ranch for *Travel America*?"

Jo looked up, nodding as she chewed.

“I hope you’ll take into consideration the fact that we’re still in the development stage…”

“Oh.” Jo wiped her mouth with the cloth napkin. “This isn’t a travel critique of the place or anything. I’m here to enjoy myself and then write about it. That’s all.”

“Okay.” A blush crept up Gloria’s neck and into her cheeks. “I’ll be honest—I’ve been feeling a bit of pressure knowing you were coming. I just really want this ranch to take off, you know?”

“Please think of me as just another guest.”

Gloria released a big sigh. “Right. Well, you let me know if there’s anything you need. Anything at all. And if I can’t help, then I’m sure Dillon would be happy to. Or Thad.”

Jolie’s throat felt funny.

“Well, speak of the devil.”

The omelet in her stomach flipped over at the sound of boots approaching on the wooden floor. Head bowed toward her plate, she looked up through her lashes to see Dillon enter the room, still wearing a winter parka, his cheeks rosy from cold. Following close on his heels was Thad and another man Jo hadn’t met yet.

“Morning, boys. How are things?”

“Good.” Dillon kissed his wife, and Jo couldn’t help watching as Gloria gently rested a hand on her husband’s chest. Jo quickly averted her eyes. Unfortunately, they ended up landing to the right…which was where Mr. Thaddeus Knight was standing.

He winked.

“Thad tells me you tried out the hot tub last night,” Dillon said.

Oh, good God.

“Mmm-hmm,” Jolie intoned. What else had Thad said?

“It’s good for a body. Helps you sleep.”

“Sure does.” Jo could not meet Dillon’s gaze. Or anyone’s, for that matter.

“Have you met Curtis?”

Thankful for the change of subject, Jo looked up and greeted the third man with a smile. Then the discussion turned to the estimated arrival times of the rest of the guests and all mention of the hot tub ceased as the men sat down to eat, Thad taking the seat right beside her.

“Morning, Ms. Jolie. You’re looking well.”

His words were drawn out, one syllable running into the next with weird inflections that seemed to mock, or could be suggestive. It was hard to tell with that Southern accent, which only served to remind Jolie of her early-morning fantasy session.

Could he tell what she was thinking?

“Thank you,” she mumbled before stuffing a forkful of egg into her mouth.

Thad’s right hand was within her line of sight, because it rested right beside her plate. She stared. His hand was exactly as she’d imagined it. Large and well formed, tanned—or maybe that was just his olive skin tone. His fingers were long and veins stood out on the back, like he actually had muscles in there.

Vivid images from her early-morning musings filtered through her mind. She glanced up. “You said you’re a hand. What does that mean, exactly?”

“I could tell you, but showing you would be way more fun.”

Déjà vu struck.

“Then you’d better show me,” she said, as if reading from a preordained script.

“It would be my pleasure.”

Chills ran up her spine, sifting through her hair and settling on the crown of her head as she stared into Thad’s eyes. His dark blue eyes.

Cerulean, cobalt, indigo... Her writer's mind came up with a list of synonyms for *blue* while she got lost in the azure depths of his gaze.

An idea washed over her as she dove into that ocean of blue. What if she stopped being embarrassed about the fact that she'd been caught skinny-dipping? What if she embraced it...no, *flaunted* it, instead? What if Thad really was interested—like in her fantasy—and what if she welcomed it? What would it be like to be that person?

“What size are your feet?”

Hell, she could be anyone she wanted to be on this trip. No one knew her. No one would know the difference.

Thad snapped his fingers in front of her face. “Hello?”

“Huh?” Oh, God. He was talking to her and she was staring at him openmouthed. She gave her head a shake. “Sorry. I—”

“You were a long way off just now. Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Perfect.” She smiled. “What did you say? Something about feet?”

“I asked you what size you are. Thought you could borrow some boots because if you're going to be traipsing around in the snow and ice, you need a better pair of footwear than the ones you drove up in.”

“Oh...right. I'm size eight.”

“Do you have a size eight she could borrow?” Thad asked Gloria.

“I'm sure I can find something.”

“All right, then. You get suited up, miss, and meet me in the yard in ten.”

WHILE THAD WAITED for Jolie to get dressed, a car drove up the lane toward the ranch. He squinted in the bright sun, made brighter by all the newly fallen snow. The car was one of those sporty deals, meant for city driving. Not for snowy country roads. Good thing whoever it was had arrived this morning instead of last night.

Once the car was parked, a man and a boy got out. The boy was probably about nine or ten years old, his hair stuck up at all angles, like it hadn't been combed in a good couple of days. His eyes were wide and uncertain as he took in the surroundings.

Thad started over, the dogs on his heels, but Humper couldn't contain his zealous nature and went bounding on ahead, straight at the kid.

“Humper!” He didn't want a repeat of last night.

Too late. Humper launched himself at the boy, toppling him into the fresh pile of snow. Thankfully the sounds the kid made were ones of laughter and not abject fear. Not like the soft whimpering notes that Jolie had been making last night.

A sudden image of Jolie lying naked beneath him, blinded him. She was making the very same noises as she had last night, only in his fantasy it was from pleasure, not fear.

Thad rubbed his eyes.

Where the hell had that thought come from?

Probably the result of watching that crazy dog. He whistled and Humper looked up, tongue lolling in ecstasy. That goddamn mutt's tongue was too big for his fat head. He ignored Thad, focused on the boy, who was standing upright again, and gave in to his basic urges.

Striding up to the dog, he pulled him off. “Sorry about that, kid. This dog's still young and trying to exert his dominance on anything that moves. Even some things that don't move.”

“It's okay,” the boy said. “He reminds me of Biscuit.”

“You’ve got a dog, do you?”

The boy glanced at the man. “Well...we used to. He went to a farm. Right, Dad?”

“Right.” The guy mussed the top of his son’s head. His eyes were tired. Sad. There was a story there; Thad could see it plain as if the title of a book was written across the man’s forehead.

“Would you like to meet the other two?” Sue and Digger sat obediently a few yards away.

“Yeah!”

A short whistle brought the other animals over and after a quick introduction, the kid was running around the yard with three ecstatic dogs chasing him while his father carried the bags inside.

Thad turned. He’d been aware of the woman’s presence, as she came to stand behind him, before she’d even said a word. Why he sensed her like he did, he couldn’t say. Was it her scent? That sweet, delicious smell of peppermint candy?

“Hi.”

“Hiya, city slicker.”

She grimaced at the name but then pointed at one of the animals that was chasing the kid around on the other side of the yard. “The dog’s name is Humper?”

She continued to watch the chase and he took the opportunity to study her. She looked different by day. In the bright light, her brown hair had honey streaks running through it, and her big eyes were flecked with gold. Her mouth was wide, probably too wide, but he liked it, particularly when she smiled. In fact, he wanted to see one of those smiles right about now.

“He comes by it honestly,” Thad explained when she met his gaze again. “Sue went out looking for a baby-daddy a year and a half ago. Must have been slim pickin’s because, while these mutts are friendly, they aren’t exactly the sharpest tools in the shed.”

There it was. The smile he'd been going for. Too bad she went and covered it up with her mitten, because he was pretty sure her grin had turned into a laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

She shrugged. “I just had this image...”

“Of?”

“Your dog, what’s its name?”

“Sue.”

“Yeah, of Sue looking over her shoulder in exasperation and telling her newfound baby-daddy, ‘Stop talking, just do me.’”

Huh. City girl had a sense of humor. She'd even done a bit of a Southern drawl for Sue, which was adorable. He chuckled. “Yeah, well, instinct is a powerful thing and when ‘the heat’ hits, even a smart one like Sue will take whatever she can get.”

She smiled.

Damn, she had a lovely mouth. The kind of mouth that was meant for kissing. His gaze dropped without warning and even though she was covered up with a winter coat, he easily recalled what was underneath. He shouldn't have spied. But he didn't regret it. Not one bit.

It took effort to lift his gaze again and unfortunately the broad smile he'd been enjoying was already gone, replaced by a wide-eyed look of fear.

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