

## Chapter 1

### **Hard to Take**

**Monday 19th March 2007**

**Jedburgh, Scotland**

Kirsten McCourt opened her eyes and stared at the bedroom ceiling. Before she registered the dawn chorus, a tear rolled down her cheek. The stinging of her buttocks had eased, but they had burned during the slaps of the night before. The pain had dulled in the crevice between her buttocks. She slowly turned her head left.

Nick lay facing Kirsten—his long fair hair spread over the pillow. A serene expression on his handsome face suggested innocent thoughts. His lips twitched, creating a smile as something crossed his mind. Even in sleep, he laid claim to Kirsten, his left arm draped over her body and left leg over hers.

Kirsten used her right foot to ease Nick's leg from hers, and then she gently raised his arm and slid out from under the duvet. She wiped her eyes as she gazed at Nick. She idolised, but occasionally feared him. Kirsten needed to get her head straight about their relationship, and not for the first time she'd do so in the shower.

Tears flowed unchecked in the hot, cleansing spray as Kirsten sobbed quietly, her arms akimbo. She created a healthy lather over her body as if it would help to wash away the memory of the night before.

Kirsten washed her hair and every other part of her body before slipping her fingers gingerly between her buttocks. She massaged gel over her tight rosebud. It was tender to the touch. Tears and pleading prevented full insertion into that most private place, but Nick's first brutal effort had been frightening.

Nick's words continually played back. *'Come on baby; it'll only hurt until I'm in ...'*, but Kirsten wasn't prepared to put up with that supposedly minor discomfort. She had fought against it. Annoyed that he couldn't have his way, Nick kept Kirsten in position and gave her a series of slaps on both buttocks, and then rammed her pussy from behind. There was no foreplay, or consideration, simply an animal urge and his sexual gratification.

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Kirsten sat at the breakfast bar to enjoy her cereal, fruit, and orange juice. She washed it down with black coffee, treating herself to a single sweetener.

The pretty twenty-three year-old put the used crockery and utensils into the washer and closed it quietly so as not to disturb her boyfriend's extended slumber. Kirsten brushed her teeth, put on her jacket and checked herself out in the hallway mirror. The inspection wasn't through vanity, but to ensure she was presentable.

A light shake of her head and her long copper hair sat perfectly. Her blemish-free, complexion provided the ideal canvas for features that could advertise a range of cosmetics. As a beauty consultant, that made sense. Kirsten smiled at her reflection as she always did before leaving the apartment. It took a little longer than normal for the smile.

She turned left and right to ensure that she was looking good. The navy jacket, crisp white blouse and red mini-skirt worked well with navy high-heels. She inclined her head, and raised an eyebrow, practising one of the looks that she used to wow husbands or boyfriends with her charms. The men were invariably the people who asked for her advice, and they'd buy anything from her.

Kirsten walked through to the bedroom and looked at the man on the bed. He had been such a catch eleven months earlier, and she had been the envy of her friends. As Kirsten looked at Nick, she wondered if she'd ever be brave enough to talk about how shallow he could be. His selfishness only affected certain aspects of their relationship, but it would have to be addressed. Kirsten was feeling the pressure.

She closed the front door quietly and then held her head high for the world outside. She walked to her car smiling—disguising her inner turmoil.

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Kirsten was in the small staff room at 10 am, sipping coffee, unaware of anyone else. The tone sounded insistent, but she was sure she'd only heard the question once.

"Kirsten," Sarah said for the third time. "Are you okay, love?"

"What?" Kirsten responded as if she'd just woken from a deep sleep.

"I asked if you were okay. You were on your own when I came in here. While I made a coffee, I was chatting away to you, but you haven't responded."

"Oh God, I'm sorry."

"Don't apologise, but please loosen up a bit. You've been sitting staring at that wall as if waiting for a death sentence." Sarah smiled and winked. "Don't tell me that man of yours has been giving you a hard time—in the nicest possible way."

Kirsten turned to look at her colleague.

The older woman was forty, tall, blonde and attractive. One of the things the younger girls liked about her was that she acted more like a friend than a bitch—like the previous supervisor.

Kirsten's dark lashes fluttered a few times, and her lips trembled. She placed her coffee on the table and rummaged through her bag.

"Here." Sarah offered a tissue.

Kirsten took long, deep breaths as she wiped her eyes.

Sarah put her coffee down and stood. "Come here, you." She held her arms out and looked down at her colleague.

Kirsten stood and fell into Sarah's comforting embrace, sobbing uncontrollably. "I'm sorry," she mumbled against Sarah's shoulder.

"Just let it all out, honey." Sarah's tone was soft; reassuring.

Kirsten sobbed freely. A lot of frustration was released.

There was a click as the door to the small staff room opened, but a sharp nod from Sarah sent the person away without a word. She embraced Kirsten until she settled.

"Now, I'm going to make us both a nice fresh coffee, with sugar instead of bloody sweeteners. While I'm doing that, you're going to tidy up that pretty face."

Kirsten forced a smile.

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Five minutes later the pair were sat opposite in the staff room again. Unknown to Kirsten, Sarah had visited the sales floor and told one of the other girls to pass around, that morning breaks would be fifteen minutes late. Only then had she returned to organise coffees.

"Okay, you're looking better now." Sarah met Kirsten's gaze. "We have a couple of ways to deal with this situation. One idea would be to do nothing—which is *not* an option. While I consider something else, I'd like you to enjoy your coffee and answer a couple of questions."

Kirsten nodded and lifted the steaming drink to her lips.

"I have no right to pry." Sarah lifted her mug before continuing. "You don't need to tell me what's going on, but I can see that things are not all rosy in the garden." She sipped her coffee, sighing and savouring the sweetness of real sugar.

Kirsten sipped her coffee and peered over the rim of her mug, not ready to talk.

"I'm going out on a limb here honey, so please forgive me if I'm way off track," Sarah said. "How would it sound if I suggested that your gorgeous guy was just that, but maybe in some respects, he could be a total bastard?"

Kirsten closed her eyes briefly. When she opened her eyes and caught Sarah's steady gaze, she couldn't hold it and looked down. She bit her trembling lip.

“Bulls-eye.” Sarah had her confirmation, but her response wasn’t triumph. “Once again Kirsten, you don’t have to tell me. Is it the whole domestic scene, or the bedroom?”

Kirsten swallowed and whispered. “Bedroom.”

“Look at me.” Sarah waited. “How long has he lived at your place?”

“Nearly a year, but it was only a couple of months ago that things started—”

“Do you love him?”

“Yes, I’m bloody crazy about him, and most of the time he’s adorable, but—”

“Does he love you?”

“Yes, he tells me every day, sometimes does the shopping, and helps around the apartment. He does stuff like that, but it’s the other part of our relationship that isn’t right.”

“The intimate part isn’t right?”

“Mmmm,” Kirsten murmured and looked down again.

“Have you any plans for lunch-time today?”

“No. Why?” Kirsten lifted her head—her expression full of hope.

Sarah reached out and placed a hand on Kirsten’s. “Lunch is on me today. We’ll be going out at noon to a quiet little place I know—to chat.”

“Thank you.” Kirsten smiled with relief.

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Kirsten and Nick finished their evening meal. They were still seated at the dining table when an unexpected piece of news set certain wheels in motion.

“Well, it’s finally happened.” Nick sat back, grinning. “I’m at work until a week on Saturday, and then there are two of us on paid leave for two weeks, awaiting a decision.”

“What do you mean, *‘paid leave for two weeks, awaiting a decision’*?”

“Joe said the garage hasn’t got enough work for everybody at the moment, so he’s prepared to keep two of us on the books if we’ll accept half-wages for two weeks. We’ve to take time off as a holiday, but it will be unofficial.”

“You volunteered to do that without telling me?”

“Well baby, it was me or somebody else, and I might as well have the time off.”

Kirsten imagined how horny Nick would be—sitting around all day, *every* day. He would pounce on her when she arrived home from a day at work.

She considered that her boyfriend had taken inspiration from the internet sites he visited. He was probably unaware he’d failed to cover his tracks a couple of times. Kirsten had discovered peculiar websites in the browsing history of her laptop, but had thus far been in denial.

“So,” Kirsten murmured. “You’re at work normally for two weeks, and then you’re off for two weeks?”

“That’s what I said honey-bunch.” He winked. “It means I’ll be rested every day and ready to take you to heaven in the evening—and again at bedtime.”

Kirsten feigned a smile and thought—he believes that’s how it is. She sipped water and stood; her mind made up. Since her lunchtime chat with Sarah, she’d worried about taking the advice Sarah had given her. Kirsten had no choice. A discussion didn’t work with Nick. She’d tried often.

“Would you mind clearing the dishes, Nick? I have to chase up a couple of things on the company website before I forget.”

“Sure.” He winked again. “Maybe some night this week we’ll try some new bedroom adventures.”

Dimples appeared on Kirsten’s cheeks as she turned to leave the room. She had already decided they would not be taking his idea of ‘bedroom adventures’ any further. If necessary, she would keep her underwear on in bed—or suggest that Nick slept on the sofa.

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Kirsten powered up her laptop at the small desk in the spare room. By the time it was ready, her breathing was erratic. She glanced over her shoulder at the partly-closed bedroom door and went straight to her Inbox.

She checked the email address Sarah had given her and entered *secs@gmail.com* into the contact line. She entered, ‘*Initial Contact - Urgent*’, in the subject line. Kirsten worried that Nick might sneak up on her for a laugh while she was writing. She had just composed a brief explanation when there was a noise behind her. Kirsten looked over her shoulder—Nick was visiting the bathroom.

When Kirsten checked her message and considered that she was sending it to a complete stranger, it shocked her. She hesitated with the cursor over the Send button. She didn’t have the courage to press it and worried her lip as she stared at the wall in front of her.

Kirsten considered a two-week period of Nick’s unusual sexual demands. A slender hand moved over the keyboard. In a neat little window above Kirsten’s message, there was an assurance that the message had been sent. She closed her eyes briefly.

Nick had believed Kirsten when she told him that she wasn’t feeling well. She didn’t look well, but her boyfriend didn’t know it was because she was worried about his sexual yearnings. Kirsten was already wondering how far she would take her enquiry. An email was one thing, but what would happen if there was a reply?

Would she be capable of seeing it through?

As the evening went on—Kirsten felt more uptight. She'd excused herself more than once and then stood in front of the bathroom mirror, staring at her reflection—hoping for inspiration. She'd opened a bottle of wine at dinner, and after sipping hers, continually topped up Nick's glass.

He happily swallowed glass after glass.

By bedtime, Kirsten had opened another bottle.

Nick's eyes flickered as he reached the last of the second bottle. He was okay on beer, but although he enjoyed the taste, he had difficulty handling wine. Nick fell asleep on the sofa, and his grateful girlfriend threw a heavy blanket over him.

It was late when Kirsten crept into the spare room to check her Inbox. There was a response signed *Heather*. Kirsten simultaneously smiled and began fretting. The confidential, wild option that Sarah had suggested was now a real possibility. Kirsten responded to the message, by saying that she would like to take the enquiry a stage further. She assured Heather that the initial personal information would be forwarded the next day.

Unknown to Kirsten, at around 2 am, Nick woke up disorientated, and with a dry mouth. He brushed his teeth and crept into the bedroom ready to surprise Kirsten with his raging erection.

“Well baby.” He was whispering as he arrived at the foot of the bed. “You'll probably resist, but you left me on the sofa. I'll fix you up in no time.”

Kirsten was stretched out and wrapped in the duvet. Her body was lying at an angle, and her head was at the edge of the bed. Near the bed on the floor was a small round basin with a brown coloured liquid in the bottom, and it had an unusual aroma.

Nick headed to the sofa and wrapped up in the blanket.

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### **Monday 26th March 2007**

Each evening for a week, Kirsten insisted that she wasn't feeling well, but hinted that she was considering Nick's suggestions. She went to the spare room every night and sent responses to Heather's questions.

Kirsten had difficulty writing about her situation at first, but by the fourth evening, she had begun to open up. Areas she highlighted were her concerns about Nick's desires, and suspicions that she had about his behaviour.

A request came in an email from Heather—urine samples would be required from Kirsten and Nick. In the same message was a proposed booking date if all were clear and Kirsten wished to go ahead. It was easy to convince Nick that Kirsten had them both checked privately to make sure that

she didn't have a condition she might have passed to him. Neither of them had ever suffered from that type of thing.

Nick's main concern was the lack of regular sex, but Kirsten appeased him a few times by taking him in hand. She explained that until she was happy that all was clear, she wasn't prepared for them to mix body fluids.

Nick said he was happy enough as long as he wasn't reduced to dealing with his frustration personally—although he still did occasionally.

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### **Saturday 31st March 2007**

Kirsten continued the practice of opening a bottle of wine regularly after dinner. She knew that if Nick weren't getting his leg over every night, he would be content to sink a few glasses of wine. He loved the taste, and it tended to make him more relaxed. Kirsten had promised him the previous week that everything ought to be back to normal in the bedroom by the end of the month.

When Nick woke up and looked around, there was no sign of Kirsten in the apartment. Her car wasn't in her space outside. She must have been okay for work again, so surely everything was okay? A smile crept across Nick's face when he checked the calendar.

"Kirsten, baby," Nick said aloud. "You might have been sick for a couple of weeks, but you are getting a right royal shagging tonight." He grinned. By the end of the day, he would have two weeks of lazing around. He'd have time on the internet, and his needs met at least twice a day. Once dealt with by himself, and then later by his lovely girlfriend.

He stroked his cock lovingly. "Oh, yes. I have a hard time planned for you, my friend." Nick had breakfast and got dressed for work—a smile never far from his lips.

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In the evening, Nick was home first and quickly showered and changed. He was eager to keep Kirsten to her word, and he wanted to be acceptable when he sidled up to her after dinner. Things would not work out as he had planned.

"That was nice." Nick placed his knife and fork on the empty plate. "Why did you have such a light meal this evening?" He grinned and raised his eyebrows. "Are you making sure you're ready for action?"

"No. I didn't want to overeat, because I'll be driving for a couple of hours later."

"Where are you going on a Saturday night?"

"It's not so much where *I'm* going—it's where *we're* going." Kirsten inhaled deep. "I've been thinking about some of the things you want us to do—in the bedroom."

“Oh, yeah.” He nodded. “What’s on your mind?”

“I know I shouldn’t have said anything to anybody.” Kirsten stared at her glass of water. “It’s just that I know this girl who will do anything for her boyfriend. I asked her advice.”

“It’s not like you to talk to anybody about sex. So, what did she say?”

“She gave me an idea, and as long as you don’t fly off the handle with me, I’ve organised something special—to celebrate our first year together.”

Nick’s brow furrowed. “Go on.”

“I’ve set up a short break to help us deal with our sexual issues.”

“This sounds interesting.” Nick’s eyes were sparkling. “I’m listening.”

“I’ve booked us into a special place for a few days for SECS sessions. It’s a private clinic a couple of hours’ drive from here.”

“This gets better as you go on.” Nick grinned. “Sex sessions—”

“It’s S.E.C.S.—that’s an abbreviation for Sexual Exploration and Consultation Services.”

“Why do we have to book into some clinic? We can discuss things here and then just try them out.”

“We can’t *discuss* things, Nick. We’ve tried that more than once. All you want to do is convince me how inhibited I am, and how much we should experiment.”

“So how is this private place going to help?”

“This person told me that I might be uptight because of my strict upbringing, combined with my present surroundings. She said it worked for her and her boyfriend—getting away from regular surroundings.”

“I hate a long drive—you know I get car-sick.”

“You’d like us to have a more adventurous love life wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah, of course, I would, but do we have to travel?”

“Do you want me to take part in experiments in bed, or not?”

“Yeah, baby, but a long car journey ....”

It was 'make or break' time. “Well my love.” She paused to muster confidence. “You can forget any chance of trying your ideas of fun in bed, or you can sleep on the journey.”

Nick nodded slowly. His brow furrowed as he looked across the table.

Kirsten forced a smile and held up a small sachet. “This is harmless. The most you’ll have to put up with is a mild headache when you wake up—you might be fine.”

“And this trip to the land of make-believe is tonight?”



“Yes, tonight.” She smiled inwardly, pleased to have pushed herself, but she knew that he might knock her confidence. Kirsten placed a forkful of fruit salad in her mouth to give her reason to stop talking.

Nick’s eyes opened wide, and his jaw dropped. “You were sick for a week, and you’ve been recovering for a week, but now you can handle a long drive. That sounds strange.”

Kirsten swallowed and drank water. “Believe what you want, Nick, but don’t start looking for excuses, *please*.”

“Before we go running off, did you ever try this with your previous boyfriend? What was his name—Phillip?”

“No, I explained before, he was just a lazy, drunken, *shit*.” She put down her fork and placed her head in her hands. “I don’t want to talk about him again.”

“Okay, so tell me one thing. Did you have a sex life with him—or not?”

“That’s not fair Nick. I’m trying to save our relationship. You are so unlike him, in many ways, but you can be so bloody selfish. I want to try the things that you suggest, but you’re just so—impatient.” She left the table and strode to the window, where she looked down at the street.

“You’ve had two previous boyfriends. One of them got nowhere with you and left you—and the other was a drunk. You’ve got me who wants to do lots of things with you, and you don’t like to do more than lay back and think of England.”

She turned and looked at him, her lips parted, but she was unable to speak.

Nick held his hands up. “I’m sorry Kirsten, love. That was unfair. It’s just that there’s more to sex than me doing press-ups on top of you. Okay, and you sitting on top of me.”

Kirsten squinted at him but said nothing. Her blinking eyes glistened.

“Okay, okay, I’m making a right bloody mess of this.” Nick rolled his eyes. “I know that sounded awful, but you have to admit, we don’t have the most exciting times in bed.”

“I’m going to pack a bag for the week, Nick. You could do likewise if you want to do this. I’ll prepare a drink for you—if we’re going.”

“You mean a secret potion because you’re a *witch*.” He laughed in an effort to recover the situation.

Kirsten didn’t laugh. Her lips merely twitched. “Maybe you want me to try too many new things—I don’t know.” She sighed. “If we do this, I’m hoping we’ll get things sorted out so that we’re both satisfied.”

“Hey,” he said, and smiled as he approached her. “Maybe I’m just oversexed, eh?”

“Yes, Nick, maybe you are.” His remarks had been cutting. “Maybe I haven’t learned to appreciate sexual experimentation, or we’re using the wrong approach.”

Nick’s smile faded.

Kirsten squeezed past him to go pack. She held back her tears but was glad she’d taken Sarah’s advice and contacted Heather.

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An hour later, Kirsten poured a glass of pineapple juice. “I’ve used a stronger juice so that it doesn’t taste unpleasant. I want you relaxed on the journey.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine.” Nick swallowed the concoction. “If this does anything strange to me, I’ll expect compensation of a special kind.” He winked at her.

“You really can’t stop yourself, can you? Compensation will be yours when we get where we’re going.” Kirsten treated him to a smile because she didn’t want to set off with bad feeling between them. She was well aware, when Nick was beaten, he always tried humour.

“I am sorry for spouting off, Kirsten, love. I promise, I’ll do whatever it takes to improve things for us.” He held his arms out, and they embraced.

There was still tension when their lips met briefly. They held each other in silence for a minute.

This could be a turning point, Kirsten thought.

While Nick prepared the apartment for leaving, Kirsten packed the car.

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Kirsten drove from Jedburgh towards Hawick.

Nick’s eyes were closed for long periods, but he sat silently, grinning like the cat that got the cream. He adjusted himself three times inside fifteen minutes. Perhaps the powder did have strange side-effects.

A glance at the car clock and then at Nick’s face told Kirsten that things were going to plan. She nudged the heater control as she changed gear. Five minutes later, Nick’s eyelids were fluttering like butterfly’s wings. Kirsten nudged the heater control again. Two minutes later, Nick was asleep.

Kirsten turned down the heater.

“You forced me into this,” Kirsten whispered. “I hope I haven’t made a huge mistake.”

Nick’s response was light snoring.

Kirsten knew she would be the weak link. She accelerated and headed west towards the A74 (M). She took the northbound carriageway of the motorway and headed for the Scottish Highlands.

They passed the services area at Lockerbie, and Kirsten judged the journey time. Traffic was light, so they would make it to their destination in a couple of hours. She needed to think, so had no music playing. The car cruised along with the steady throb of the engine.

Kirsten considered the things she'd found on Nick's favourite websites. Had he intended her to find those links, as if by accident? It wasn't only pictures that had been on the websites—there had been videos too. Nick had visited a wide variety of activities, including same-sex couples of both genders, two of one sex with one of another and some people who were in a different category altogether. There were some very unusual people out there.

“Oh, my—” Kirsten gasped. She had been imagining herself in some of the scenes and realised the thought of being with another woman had made her cheeks warm but had also affected her elsewhere in an unexpected way.

She shook her head. It was all very well being curious, but it might feel different when faced with the reality. Kirsten wondered how brave she would be when she met Heather—the woman she had been in touch with by email. It occurred to her that she didn't know what Heather looked like, or how many other people worked at the clinic.

Kirsten was zipping past other vehicles and she was in the outside lane, exceeding the speed limit. She bit her lip and slowed. “Get a grip, Kirsten.” She couldn't decide whether it was apprehension or excitement that was gaining the upper hand, but whatever it was caused her to tremble occasionally.

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