

BEING A GOOD WOMAN'S NOT EASY

By Jeannette Dean

"No, it's not easy," she whispered as she looked at his firm brown body. The shallow crevice of his spine with smooth hills of flesh to each side glided into a perfect ass.

Leaning over, she kissed the top of his head ever so gently. The coarse black hair was appealingly rough. Her fingers remembered pulling and mauling it demandingly.

Atlanta sighed, stood and started collecting her clothes, strewn violently around the plush suite. Still in her long black gloves, garter belt and stockings, she looked approvingly at her reflection in the sliding glass that closed out the New York night. She had many good, profitable years ahead of her.

Glancing at her watch she swore softly and upped the tempo of her departure. Extra time to find the two pearl buttons. He'd torn off her skirt in such a passion they'd gone flying. Leaving them was out of the question, though her floor-length evening cape would hide the flaw.

Priest was waiting for her when she stepped out of the taxi at the airport. With a kiss on each cheek he escorted her inside to the international arrivals lounge. Taking the bag he had brought for her, she excused herself to change and count the money.

Returning, she slipped into the chair next to him and beamed, "Buy me a drink."

"Chameleon," he toasted her. "Though I've seen it many times, I'm always amazed at the spunky young business woman who emerges from the door through which a sensuous professional had departed."

"Will the real Atlanta please stand up," she mocked. She always enjoyed the first scotch after a job. They'd

been partners for so long, knew each other well. Priest never pushed. He just set things up, took care of business.

"I'm the mechanic, you're the artist," he often said.

"Sorry I'm late." She stretched and made eye contact for the first time. He's my anchor, she thought.

He smiled, "We've over an hour until the flight. Was he a problem?"

She frowned and her brow wrinkled. It felt odd. She considered her face a mask and knew its smooth surface showed nothing. Except to Priest.

"I know that it's not always clean and simple," Priest's steady gaze willed her to talk. She called their discussion of each case upon its completion her therapy. Sometimes he needed details to satisfy his clients.

But usually it was just Atlanta needing to unload, cleanse.

"He was so in touch," she gave a throaty laugh. Pushing her straight auburn hair behind her ears, she leaned forward in a sharing way. "I mean, he pushed all the buttons. Would you believe he satisfied me?!" Her smile widened slowly.

"How do you feel about that?"

"Well, I don't know, really. A first."

"Did you have trouble saying goodbye?"

She leaned back, recognizing concern in his narrow blue eyes. The sculpted features were slightly taut though the voice was as smooth and relaxed as ever.

"Of course not. It was just a bonus." She finished her scotch. "Let's get to departure and check in. I want to hear about the next case before I have another drink. I'll sleep like a baby on the flight to London."

As always, Priest didn't go near her during this part of the exercise, but waited in the bar. She joined him after flight confirmation. They allowed plenty of airport time, the only place they ever made contact.

"Your piggy in the Cayman Islands is getting chubby," he handed her the receipt from his last deposit. She received first class tickets and cash to cover expenses but her commission on each case was banked.

Atlanta examined it in the dim light, smiled and tore it into tiny pieces. "Not enough for sailing away into the sunset yet. Besides, I like my work."

"Just be careful. Satisfaction is not a luxury you can afford."

Her green eyes flashed. "I'm a professional, Priest."

His smile was surface. "You're human. I recommend you take a break after this case. I can delay the next one. You're the best. They'll wait."

"We agreed I'd tell you when I needed time away."

They drank in silence for a while. "This will be the third case for the same client. He likes your work. It may take time to establish yourself, but it's perfect for you. You'll be dealing with a yachtsman."

Atlanta smiled, "Now you're talking. My only complaint about our thriving business is that I never get time to go sailing."

Priest nodded. "Maybe you should charter a boat in some exotic place."

She gave him a cold, "Maybe."

He lifted a hand, "Okay, it's up to you. Here's a photo and info on Jackson Burroughs. He's 38, a yacht racer of good reputation and very popular. Client's wife is smitten with him, wants to finance his bid for the Americas Cup. You can stop that. He's on his own boat right now in the Cowes Marina on the Isle of Wight.

You can take the train down from London.”

“How long do I have?”

“Two weeks max, less is better of course. He’ll pay double if you get Burroughs out of England.”

“Can’t handle competition, can he? What’s his problem? Old, fat and ugly, or is he living on his wife’s money?”

Priest shook his head, “You know we don’t discuss clients. That’s the agreement.”

She shrugged, “I’m gone. Ring you in a week at your London number.”

Leaving the ferry, Atlanta took in her surroundings. Aesthetically appealing, gentle hills rose up from the inlet that continued perhaps five miles into the island. She watched strong currents playing at the mouth, had read that they became quite treacherous out in the Solent that divided them from the mainland.

The pamphlet she’d grabbed informed her she’d just missed Cowes Race Week. Pity, but now she understood why Jackson was there. He would probably have raced and partied so would be recuperating, working on his boat. Perfect, if he didn’t have anyone with him.

She walked down the cobblestone main street of the small town, bought some appropriate boat clothes, and changed in the hotel where she secured a room for the week. All the while she was going over the details she’d studied before disposing of the paperwork in a sanitary disposal at the airport. Jackson had spent a year in Thailand so she was pleased when she spotted a Thai restaurant close to the hotel.

When she walked down to the marina she saw his boat almost immediately among the traditional wood and production fiberglass craft. ‘Tango’ was modern, a 44ft light displacement aluminum sloop with unpainted topsides.

“Oh, I’ll bet you’re fast,” Atlanta murmured, feeling the goose-bumps rise on her flesh. Her dream was to retire to the sea, to keep moving. A few more years, she promised herself, and walked in the gate to his quay as a hairy young man was coming out.

Jackson sat in the cockpit, deeply engrossed in his project. An unruly shock of sun-bleached hair set off the uniform tan of his fit body.

She had her hands on her hips, was studying the stern from beneath her visor. “Is she a Bruce Farr?”

He glanced up. “His design but I built her.”

“Yeah, I thought he only built in exotics, to keep the weight down.”

“But I want to cruise, I want low maintenance, and I want to do my own repairs, so it’s aluminum.”

“Practical and a performer.”

“You have a boat here?”

Atlanta gave him a smile, looked away as if embarrassed. “Uh, no, I sneaked in when someone was leaving. I just wanted to get a closer look.”

His smile was open and warm. “Come aboard. I’ll even let you see below decks.”

“Sorry to disturb you, but I’m looking for a boat. I’ve a dream of sailing away into the sunset, hopefully before too long. A friend recommended I check out Bruce Farr designs. Do you love her?”

“With all my heart,” he smiled and watched appreciatively as she removed her shoes and stepped nimbly aboard. She went first to the foredeck to survey the rigging.

He put aside the bilge pump he was rebuilding. “Would you like a drink?”

“I’d like water if I may.” She followed him below. When working she only drank alcohol if there was a reason.

She was a sponge as he conducted the tour, missing nothing about the boat or the man. She was in control, knew him so well, would have him out of the country in a week.

“Thanks a lot. She’s a beauty,” Atlanta smiled when they were back on deck. “I’ll let you get back to work.”

He picked up the bilge pump without enthusiasm. “Not my favorite job. Do you have plans for dinner?”

“Actually, Thai food’s my passion and I spotted a restaurant in town so I think I’ll give it a try.”

Jackson laughed, “I eat there every night. It’s a date then.”

She didn’t sleep with him that night, tempted though she was. She kept hearing Priest’s, ‘Satisfaction’s not something you can afford’. Play him, she told herself.

For two days she helped him work on the boat, always asking questions. She watched his feelings for her grow as she enthused over his first love. She effortlessly led the talk into racing and the Americas Cup.

“Entering that race takes serious sponsors and I’ve been searching. It’s what I’ve always wanted. But,” he shook his head, seemed embarrassed, “I’m having doubts.”

“About finding a sponsor or about your own capabilities?” She encouraged his intimacy.

“Neither. But it would demand complete commitment. I’m not sure it’s there anymore. All I think about is ‘Tango’ and going cruising.” He was unconsciously stroking the deck.

Atlanta laughed, “So it’s this hussy’s fault!”

Jackson took her hand, “Let me show you what this hussy can do.”

After a few hours tacking around she found herself thinking how difficult this goodbye was going to be. I’m honestly impressed with this man and his boat, she laughed ruefully while winching in the jib. Priest was right. I’ll take a break after this case is closed.

After their Thai dinner that night she stayed with him on 'Tango'. She had known the sex would be good, but the intensity shook her. Long after he slept contentedly wrapped around her, she stared through the open hatch at the clear sky. A few clouds played amongst the stars, covering then displaying their brilliance.

Ethical questions she left to the clients since she was but the instrument. But the client in this case had taken form and she didn't like him. That seemed to have left the door ajar and she could feel the enemy threaten her professional skill. Emotion was the enemy and she had kept it at bay without too much effort throughout her career.

With the morning came long, slow love making, so tender and sensitive that her reserve was forgotten, his whispered endearments taking precedence. Afterwards her heart was just settling into its normal rhythm when he said, "Go sailing with me Atlanta."

"What are you saying? You don't know me." She felt her brow wrinkle. This is what you want, she told herself. Get him out of the country, say goodbye.

"I know you're spirited, I know you love the sea and 'Tango' and life. I feel that we want the same thing. 'Tango' is ready. I've had her ready for months."

"But I can't navigate. I'd not be a good crew."

"It's pushing buttons. I've got two satellite navigation units and I'll teach you with the sextant later. I've planned several possible routes for getting around the world, but first we'll get to the South Atlantic."

She laughed, "You're mad!"

"Yes, and that's why you like me. Now get dressed, woman! We'll go buy out the market and get you some foul weather gear and you can call whomever you must. ETD, 0800 tomorrow morning."

And, that's how it went. Jackson's excitement and confidence were infectious, making the wild idea seem normal, inevitable. She made one call, to the London number, leaving the message that she was getting him out of the country.

Atlanta slept well after their loving that night. By noon they were into international waters in the middle of the English Channel. Jackson slept while she was on watch and 'Tango' steered herself WSW as the outgoing tide sped them toward the Atlantic. She would wake him as soon as she disposed of the tools of her trade.

She opened her bag and took out the 'diabetic kit' with the falsified doctor's statement that had insured she could carry it with her at all times. She sighed. How many men had she seduced and injected, putting them to sleep as one would an animal that had outlived its usefulness? It had been a lucrative career.

Stepping to the stern, Atlanta emptied the needle and vials into the churning water. She had been good, they'd felt no pain. With sex and alcohol induced sleep, none of them had felt the injection.

Smiling, she turned to look forward. Now she could afford the luxury of satisfaction. No more good-byes.

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