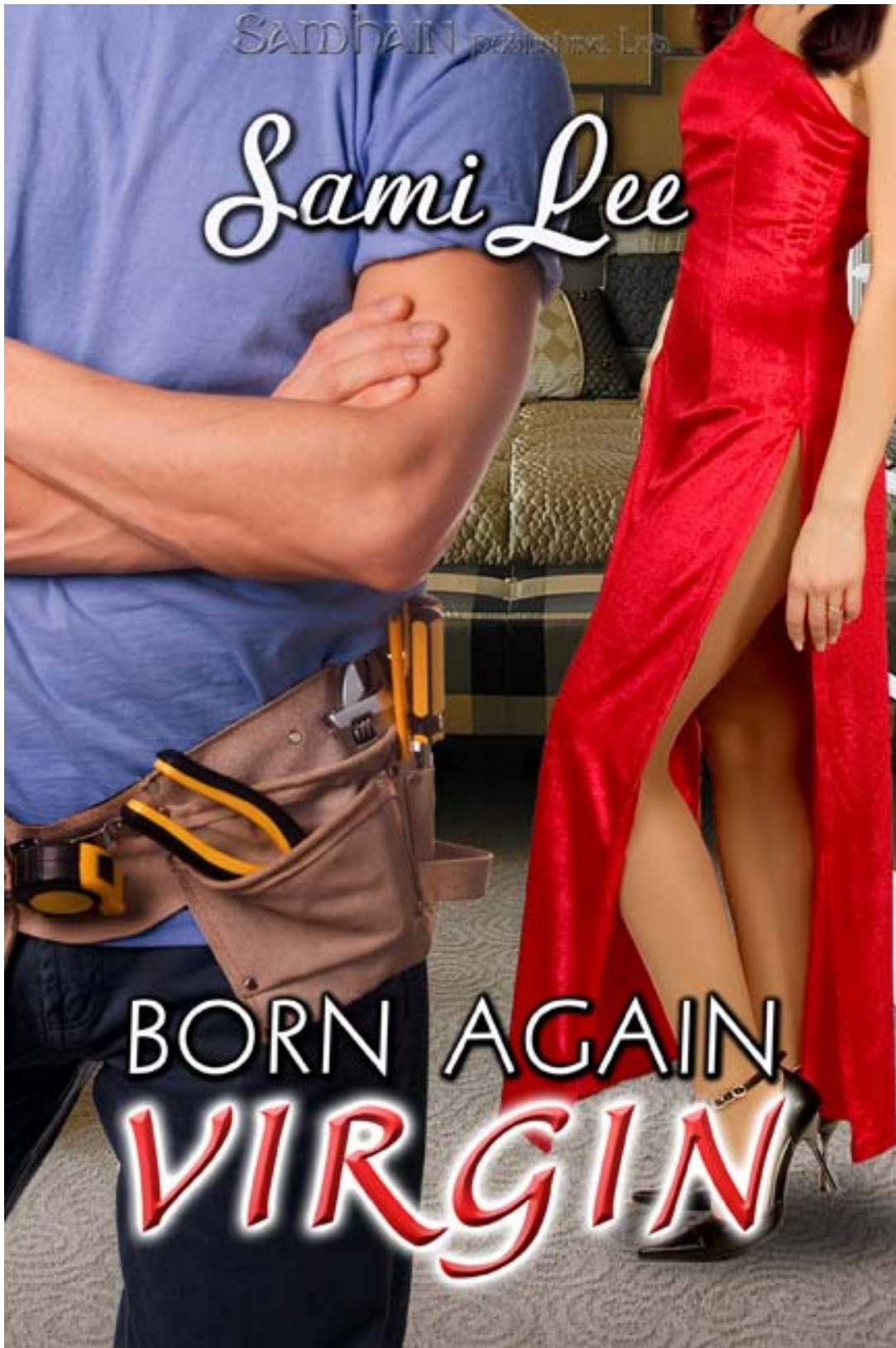


SANDHAIN PUBLISHING, LLC

Sami Lee

BORN AGAIN
VIRGIN



eBooks are *not* transferable. They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
512 Forest Lake Drive
Warner Robins, Georgia 31093

Born Again Virgin
Copyright © 2007 by Sami Lee
Cover by Scott Carpenter
ISBN: 1-59998-495-4
www.samhainpublishing.com

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First **Samhain Publishing, Ltd.** electronic publication: May 2007

Born Again Virgin

Sami Lee

Dedication

For Chris—better late than never.

Chapter One

Kelsey Simmons assessed her appearance in the full-length mirror critically. She could swear the dress hadn't looked quite so outrageous in the boutique. "Remind me again why I bought this, Gabby," she told her best friend.

Held up with spaghetti-thin straps, the dress dipped low in the back, exposing a liberal V of honey-hued skin and rendering a bra infeasible. The bodice revealed an eye-popping amount of cleavage where it stretched taut and low across her otherwise unsecured breasts. Kelsey feared any stranger passing her in the street might lose an eye if the wind picked up unexpectedly.

The bodice alone was enough to alert a man to a woman's intentions. The sensuous shimmer of fabric that skimmed her hips and the twin splits in the hem that exposed her thighs when she walked were probably overkill. The whole package practically screamed *I want you to take me to bed!*

Gabrielle Murray stepped forward to view the dress in the mirror, the bulge of her pregnant stomach forcing Kelsey to move over. Tilting her head to one side in consideration, Gabby combed her hands through Kelsey's neatly styled hair, sending the thick locks into disarray. "Because it complements your coloring and makes you look like sex on legs. J-Lo," she said with a click of her fingers, "eat your heart out."

Kelsey smoothed a hand over her messed-up hair. "I don't know. I'm not really sure what kind of reaction I'm going to get out of Stefan if I wear this." As obvious as she thought the dress was, Stefan Henley hadn't thus far shown himself to be a great interpreter of women's signals—at least not hers.

“If there’s any hot blood pumping beneath that composed exterior of his, you’ll get just the reaction we’re looking for.”

Kelsey wasn’t convinced. Stefan had always been almost painfully reserved around her. Despite the enjoyable, although not steamy, kisses they had shared during their regular evenings out over the past six months, he often reverted to treating her more like a friend than a potential lover afterward. She couldn’t help but wonder at the reasons behind his hesitancy.

She believed Stefan’s assertion that he wanted to take things slowly with her—he had been raised by conservative parents and was innately shy. But occasionally insecurity raised its ugly head. Perhaps Stefan just wasn’t all that into her.

Gabby, ever Kelsey’s staunch supporter, had declared that nonsense and suggested Stefan might not believe in sex without serious commitment. That was why she had devised “operation seduction”, corny name and all.

“When Stefan sees you in this, one of two things will happen,” Gabby began, outlining the main objectives of her plan to spur Stefan into action. “He’ll either race you to the nearest bedroom or the nearest altar—and I suspect the latter. Both would be even better.”

“Agreed. I’m not in this just to...you know.”

“Get laid?”

Kelsey arched a brow at her friend’s blunt contribution. “Right. I want a relationship, Gab, in every sense of the word. I won’t settle for less.” Despite her fervent words, Kelsey wondered what she would do if Stefan offered sex before commitment. Only to herself would she admit that the admirable restraint he had shown had started to get somewhat frustrating. Lord knows, it was *years* since she’d been with a man.

Determinedly, Kelsey shook off the thought. Her self-imposed state of celibacy was just that—self-imposed. Past disasters had given her good reason to steer clear of relationships, particularly the kind based on sexual attraction alone. Deprivation was not the reason she wanted to move things along with Stefan. Kind and sweet, he understood her

dedication to her real-estate business and made no unreasonable demands on her time. He fit her lifestyle perfectly. He *was* perfect. Mr. Right, actually. Kelsey felt sure of it.

"We need a man's opinion. We'll ask Frank when he comes," Gabby said.

"Frank?"

"Yeah, he's perfect. He's happily married, an experienced, older man." As though on cue, a knock came from the front door. "No time to argue, he's here. I have to go to the bathroom, *again*. Meet me in the kitchen. I'll put some coffee on."

Frank Brevan had agreed to come around this morning and give Kelsey an estimate for the renovations she wanted done on her newly purchased house, a high-set, four-bedroom Queenslander that was structurally sound but had seen better days. Hiring Frank was a foregone conclusion. Reliable handymen didn't exactly crowd the streets of Holly Hill. And she'd been more than happy with his work last time she bought an old house to renovate. Resale had produced a tidy profit and Kelsey expected this venture to be just as successful. Still, she needed to know how much she was up for before work began.

Kelsey supposed Gabby was right. Frank could give her a man's point of view. Was the dress seductive or just plain slutty? If he wouldn't want his daughter wearing it, if he had one, it might go back to the boutique.

That decided, Kelsey went to answer the door. Almost before she spotted him, Kelsey realized her caller was not the non-threatening, middle-aged Frank Brevan.

Where Frank was no more than medium height and rotund, this man was long, lean and limber. His back was to her as he rested his weight on the porch railing, surveying the view.

The house stood on a hill, the valley below carpeted in varying shades of green. The small Sunshine Coast town of Holly Hill was a cluster of buildings in the foreground, the sparkling Pacific Ocean a brilliant blue backdrop.

The outlook was spectacular, but for the first time Kelsey hardly noticed. Her attention snagged instead on an equally spectacular view of taut rear end and narrow hips encased in well-loved, faded denim. A broad back was nicely displayed by the fitted cotton of a light blue T-shirt she suspected was as old as the jeans. At the sound of the door creaking on its hinges, the man straightened and turned. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but stopped in the process of dipping his battered hat to stare. His gaze roamed over her, from toe to head, and he took his sweet time about it. She felt the unmistakable heat of his perusal like millions of tiny pinpricks that raised goose bumps over her skin.

Unnerved, Kelsey wanted to say something icy that would put him and his roving eyes in their place, yet when she tried, all that came out was a rasped, “Yes?”

She detected the barest hike of his dark eyebrows and the glint of a smile as he stepped toward her, the heels of his worn boots thudding on the wooden planking of the porch. “Miss Simmons?”

“Yes,” Kelsey said again, her voice still not running on full power. He was tall, definitely over six feet. With the breadth of his shoulders and the wide-brimmed hat, she had the sense that he towered over her.

That, she didn’t like. At only a few inches taller than her five-feet-three-inches, Stefan suited her just fine. She was not into feeling dominated. Not even by easy-on-the-eyes and—Kelsey felt herself gulp as she struggled to keep her composure as steady as her gaze—sexy men.

“I’m here to give you an estimate for your renovations.”

Kelsey forced herself to concentrate on the man’s words and not on the softly spoken, yet masculine, sound of his voice. “Ahh...I’ve already hired Frank Brevan and I’m expecting him any minute. So...” *So scram.* She could still feel him openly assessing her with those eyes she couldn’t quite see and it made her nervous.

Okay, so she hadn’t intended to open the door dressed like a Las Vegas cocktail waitress to some unknown male, but really. He was gawking as if he hadn’t seen a woman in months—and he didn’t look like

the Navy type, so she doubted that was the case. He was way too rough around the edges, with an air of unruliness.

Before her manners got the better of her, Kelsey said, "Well, sorry you wasted a trip. Goodbye," and soundly shut the door in his face.

Letting out a breath, Kelsey leaned her back against the solid timber. When he knocked again Kelsey felt it vibrate through the wood. For some strange reason her knees went wobbly at the sound of his voice. "I'm here because Frank asked me to come. I'm KD McKinley."

"Are they supposed to be the magic words, like open sesame?" Kelsey wondered why Frank hadn't told her he'd hired an employee before sending KD around.

"No," KD McKinley said with great patience, as though to a small child in need of simple explanations. "How about, I'm Laura's son. Will that help?"

It took Kelsey a moment or two to process the information. "You're Frank's stepson?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Oh, it was yes, ma'am, was it? She knew Laura McKinley-Breman came from a small town in Texas, but she hadn't detected much of an accent when her son had first spoken. "The accent's not an open sesame either," she told him, picturing the female conquests that had likely fallen at his feet at the sound of that drawling molasses lilt.

"Funny, it's served me well in the past. But I'm not here to open your...sesame. I'm here to do the estimate on Frank's behalf. Are you planning on letting me in?"

No, I'm planning to stand here all day like a fair maiden denying the handsome prince entry to the castle. Lord, he must think she was an idiot. She looked down at herself. Changing would draw too much attention. Besides, he'd already seen her in her ready-to-seduce-her-boyfriend outfit. And this was her house. He could just put his eyes right back in his head, thank you very much.

When the door opened, KD forced his eyes to remain trained above the brunette's neck. She was stunning, soft and delicate in some features—the finely arched eyebrows, the pertly upturned nose—and strong in others—the indomitable line of jaw and the bold, level stare of golden hazel eyes. She had a hell of a face. Hell of a package, really, though he'd be burned at the stake before he got caught gawking at her like a randy teenager again.

But what kind of woman answers the door on Sunday morning dressed like that? The dress didn't exactly look like church wear.

"I thought you lived in the US."

"On and off," KD said vaguely to address her implied question. He'd spent some time in the US working in construction and had lived there until his mother had moved them to Australia to marry Frank when KD was eleven years old. Despite that, his accent was subtle to the point of unnoticeable unless he was angry or employing the good ol' boy routine that often opened an otherwise resistant woman's door. Not that it had made an impression in this instance. "Right now, I'm here to give you that estimate." Was she going to make him stand out here and suffer an interrogation?

He thought perhaps she *was* when she inquired haughtily, "Maybe you are and maybe you aren't. Are you well-qualified?"

KD bit back an exasperated sigh. The last twenty-four hours had been hard enough without this. He wasn't about to stand here reciting his qualifications, beg for a job any able-bodied man with a tool kit could complete. "I think I can handle a little paintin' and hammerin', if that's what you're asking."

"Well, if it were just *paintin'* and *hammerin'*, I could do the job myself. I have bigger plans."

KD let his gaze rove over her again, this time doing nothing to mask the intent of his perusal. She was petite, yet lush and feminine. She looked like the type to be more interested in painting nails than hammering them, the type that'd let out a horrified squeal should she get

a spot of paint on her impeccably stylish outfit. “Whatever you say,” he said with the barest tilt of his lips.

Her eyes narrowed. For a second she looked like she wanted to sock him one and KD had to struggle to keep his grin from widening. She might not be cut out for manual labor, but she was no shrinking violet either.

Apparently she decided not to start an argument about women and home renovations, but her voice remained cool. “Well, if Frank sent you, I guess he must know what he’s doing. You might as well come in and take a look around.”

He paused to wipe his boots on the welcome mat, ducking his head to remove his hat as he did so. He caught a whiff of perfume, something flowery and exotic. Probably French, definitely expensive. The kind that teased a man like him into noticing what he was never likely to have.

The scent, and the sentiment, suited Kelsey Simmons to the ground.

KD followed her along the hall and registered the condition and style of the house. Exposed timber floorboards needed a buff and polish, wooden latticework needed repainting, skirting boards needed replacing. The central hallway provided entry to a sparsely furnished main living area and four well-sized bedrooms. Only one was furnished with a queen-sized bed and an old timber wardrobe. Narrow windows framed the view of leafy trees set against the backdrop of a perfect blue sky that met the rugged outline of the Glass House Mountains at the horizon. The windows were all open and a cooling spring breeze blew the distinctive aroma of blooming gardenia into the house to mingle with the smell of fresh-brewed coffee.

Kelsey Simmons stopped at the largest bedroom, the one with the bed. “I had the idea that I could make this bedroom a real feature. Being as it’s right next door to that small second bathroom, I thought I might open up that wall and create an ensuite. Do you think that could be done?”

She looked at him with those wide hazel eyes, waiting for him to say something. “I’d have to check the foundations,” he finally answered,

willing his mind to stay on business. The way they were both wedged in the narrow doorway, her body slanted in his direction, made it difficult for him to control the direction of his gaze. Her—he had to say impressive—cleavage drew inviting shadows across her honeyed skin where it wasn't concealed by the thick curtain of her dark brown hair.

You are *not* going to be caught ogling her breasts, KD told himself firmly, though his inner voice wasn't the only thing firming up. Shit, not a good time for that to happen.

"If you could give me a definite on that before you leave today, I'd appreciate it. I have my heart set on an ensuite."

"I'll be sure and look into it." He wondered what, besides an ensuite, the delectable Miss Simmons might set her heart on. He had the distinct impression she made a point of getting what she wanted and the notion incited his libido. "The whole place needs a paint as well, as you can probably tell." She pushed off down the hallway again. "And most of the skirting boards need replacing. I could do some of that myself, but I work so much that I might not be able to find the time."

Right. She looked barely large enough to reach the top shelf of a kitchen pantry, let alone conduct home renovations. She couldn't be much taller than five-feet-three. And she was done up like she was about to break out in the rumba, not break in to a toolbox.

Abruptly she stopped and turned. KD just managed to pull up before he ran into her. From the less-than-impressed look on her face, KD figured she had guessed at the direction of his thoughts. "I *am* perfectly capable of wielding a hammer. I'm not useless."

"Did I say you were?" KD had already thought of more than one use for her in the five minutes since she had opened the front door. *Quit thinking like that, jackass!*

"Oh no, you didn't *say* anything. Very shrewd."

"Look." KD felt the urge to sigh mightily. "I'm sure you're capable of achieving whatever you want, a woman can do whatever a man can do, etcetera, etcetera. But if you could renovate this place yourself, you wouldn't need me now, would you?"

No question, that annoyed her. The change in her stance telegraphed that clearly. The way she put her hands on those flaring hips also urged her luscious flesh to press invitingly against the fitted neckline of her little red dress. The top of her head barely came level with his collarbone, so the view was quite impressive from his vantage point.

I will not stare at her breasts. I will not stare at her breasts. He was here representing his stepfather, so he had better behave. That meant going out of his way not to notice the way the outline of her pebbled nipples was clearly visible against the clingy fabric.

Lord, have mercy.

“Who says I do need you?” she challenged with faux sweetness. “After all, my verbal agreement is with Frank. Perhaps I’ll just make another appointment with him.”

“You might be waiting a while.” Lack of sleep and stress made his voice gruff. “The doctor has him on bed rest.”

“The doctor?”

“Frank had a heart attack yesterday. That’s why I came up from Brisbane—to take over his workload while he recovers.”

“A heart attack?” Her hand fluttered to her throat. “I had no idea. How awful.”

“Yeah, well,” KD said, her obvious distress quelling his momentary annoyance. “The attack was mild, so he’ll be fine with rest and the change in his diet he was told to make after his last checkup.”

“He was told... He should have been watching his diet?”

“The doctor has been telling him to for years.”

Kelsey felt the heat of guilt infuse her face. “I guess strenuous activity is out of the question, too.” Why hadn’t Frank said anything? “I feel terrible about this. I shouldn’t have... Poor Frank. Gabby!” she called out, heading toward the kitchen, leaving Frank’s stepson in the hall.

“What’s up?” Gabby inquired anxiously, picking up on Kelsey’s mood.

“It’s Frank. He had a heart attack last night.”

“Oh no! Is he alright?”

“How can he be? He’s in the hospital.” No matter what KD McKinley had said, coronary trouble was never mild. “And get this. He’d had warnings from the doctor. He should have been dieting, avoiding strenuous activity. I didn’t know he had a bad heart. He never said anything. If he had I certainly would never have—”

“Of course, you wouldn’t have,” Gabby rushed to assure her, placing an arm around her shoulders. “I know what you’re thinking and you can just stop it. It was up to Frank to resist. This has nothing to do with you.”

“But I feel just terrible. I tempted him.”

“That’s just silly, Kels. Frank’s a big boy and responsible for his own actions. You can’t *give* a man heart failure.”

A masculine voice, full of barely constrained distaste, broke into their exchange. Kelsey turned to see KD McKinley standing behind her with his arms crossed over the imposing width of his chest. At the look in his eyes, she shivered.

“What, exactly, is it that you think you did to cause my stepfather’s condition?”

KD couldn’t believe the ideas racing through his head. Hell, he could barely fathom the concept. If any man in the world was reliable, faithful, it was Frank Brevan. He had been an emotional rock for KD and his mother for going on twenty years.

But Kelsey Simmons was one hell of a gorgeous woman. He had himself been blindsided by her luscious curves, the silken swing of her thick, shiny hair. And why not? She had opened the door to him draped in that *dress*, the one she had apparently donned for Frank’s benefit. His stepfather’s sense of fidelity and honor wouldn’t have stood much of a chance against this woman hell-bent on full-tilt seduction.

“What do you have, a father fetish?” The thought of their sordid little affair made him sick to his stomach.

“Just who are you?”

Kelsey turned to the blonde woman standing beside her. "Gabby, this is KD. Laura's son."

"Oh." As comprehension dawned, the scowl dropped from Gabby's face. Immediately she jumped to Kelsey's defense. "Don't listen to her, she didn't know Frank had a bad heart. Frank's a grown man."

"A bad heart would have stopped her? What a saint."

"Come on, it's not like she's the only one in town Frank's been coaxing sweets from."

Frank must be going through a midlife crisis. None of this was in character and KD was having a hard time digesting the information. He might have come close to hitting a note only prepubescent choirboys could reach when he demanded, "You mean—*he's done this before?*"

"Sure. With Mrs. Flannery when he goes to mow her lawn. Ms. Edgar when he painted her house last month."

"Sweet Jesus, I don't believe this." Did everyone in town know about his stepfather's indiscretions? Did his mother know?

He didn't realize Kelsey was approaching him until she rested her hand in what she probably thought was a soothing touch on his arm. His bicep flinched beneath the unexpected contact. "I do hope your mother won't be angry with me. Although I suppose she has a right to be."

"No shit." He uncrossed his arms, forcing off her hand. "I should think my mother has a right to be angry. I should kick your tempting tush from here to Sunday myself. Good God, Frank didn't stand a chance against you and what you offered."

A guilty flush rose up to color her cheeks and she recoiled, looking contrite. "I know, I know. My buns are pretty spectacular."

"Oh, they're spectacular alright. Not to mention the rest of you. Jesus your—" Even in his agitated state, KD balked at using the word that first sprang to mind to a woman's face, so he gestured toward the vicinity of her chest. "I mean, what a fantastic set of...you-know-whats. Hell, woman, what man could resist you dressed like that?"

Kelsey regarded him in utter bewilderment. "You don't think you're overreacting, just a little maybe? And what has any of this got to do with

my”—the way she shuffled her feet hinted at discomfiture, but she still managed a lofty demeanor as she finished—“*set of you-know-whats?*”

“If you’ve been walking around advertising them in front of Frank, they have everything to do with this.”

“*Advertising?*” Kelsey gasped. She tugged at the neckline of her dress, seeming as embarrassed as she was indignant. Never taking her blazing glare off KD, she said, “Gabby, we can conclude that the dress is too much after all.”

“Or too little,” KD muttered.

“Umm, Kelsey,” Gabby injected tentatively.

“No, it doesn’t matter what you say now, Gabby. This”—Kelsey narrowed her eyes at him—“*person* obviously thinks I look like a...a...”

KD detected glistening beneath the woman’s lashes and wondered how in the hell she managed to make *him* feel like sack of dirt with her pretense of fighting tears. It *was* possible she had no idea what kind of effect she had on men. Her big gold brown eyes and lush, trembly lips didn’t look like those of a ruthless homewrecker.

Wake up, KD. She was having an affair with Frank.

The incongruous sound of barely suppressed laughter made them stare at Gabby, who was covering her mouth with one hand in a vain attempt to stifle a fit of giggles. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be laughing.”

“Damn right,” KD concurred.

“I’m so sorry about Frank. Really. It’s just that I think there’s been a misunderstanding.”

“Well, I’m certainly not understanding any of this,” Kelsey said. “I don’t know why this...man would be so angry over a few cakes and a bit of manual labor. I didn’t cause Frank’s heart attack all on my own.”

“Cakes?” KD had the terrible premonition that he was about to end up looking like a complete jackass.

“I think,” Gabby began, no longer hiding her amused grin, “KD has gotten the impression you’re having an affair with his stepfather.”

Chapter Two

“A—what?”

“Yes, I think so. Isn’t that what you thought, KD?” Gabby asked.

Kelsey turned on him again. “What on earth—How could you think that?”

“How could I?” KD repeated, incredulous. “How about the way you’re dressed? And you felt guilty about causing Frank’s heart attack. What am I supposed to make of that?”

“Kelsey likes to bake.”

KD flicked Gabby an irritated glance. “What?”

“You know muffins and stuff like that.”

He grit his teeth and enunciated, “I know what baking is.”

“Righto. Well, she used to bake her special chocolate mud muffins for Frank. That’s Kelsey’s specialty. Mrs. Flannery’s is passionfruit cheesecake and Ms. Edgar’s is... Well, Ms. Edgar doesn’t actually bake anything very well, but I suppose that’s beside the point.”

The feeling that he was about to end up looking like the biggest idiot in town intensified. But KD crossed his arms over his chest, refusing to admit defeat. “What about her buns?”

“What?”

The gasped word came from Kelsey and KD turned back to face her. She looked like she wanted to throttle him and he couldn’t imagine her baking sweet treats for anyone at that moment. “Your spectacular buns. Your words, not mine,” he pointed out. Although, from what he had seen when he had followed her down the hall, he agreed. His opinion of her

delicious rear aside, KD added a little feeling to his sneer. “A little stuck on yourself, aren’t you?”

Her eyes narrowed. Her lips pursed. KD could practically hear her seething. “You...insulting, contemptuous...rude...”

When she paused, KD cordially inquired, “You need a thesaurus?”

“What I need,” she began, breathing heavily, “is a frying pan. Or a stockpot. Something really, really heavy.”

Her breasts were rising and falling inside that inadequate bodice. KD sensed it viscerally, even as he managed with some inhuman will not to leer. “Alright, I’ll bite. Why?”

“To hit you over the head with, you unimaginable bastard.”

“Well, you got me there, Miss Simmons.”

Recognizing the irony in his tone, Kelsey felt a stab of regret. Everyone in town knew the basics of Laura McKinley’s past. She was neither ashamed nor secretive about it. She had gotten pregnant young and by mistake. The father—KD’s father—refused to marry her and took off without a second look back.

Any word other than bastard would have been preferable.

But Kelsey fought the urge to apologize. He hadn’t yet apologized for calling her—by insinuation if not words—a husband-stealing slut. “What I got, Mr. McKinley, is a mind not to hire you.”

“Fine.” His shrug was not an affectation, Kelsey realized right away. He was as happy to wheedle his way out of this job as she was to have him gone. “I came here as a favor to my stepfather, because I owe him that much, and more. You don’t want me to do the job? No skin off my nose. I’m not gettin’ down on my knees, lady.”

Kelsey was shocked to the point of breathlessness at the image that flashed, vivid and utterly sexual, through her mind. She wouldn’t mind having Mr. KD McKinley down on his knees, where she could be in control of him, where she could have him doing things to her that no man had done in longer than she cared to recall.

Oh. My. God.

She knew only enough to find him detestable and she was thinking like that? Oh Lord, Stefan better respond to this dress the way she wanted him to, because deprivation was finally catching up. It had been four long years since she had made her vow to stay celibate until she found Mr. Right. In the view of some—well, in the view of one Gabrielle Murray—that practically made her a virgin again.

A born again virgin. She wondered if KD McKinley's opinion of her would change if he knew.

"Fine," Kelsey agreed, her voice breathy. His eyebrow moved, almost infinitesimally, making her wonder if her thoughts had been telegraphed. She felt suddenly, frighteningly naked. Not much of a stretch, considering what she was wearing. It didn't exactly scream virginal.

She had to get this man out of here.

Pulling herself together, she gave her hair a haughty toss and walked, deliberately casual, by him. "Don't let the door hit you on the butt when you leave, Mr. McKinley."

* * *

"Do you suppose he worked out that you were talking about cinnamon buns?"

Kelsey held the cordless phone between her shoulder and cheek as she spread strawberry jam on a slice of wholemeal toast. "I told you not to mention him again."

"Oh, come on. That little exchange between you and Laura's prodigal was the highlight of my week," Gabby said unapologetically. "Paul laughed his head off, too."

"You told Paul?" Kelsey groaned.

"Of course. It's this pesky ring on my finger. I'm contractually obliged to tell the man everything, whether he's listening or not."

"Funny, I don't remember hearing that in the vows you spoke."

"It's in the fine print. Along with 'I promise to squander my youth by remaining barefoot and pregnant for the majority of my twenties'. Thomas, stop pinching your sister!"

Kelsey waited until Gabby dealt with the altercation in the background before pointing out, "As I recall, you were the one who wanted children right away. A big family like your own and all that."

"Yeah, yeah. That was before I had two and one more on the way. After this one, that's it. Paul is getting the old snip-snip."

"Really?"

Gabby hesitated. Kelsey could just imagine her giving her rounded stomach an affectionate pat. "Well...maybe. Anyway, I didn't call to talk about me. What are you going to do about hunky handyman?"

"Do?"

"I hear he's a fully qualified carpenter and they aren't exactly thick on the ground around here."

Kelsey knew this. Her attempts yesterday to find an alternative replacement for Frank Brevan had proven wholly fruitless. She'd even made calls to Brisbane, but no one had been keen to travel more than an hour to take on her small project.

Yet she said to Gabby, "So maybe I'll wait until someone's available. Or start on things myself."

"You're going to turn that poky toilet into an ensuite and install French doors?"

"Nooo." Kelsey drew out the word. She took a bite of her toast, chewing and swallowing before she continued. "I'll just have to abandon that idea and do the surface stuff."

"*You*, abandon an idea? Miss See-things-through-to-the-end-if-it-kills-me? Don't do it, Kels. The universe might shift off balance and we could all be doomed."

"Ha, ha." Kelsey took another bite just as there was a knock on the front door. Walking down the hall, her powder blue pumps clicking on the floorboards, she said into the phone, "I've got to go, Gab. Someone's

at the door.” Probably Mrs. Lipitz from the neighboring house, calling in for an ill-timed and much too lengthy chat. She could think of no one else who considered it appropriate to knock at seven-thirty in the morning.

“Okay. The last thing I’ll say on the matter is this. Why don’t you just call a truce with hunky handyman and hire him?”

“Would you stop calling him hunky—” Kelsey swung open the front door and fell silent, gaping at the view of firm pectoral muscles that confronted her. Her eyes traveled upward, slower than she liked, to see broad shoulders before connecting with a pair of dark blue eyes the color of the deepest parts of the Pacific Ocean.

Speak of the devil and he shall appear.

“Why not? He is hunky. You’re not so wrapped up in Stefan that you didn’t notice.”

“Miss Simmons?”

His voice was softer than she remembered, as soft as the white cotton of his T-shirt. It made Kelsey feel like his words caressed her.

Oh, stop it you fool. “Gab, I really have to go.”

“He’s there, isn’t he?”

“Gab, I’m hanging up.” Kelsey pressed the end button on the cordless phone. Fisting the implement, she rested it against her hip and gathered her wits with effort.

“Good morning, Mr. McKinley. Did you think of another insult you wanted to hit me with?”

KD made his expression neutral, while inside he warred between annoyance and outright lust. Which in turn fuelled his annoyance. She wore a streamlined skirt suit in powder blue and a silky white blouse with the top three buttons undone. The sight of her dressed for business was a shock after the lasting impression that little red dress had left. The dreams he’d had...

Well, they didn't bear thinking about when standing toe-to-toe with their star. He was not here to make matters worse between him and the irritatingly delectable Kelsey Simmons. Unfortunately, he was here to eat a healthy serving of crow.

"Not if you don't give me any ammunition." *Damn.* He was supposed to be ingratiating himself, not getting into it with her again.

"I don't recall giving you any ammunition last time." Her haughty demeanor only rankled his nerves further.

"I don't know. My stepfather has a bad heart, as it turns out. You could have given him a coronary opening the door in that excuse for a dress you were wearing Sunday, whether you meant to seduce him or not."

"Whether I meant... How many times do I have to deny that I want to get your stepfather into bed?"

KD shrugged in lieu of a response. Okay, so he figured Kelsey and Frank hadn't been having any kind of affair. When he'd told his mother about the conclusion he had drawn, she had laughed for the first time since Frank had been taken to hospital. Then she'd reamed him out for losing Frank the job he had been so looking forward to, the job he would still want to be a part of, even if it was only in a consultative role.

That was when she'd demanded he come skulking back to Kelsey Simmons's doorstep and beg forgiveness. Under the circumstances, KD couldn't deny his mother the favor.

But damn, it was harder than he had imagined.

He cleared his throat. "Do you suppose I could come in?"

"No."

He put his hands on his hips, unconsciously mirroring her pose. "Do you suppose we could start over again? I'd like to offer you that estimate I never got around to."

"That depends."

"On what?"

"If you're here to apologize."

KD felt his temperature shoot up about seven degrees. She was actually going to make him say he was sorry, when he shouldn't have to. He had drawn a perfectly logical conclusion the other day. And he hadn't been completely kidding when he'd said that dress could have given Frank a heart attack.

Forcing himself to think of his mother and Frank, KD said, "Yeah, that's why I'm here."

She simply waited, arching an expectant brow. KD cleared the pride out of his throat. "I jumped to the wrong conclusion on Sunday. I should have known Frank would never cheat on my mother."

"You should have known *Frank* would never cheat?" she repeated at a much higher decibel level. "What about *me*?"

"To be honest, ma'am"—KD forgot that his little accent trick didn't work on this particular woman—"I don't know you or what kind of person you are. I mean, you don't like me based on one wrong assumption I made and you don't know me either."

That seemed to stump her. She straightened and stared, wide-eyed. She did have lovely eyes. A soft brown rimmed in gold. Eyes a man could spend a long time staring into as he lost himself in her hot, wet...

Oh, jeez.

At last she spoke, dragging KD away from his lewd thoughts. If he didn't know better, he would have thought she was struggling not to smile. "That's the worst excuse for an apology I've ever heard."

"Thank you."

She heaved a weighty sigh and stepped back to allow him entry. "You might as well come in. I'll let you give me your estimate—for Frank's sake."

"I'm here for Frank's sake, too," KD matched her not-so-subtle hint that she wasn't doing *him* any favors. "He was looking forward to this job and he wants me to do it. *I* want to do it, as a favor to him and my mother."

"I guess you'd better give me a good estimate, then."

“Why don’t we just cut the crap, Miss Simmons?”

She stopped mid-stride and swung around to face him. Her lush lips were pursed and shiny with lilac-tinted gloss. Her dark mane of hair was clipped back at the sides, the rest of it hanging down her back in ribbons of chocolate brown.

She looked riled and imperious. Strong and sexy. And beautiful. Damn, but she looked beautiful.

“Yes,” she said at last. “Why don’t we? You’re here because Frank asked you to come, not because you want to apologize to me. He was angry with you.”

“It was my mother, actually. She didn’t tell Frank anything about our misunderstanding. And *you* haven’t been able to find anyone else interested in the job you want done.”

“What makes you say that?”

He showed her a knowing smile. “Because you wouldn’t have invited me in if you had.”

Very astute, considering he looked more like some ill-bred cowboy than a man of any depth of intelligence. Kelsey’s opinion of him shifted a little, before she got a hold of herself again. Just because he was smart didn’t mean he wasn’t also the ignominious blockhead she had originally thought. After all, he hadn’t apologized for his outrageous assumption about her interest in his stepfather. He’d only given a half-baked, man-style apology—one that allowed him to save face and that never actually acknowledged the malfeasance against her.

Still, he was right. She had no one else interested in renovating her house and she *did* need that ensuite. And those French doors. She could just about hear Gabby laughing at her earlier pronouncement that she would do without them. She had already decided what she wanted and, like it or not, KD McKinley was the only man around willing and able to give it to her.

Oh, dear. Did she have to arrange the facts quite that way in her mind?

“Alright, Mr. McKinley,” Kelsey said after a long pause during which images of the man giving her what she wanted—and what she hadn’t gotten in a long, long time—filled her brain to distressing capacity. She shifted her weight from foot to foot. This was just business. She would be at work whenever he was here and so she needn’t take into account the way he vexed her so. “If you can do it for the right price, you’ve got yourself a job.”

* * *

Three days later, as she sat across a stained timber dining table from Stefan Henley, Kelsey realized she had never told KD McKinley she had a boyfriend.

They were at The Central, aptly and unimaginatively named for its location in the center of town. Its popularity as a lunch venue was due in large part to its status as the only pub in Holly Hill. In addition to this obvious advantage, The Central also had a lovely beer garden dotted with round oak dining tables and matching oak chairs. Couples could enjoy each other in the relative privacy and shade afforded by a lush canopy of rainforest trees.

Kelsey now found herself there, picking at her Caesar salad while Stefan concentrated on his grilled fish. Instead of the potential fiancé seated across from her, she thought about hunky handyman.

Damn that man KD. She hadn’t laid eyes on him since she had offered him the renovation job, but his assorted tradesman debris littered her house, reminding her that he occupied her space during the day. He’d moved her bed into one of the spare rooms, as requested, so he could work on knocking down the wall between the master bedroom and the bathroom. Just the thought that he had placed his hands on her bed made her shiver and she’d barely gotten a decent night’s sleep since.

Pathetic. She would turn thirty in precisely two months, so wasn’t some teenage ingenue. She’d been around the block before. A few more times than she would have liked, maybe, but she’d known men and she’d

enjoyed sex, for the most part. Just because she had decided four years ago to get off that particular merry-go-round and wait for the right guy, didn't excuse her acting like a hormone-riddled schoolgirl at the merest thought of the man in her house. The man who would be in her house right now. Working. Sweating. Maybe taking off his shirt, revealing work-hewn muscles and silky, dark chest hair.

Dear God. Kelsey shifted in her seat, shocked to find herself aroused. This was what the man did to her when she didn't even see him. God help her if she ever ran into him on the way home.

And today was Friday. She usually gave herself an early mark from work on a Friday, if she could manage it. But if she went home too soon she might see KD McKinley. And if he was in the state of half dress she had just been picturing...

Oh, dear. "Would you like to come to my place for dinner tonight?"

Stefan looked up from his plate, a forkful of fish halfway to his mouth. "Pardon?"

And well he should look shocked. She had just interrupted his one-way conversation on land ordinance twenty-six A. Or was it twenty-six B? Stefan was on the local council and he loved his work. He'd be stunned to discover Kelsey had tuned out the conversation for the last ten minutes.

She cleared her throat. "I asked if you'd like to come to dinner at my place."

"Tonight?"

Kelsey usually appreciated Stefan's adherence to his strict and busy schedule. She was a fan of the schedule. But right this minute his obvious reluctance to do something even mildly impulsive annoyed her. "Yes tonight." *I need you to come home and stop me from leaping all over hunky handyman if I see him with his shirt off.* "I could get a couple of steaks, a bottle of wine. What do you think?"

"I don't know. I don't think I have anything on..."

His hesitancy was giving her a complex. Didn't he *want* to spend time with her, even if it wasn't scheduled? Granted, he'd never been inside her

house before—just as she'd never been invited into his. They had dated for almost six months, but they'd only ever been together in public places. Afterward, Stefan always dropped her at her door, giving her a measured kiss—not too heavy, not too chaste, with minimal tongue and some caressing, but no groping. Just enough to leave Kelsey wanting more. She'd invited him in a couple of times, but he'd never accepted.

For the first time she wondered if Stefan even wanted to have sex.

Her ego punctured, Kelsey found her voice turning peevish. “Well, if you don't want to, I'm not going to beg.”

“Of course I want to, Kelsey,” Stefan rushed to say, soothing her ruffled feathers. “I always enjoy spending time with you. So yes, I will come to dinner tonight.”

She gave him a bright grin. “Excellent. Why don't you come over at six or so?”

Stefan smiled. He really was handsome, with soft gray eyes and neatly styled blond hair. When he smiled, his left cheek dimpled and smile lines appeared around his eyes, lending him the character that didn't always show when talking about work or giving a speech. He was five years older than she was, but that dimple made him look younger, approachable. He was sweet and gentlemanly and dedicated to making Holly Hill a better place for all who lived here.

What more could a girl want?

Take that, KD McKinley. I won't be fantasizing about you tonight. Tonight I'll have the real thing.

* * *

As she carried her grocery bags up the front stairs, Kelsey wondered if she should wear the red dress. She'd bought it so Stefan would see her in it, but she didn't want to shock the pants off him. His pants should come off voluntarily.

And tonight would be the perfect opportunity. They would be completely alone for the first time, with nothing to stop them from

making love. She felt a surge of nerves. How would Stefan react if she made a move?

Instinctively, Kelsey knew he wouldn't react well. Stefan was a man of the traditional variety. He thought it was the man's responsibility to make the moves. If she wanted him to make love to her, she would have to let him think it was all his idea.

Which was where the dress came in...

Contemplating her options, she shuffled her grocery bags to reach for the doorknob, only to have it open from the inside. She always seemed to be meeting KD on her front doorstep.

Her heart gave a thump, and another until it was thumping all over the place. His jeans molded to his long muscled thighs with loving dedication, his black T-shirt did the same to his shoulders and well-shaped biceps. There was a streak of dirt on his cheek and rough stubble on his jaw. His hair was mussed and coated in dust, making Kelsey want to run her hands through it.

At least he was wearing his shirt.

His eyes swept over her, their ocean blue sparkling, and his impossibly sinful mouth curved in an appreciative smile that had her knees wobbling. "Hey, sugar."

The endearment seeped into her, making her think of chocolate and cream and everything sweet, and what she would love to do if he were covered in the stuff. Lick it all off him, sweat, dirt and all.

"I didn't know you were still here." She meant to sound cool, not like she was having an asthma attack.

"My truck's around the back. I've been loading up some trash to take away."

"My bedroom wall?"

"Yup. Hope you're not going to change your mind now. Let me grab those."

He had stepped forward and relieved her of the bags before Kelsey could protest. He turned and walked down the hall to her kitchen as

though he owned the place, placing her bags on the counter. "Want me help you put this stuff away?"

What was he doing—pretending to be a gentleman now? "No, leave it out. I'm cooking dinner tonight, for two." He sent her a look she couldn't read. Oh God, had he thought she was issuing him an invitation? She hurried to add, "My boyfriend's coming over."

"Your boyfriend, huh?"

Why did his tone sound dubious? "Yes. I have a boyfriend. And he's coming over." Could you say it again, Kelsey? Make it sound even more like a fabrication. "In fact, he'll be here soon, so I have to shower and change."

He leaned his butt on the kitchen counter and crossed his arms over his chest. Impressive arms, impressive chest. Why couldn't she stop noticing? He made no move to leave. "Into that red dress of yours?"

"Why would you assume that? I have other clothes."

He lifted a careless shoulder. "It's definitely the kind of dress you buy for a man's benefit. And since you say you didn't buy it for Frank..."

"Yes, I say that," she muttered crossly. Pulling the bottle of white wine out of the bag, she opened the fridge and put it on the shelf. At the risk of stirring his suspicions about her and Frank again, Kelsey allowed her genuine concern for his stepfather to show. "How is Frank?"

"You ought to know as well as I. He told me you've been to visit him twice."

"Just to check on him, I swear," she said wearily. "Nothing untoward about it."

"I know." To her surprise he ducked his head and examined his shoes, instead of regarding her with those openly daring eyes. "The thing is...I've acted like a jerk with you. I know you're not after Frank. I should have said so on Tuesday. I'm...sorry."

Kelsey stood in the middle of the kitchen, a plastic bag of steaks in her hand and her mouth hanging open. She hadn't expected him to apologize. She had decided he was one of those men who just didn't. But apparently she'd been wrong.

He raised his head and met her gaze. His level stare made her suck in a breath. "You...you've surprised me, Mr. McKinley."

"Yeah, I see." He stepped forward and took the package from her hand.

Only then did Kelsey realize she was dripping meat juices all over the hardwood floors and her expensive shell pink shoes. "My shoes!"

KD chuckled. "Women and their shoes."

"Clearly you have no idea how hard it is to find shell pink sandals in a size five and a half."

"Clearly." He smiled at her.

Kelsey nearly lost her footing as she bent to take off the soiled shoes. The man had a smile on him that was positively lethal. He shot out an arm to give her something to hang on to, when she looked about to fall.

Her palm felt corded forearm muscles beneath it. Lightning heat shot out from the point of contact to her every extremity, shocking her so she nearly yelped. Her equilibrium took its time returning and she was forced to keep hold of his arm with her free hand while the one holding her shoes found its way to his abdomen.

God, he was hard there, too. Did he have a six-pack? She'd never actually seen a six-pack in the flesh. What would it be like to run her hands over the hard ridges, to travel lower to the waistband of his jeans and beyond? Would *that* be hard?

The thought flushed more heat through her. Either summer had come early or she was about to.

The realization that she was turned on had her pushing away from him. "I really have to go have a shower now."

"Don't let me stop you."

His voice was a low, ominous rumble, like approaching thunder. Kelsey met his eyes and saw they had turned dark and cloudy. Fear tingled along her spine. She felt as though she were about to be caught up in the fury of the wild storm that had apparently begun building inside him, just as it had inside her.

“Don’t worry. I’ll see myself out.”

His words brought her back to reality, the moment of ferocity dissipating. Perhaps her own out-of-control response to KD McKinley colored her judgment. Perhaps he hadn’t been as aroused as she in that moment.

Kelsey hoped so. Because if KD felt half of what she’d felt, she didn’t think he was the type of man to let it go.

Chapter Three

Kelsey was in the shower and he *really* had to leave.

He wanted to toss that woman over the nearest chair and have his way with her. But she was getting ready for her boyfriend to come over, so why was he hanging around? What kind of man was he? A sick man, that's what kind. A sucker for punishment. A real sad case.

Time to pack up his remaining stuff and hightail it out of Kelsey's house.

Just for a moment there, he'd seen something in her eyes, felt something go *snap* in the air between them. Despite all evidence to the contrary, he'd thought she wanted him as much as he couldn't help wanting her. And that had felt too damn good.

But, as she'd told him, she had a boyfriend. Of course she did. Women like Kelsey Simmons didn't hang around unattached just waiting for a guy like him to come along and pay them some clumsy attention. Women like Kelsey owned skimpy red dresses that they wore for any guy they chose. And she had already chosen someone.

Enduring the image of some *other* guy tossing Kelsey over the nearest chair for an agonizing moment, KD grunted in disgust and threw the last of his tools in his battered red toolbox. He was just heading out when Kelsey's phone rang. He hesitated in the kitchen doorway. Should he answer it?

Nah, he decided when the answering machine kicked in and a man's voice, smooth and cultured, spilled into the room. "Kelsey, are you there? It's Stefan." A pause before the sound of a throat being cleared. The guy sounded nervous. "Ah, I guess you're not home yet. Listen, I'm sorry but

I won't be able to make it tonight, after all. Something's come up. Enjoy the steaks. I'll call you over the weekend, alright? Bye-bye...darling."

KD scowled as the machine clicked off. *Something's come up? Enjoy the steaks?* Jeez, it was the lamest fob off he'd ever heard. And on her answering machine! The least the guy could have done was call back and talk to her in person. And he'd hesitated over that "darling", like he'd been unsure about using it. How long had the two of them been dating anyway?

Barring an earthquake complete with tsunami, nothing would stop KD spending the night with Kelsey. Especially if she was wearing that *dress*.

Belatedly, he realized the shower had stopped running. *Hell*. He stood there in the hall, hanging on to his toolbox like a dummy, some Bob the Builder cardboard cutout, and Kelsey was going to stick her head out any minute and find him.

But what should he do? Leave without telling her about her lame boyfriend's message? It might be ages before she checked her machine and realized the doofus wasn't coming. *Double Hell*.

He had just resolved to knock on the bathroom door and deliver the message through the safety of two inches of solid timber when the door in question opened and Kelsey stepped out.

She had her arms up, twisting her damp hair into a ponytail. The action caused her breasts to jut out against the silky damp material of the chocolate brown robe she wore, her puckered nipples an erotic relief against the thin fabric. The short robe exposed most of her thighs. Damp and dewy fresh all over, she smelled like lavender and good, clean woman.

It was a minute before she saw him. A minute KD spent immobile, staring like a dolt, his mouth drying out like the sun-baked earth in midsummer. He'd never wanted to just grab a woman and take her so much in his whole life.

At last she saw him. Her eyes shot open and her hands covered her mouth as she let out a scream and stumbled back against the bathroom door.

“Shit. Sorry.” He moved forward, making a conciliatory gesture. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Her hand moved to cover her heart. “You scared the shit out of me!”

He couldn’t help it. The sound of Kelsey swearing made him laugh. He bet she never swore, ordinarily. She might be tough, but she was also a lady.

“What’s so funny?”

“You saying shit.”

“Hilarious. That’s what happens when someone scares the...*shit* out of me. Shit, shit, shit!”

He laughed harder. Before long Kelsey’s mouth twitched and her answering chuckle rewarded him. It sounded warm and melodic and, despite her recent outburst, pleasantly ladylike.

It felt nice, laughing with her. “You should have seen your face.”

“You should have seen *yours*. What were you doing, just standing there like that?”

KD hadn’t blushed since he was fifteen and hadn’t been able to hide an inconvenient erection from Heather Winchester, his high school crush. “Ahh...I was, well...when a man sees a woman who looks like you, dressed like *that*”—he used a hand to encompass her form from head to toe—“staring is kind of involuntary.”

She gasped, suddenly realizing how uncovered she was. She crossed an arm over her breasts and used the other to pull the robe farther down her legs. “You were spying on me?”

“No, dammit. I hung around to tell you you got a message on your machine. Stanley’s not coming.”

She frowned in confusion. “Do you mean *Stefan*’s not coming?”

“Whatever his name is,” KD muttered. Whatever his name is was a complete idiot.

“Did he say why?”

“Something’s come up, he said.”

“Oh.”

Her blush was telling. She thought it as lame a fob off as he had, and she’d just been humiliated in front of him. In her robe.

“Hey, I’m sure something did come up.”

“Sure. Something more important than me.”

“Aw. That can’t be right.”

But if it wasn’t more important than her, the guy would be here, wouldn’t he?

KD had the strong urge to step forward and gather her in his arms. Just to reassure her. *Bad idea*. Reassurance wasn’t the only thing on his mind and he couldn’t trust himself. Besides, she wasn’t likely to welcome such an act from him.

“Well, that’s a waste of a couple of rib fillet steaks, isn’t it?” Kelsey said, a little too brightly.

“The man’s a fool.”

She gave him a small smile of appreciation. “Thanks for saying that.”

He just shrugged, struggling for words that didn’t take the conversation to sexual areas. *Why don’t you let me show you what a fool I think he is? I’d appreciate a woman like you more than he does. Let me take you to bed, for Crissakes.*

“Well, I’d better go,” he said instead, proud he’d managed to get the words out.

But she went and ruined all his good intentions.

“Unless...you’d like to stay and eat with me?”

* * *

She’d taken leave of her senses, obviously. She must have left them in the car. Why on earth had she asked KD to stay for dinner?

She sat across from him at the small outdoor table on her back verandah, the warm twilight air creating the kind of intimate atmosphere that only those close to each other usually shared. The wooden table seemed an inadequate and easily surmountable barrier between them. Funny, when she'd been sitting across from Stefan at lunch this very day, she hadn't fought down the insane urge to swipe their crockery off the surface, scramble on all fours atop the table and shove her tongue down his throat.

She had been fighting an ever-growing, frighteningly powerful sexual attraction to KD since the second she'd opened her front door to him almost a week ago. So why had she gone and consumed two glasses of Chardonnay—something sure to dull her sense of propriety and possibly get her into serious trouble if she couldn't change the sexual orientation of her thoughts?

Because she'd been stood up and it depressed her, that's why.

She had hastily changed into denim cutoff shorts and a perfectly boring white tank top. Then she'd put the steaks on the grill and opened the wine she had planned to share with Stefan while KD went to get cleaned up. Evidently, he'd stuck his head under the bathroom tap enough to wash his face and get most of the dust out of his thick auburn hair.

She liked the color, she decided as she stole a surreptitious glance at him. He wasn't quite a redhead, not traditionally dark. His hair wasn't straight, but wasn't exactly curly either. Shaggy might be the word, with a little length so it brushed his collar. Up close, the faintest remnants of freckling could be seen across a nose a little too long and broad to be considered aristocratic. On the whole, he might not be considered a handsome man—at least, not in the traditional way that Stefan was handsome. But he had those sparkling blue eyes, a stunning contrast to his unique coloring, and a killer smile that promised satisfaction in the most elemental way.

And that body, of course. Muscles hard and rough-hewn from traditional manual labor, not gym workouts, in a long, lean and thrilling package.

“So do you have family here in Holly Hill?”

Recognizing his question for what it was—a conversation starter that might fill the awkward silence—Kelsey was glad for the opportunity to talk. Even about her family. “Not blood family, but Gabby’s always been closer to me than my real sister.” At his questioning look, she explained, “Genevieve is based in London. She’s a freelance travel writer. We don’t see much of each other. My parents are divorced. My mother’s still in Brisbane—that’s where I grew up—with husband number two. My father’s in Sydney with girlfriend number, I’m not sure, five, I think. And I’m here because...”

Kelsey shrugged. How could she explain? After Adam Scalia had made her the unwitting other woman in a triangle she hadn’t known existed and broken her heart in the process, she had lost her way and gotten on a merry-go-round of short, ill-conceived relationships. She could never admit to KD the humiliation of that alcohol-fuelled one-night-stand with a work colleague that had finally prompted her to take a look at her life and change it. Too deeply ashamed of herself, she hadn’t even told Gabby. She had simply changed her job and stopped dating altogether, stopped going out, limited drinking. She had been determined not to sleep with another man on impulse. With another man who wasn’t *The One*.

“I got sick of the rat race in the city and the opportunity to take over the real-estate practice here came up a couple of years back.” She gave as much of the truth as she was willing to. “This is Gabby’s hometown and I fell in love with it long ago, so it seemed like fate. Especially as I’d just gotten my real-estate license.” *You’re babbling, Kelsey.*

“How did you meet Gabby, if you’re from Brisbane and she’s from here?”

“Boarding school. Gabby’s parents sent her so she could get the best education and mine sent me...well, because they were getting divorced, I suppose. Made things easier for them with me and Gen not around.”

“Easier for them,” he noted quietly. “Not for you.”

His eyes searched her face and she felt them trail warmth wherever they touched. “I didn’t think so at the time, but who knows? Maybe it was better than being in the house with the two of them fighting like the proverbial cat and dog. And I met Gabby there.” *Had she already said that?*

She cut off a slice of steak and popped it into her mouth, chewing thoughtfully. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Your mother lives here, and Frank. They’re planning to stay for good, aren’t they?”

“Seems that way. Ma always liked it down this way. It’s sure a lot nicer than the outback mining towns we lived in most of my adolescence.”

“That’s right. Frank mentioned he used to work in mining.” Kelsey picked up her wine and took a long sip.

“Yeah. Not much excitement in those towns for a teenager, at least I never thought so. I took off as soon as I secured an apprenticeship in Mackay, stayed there until I finished and then”—he made a movement like an aircraft in flight—“I decided to see the some of the world.”

“Have you seen enough of it yet?” Kelsey asked curiously. He sounded just like Genevieve—always looking for the next interesting place to visit, a whole host of new people to meet. No moss gathered on her sister either.

KD just shrugged. “That remains to be seen, I suppose.”

“Ever think of moving here?” *Why had she asked that?*

His laugh made her regret her question even more. “Oh, my mother would love that, but it’s never appealed. I prefer moving around, anyway.”

All the better not to get tied down, Kelsey deduced. She’d known it already—that he lived like a nomad. He hadn’t visited Holly Hill once in the past two years. He had probably only come now because of Frank’s heart attack. Hearing him confirm it though, had a peculiar effect on her heart. It sank. Suddenly she felt very, very tired.

What had she been thinking? That one look at her and KD might change his mind about settling down with a good woman? Please. She wouldn't want that anyway. He was so far removed from the type of man she saw as a permanent fixture in her life that it wasn't funny. And despite tonight's letdown, she still had Stefan Henley in her sights.

Stefan. Goodness, she'd forgotten all about him.

"That was delicious. Thanks." KD had finished his steak and was now leaning against the backrest of his chair. She hadn't finished hers, but she'd had as much as she wanted. Of food. And nothing else was on the menu.

"No problem." She stood to collect the plates. A wave of dizziness hit and she swayed, clutching the table edge for support.

KD was beside her in a split second, gently easing her back into her chair. Kelsey giggled. "You don't have to treat me like your grandmother, KD."

"Believe me, you don't remind me of anyone's grandmother. Why don't you sit and let me clear the table?"

A man—a macho, man's man at that—who offered to clear the table? She was hardly going to knock back that offer. She spread her hands wide. "Be my guest. I'll just sit here, have another glass of wine and enjoy the night air."

She moved to pick up the half-empty bottle, but KD grabbed it first, holding it out of reach. "I think you ought to slow down on this stuff."

"Why?"

"Because, Miss Simmons." He smiled. "You're a little drunk."

"Oh, that." Kelsey flopped back in her chair and pushed out a sigh. "I think, since we've shared a meal and all now, you should start calling me Kelsey."

Leaning over the table, hands flat on the surface, he looked at her steadily with those dreamy blue eyes. She went all warm inside, from more than the wine. It would be so easy to tilt her head and offer her lips, urge him to kiss her. So easy and so good and so very, very wrong.

"I'll be right back." KD cleared the dishes without a further word and disappeared inside.

Kelsey closed her eyes and rested her head on her crossed arms. What was she doing, thinking about kissing KD? Was she nuts, as well as intoxicated?

"Here, drink this."

Lifting her head with a start, Kelsey saw a mug of steaming black coffee in front of her and wondered how it had gotten there. "Did I fall asleep?"

"Seems that way." He took his seat again and drank from his own mug. He surveyed her face with those keen eyes. "Want to talk about why you're in such a drinking mood?"

She lifted a careless shoulder and sipped her coffee. Black and strong, no sugar. As if he had known how she liked it. Her eyes flicked back to him. "Tell me what it means when a man doesn't want to be alone with a woman."

"If it's with you? He's gay."

His unequivocal tone made her laugh.

"You think I'm joking?"

Her gaze strayed back to him. He simply continued to look at her, steady and sure. His question wasn't rhetorical and Kelsey shook her head. "But Stefan's not."

"If that's true, he's mighty stupid."

"Wrong again." Kelsey leapt to Stefan's defense. "He has a degree in town planning and a masters in political science. He's a very intelligent man."

KD put his mug down and leaned forward to drill her with a hard expression. "A piece of paper is no measure of a person's intelligence, Kelsey."

It was the first time he had said her name since she had suggested he do so. Kelsey gulped, wishing she had never extended the offer. It sounded bone-shiveringly good on his lips.

“Neither can it be dismissed as a factor.” Although what he said was true—after all, she had no degree and didn’t think herself the lesser for it—she was loath to agree with him so readily. “How about you? Did you ever go to university?”

She hadn’t meant the question to sound like a challenge, but the scornful twist of his lips told her it had come out that way. His eyes turned glacial. “Making comparisons, sugar?”

Kelsey amended her earlier opinion. She wished he would call her by her name. If he called her *sugar* like that one more time she might dissolve like a spoonful in a hot cup of tea. “Between you and Stefan? Why on earth would I?”

He merely tilted his head slightly until his meaning sank in. Kelsey gasped and all but sputtered, “You don’t think I’m interested in...*you*?”

“I think you’re interested in something ol’ Stevie doesn’t seem to want to give you.”

“His name,” she enunciated, “is *Stefan*.”

“Whatever. He’s not sleeping with you and by my reckoning you’re in need of a good, hard—”

“What makes you think Stefan and I aren’t sleeping together?”

“Because if this guy was your lover there’d be no way he’d allow you to have dinner with me. He’d be over here taking advantage of the situation.”

“Taking advantage...no way he’d *allow* me...” Kelsey didn’t know where to start to argue with such an arrogant, sexist statement. All her soft-edged tipsiness evaporated. Her anger intensified at her inability to express to this Neanderthal what a throwback he was.

She pushed back her chair and stood, this time feeling no dizziness, only determination. “Get out of my house.”

He pushed back his chair and stood, too. “Your imperious, lady-of-the-house thing is hot as hell. Anytime you want me to play at being your footman—”

“I said get out!”

“Alright, alright.” To Kelsey’s mounting rage he actually laughed, the sound soft, melodic and maddeningly sexy. “Anything the lady wants.”

The innuendo hung in the air as he left, making heat that didn’t belong to fury slice through her. As arrogant and rude as she knew him to be, the idea of KD giving her whatever she wanted had more appeal than she felt capable of dealing with. How could she want to sleep with a man she found so reprehensible?

Chemistry, that’s what. Hormones, celibacy and frustration. None of which she would let rule her life.

With a determined sigh, Kelsey scooped up the coffee cups and carried them inside. She had just finished washing them when she heard footsteps in the hall. The distinctive, heavy clunk of KD’s boots.

She turned as he entered the kitchen. His expression taut, his shoulders tense with restraint, he asked, “Have you ever heard the expression, might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb?”

“Ah, yes.”

“Well, I figure this is one of those situations.” He took a few, seemingly casual steps. But there was nothing casual in his heated expression as he drew near. Kelsey’s knees weakened and she clutched the solid steel of the kitchen sink for support. “You hate me enough to slap me right about now, so making you hate me a little bit more isn’t gonna make much difference, is it?”

She recognized the intent in his eyes a moment before he acted. It wasn’t enough time to stop him. Before she could even gasp, KD hauled her into his arms, crushing her already aching breasts against the hard wall of his chest and covering her mouth with his.

Chapter Four

The first few moments were pure shock, adrenaline coursing through her. She had a too-fleeting thought of resisting, but couldn't for the life of her remember all her sensible reasons for doing so. His lips, after taking their initial, indelicate, possession of hers, softened, turning warm and persuasive. Kelsey found herself sighing involuntarily and, darn it, letting him kiss her.

His tongue brushed across her bottom lip with a feathery caress. Heat erupted with a volcanic rush from the pit of her stomach, bursting through her blood and turning her to liquid fire. There was no possible way she could extract herself from the tender prison formed by the arm that moved to draw her closer to his body and the hand that splayed, gently massaging, through the hair at her nape. Her mind wouldn't let her think of how to do it.

Might as well be hung for a sheep, Kelsey thought in capitulation and stood on tiptoes so she could wind her arms around KD's neck and lean into the kiss.

He made a deep, guttural sound that sent a vibration through her. His arm tightened around her, his hand moving to the small of her back. It slipped beneath the cotton of her tank top, the warmth of his palm searing her skin.

Their tongues moved to greet each other. He tasted faintly like pepper and Chardonnay—or was that her? Kelsey felt drunk again, her head swimming with the all-consuming awareness of being kissed like she'd never been kissed, by a man who knew just how to do it.

His fingers found their way to the back hook of her bra and toyed with it almost absently, alternatively slipping beneath the strap and moving away, as though he were of two minds about what to do with the so easily attained access to her underclothes. Kelsey felt the imprint of KD's arousal against the softness of her stomach and knew his hesitation had nothing to do with a lack of desire. The knowledge of his state of need had Kelsey pressing against him, her breasts crushed to his chest, their peaks firm and tingling as she whimpered into his mouth.

Abruptly KD pulled back, drawing in great gulps of air as he looked down. The look of bright amazement in his eyes seemed to hold a mirror to her feelings. "Kelsey," he said. Just that, just her name, but the thick emotion of his voice seemed to say a thousand things that every cell in her body understood implicitly.

His hand abandoned the sensual massage of her nape, moving down to join the other in grasping her buttocks through the worn denim of her shorts. The cutoffs were miniscule—she should have had the sense not to wear them. His hands easily slipped beneath the frayed cuffs and found her buttocks, his callused fingers scraping an erotic trail across her soft skin.

Kelsey gasped and clutched at his shirt, fisting the material. He pulled her closer, the rock hard jut of his erection pressing against the zipper of her shorts. The soft cotton of her g-string was drenched, her clitoris throbbing with energy. He used his grip on her ass to grind the aching spot against his cock and Kelsey groaned like an animal, standing on tiptoes so she could fit herself more intimately along his length.

The sensations were perfect. The rough drag of her zipper over her damp panties and KD's solid shaft rocking against her pulsing flesh. Her arousal spiraled fast into desperation. "Oh God. Don't stop. Don't stop."

With a groan, he squeezed her butt cheeks, lifting her off her feet and pushing her back against the sink. The solid steel gave her the purchase she needed to grind herself more fully toward him, all the denim between them an erotic frustration Kelsey didn't have the wherewithal to do anything about.

Her position freed up KD's hands. One moved to grasp her breast through the cotton of her top and the lace of her bra, the fabric providing more frustration. She wanted his touch on her bare skin, his callused fingers plucking at her aching nipples. The thought made her moan, but she was too crazed with lust to voice any of her desires.

"Damn, you're hot, sugar," KD groaned against her neck, where his mouth placed hasty damp kisses against her thumping pulse. The hand grasping her ass slipped between her legs. His finger found her skimpy panties and pulled them aside, delving an experimentally short distance inside her wet heat. "Sweet Jesus, you're so wet. I want to taste you there, lick up your sweet, hot juices. Tease you with my tongue and make you come screaming. I'm gonna love you long and hard, sugar. All night long."

All night. His declaration sent waves of excitement crashing through her. Hot juice spilled from her, coating his finger and demanding a deeper invasion. Her clit throbbed to the point of pain. She was moments away from cresting on a wave of ecstasy she badly needed. Her breasts yearned for the touch of KD's hands, his tongue. She'd never needed to be loved long and hard more in her whole darned life.

But close behind her physical response was self-recrimination, its iciness stopping lust in its tracks. Was this all it took to get her into bed, to convince her to throw away a vow she had made four long years ago? A relationship she had spent half a year building?

Stefan. Why did she have to keep reminding herself about Stefan? The man she'd been dating. The man she planned to marry, when he finally got around to asking her.

What in hell was she doing, almost making it in the kitchen with KD McKinley, an arrogant reprobate she knew virtually nothing about, other than the glaring truth he was *not* Mr. Right? She had left this part of her behind, the part that did reckless things uncaring of who they hurt, even when the person hurt was her.

Wishing it didn't take so much effort, Kelsey brought her hands between their two bodies and pushed. The feel of his taut chest beneath

her palms, the jut of his nipples as her fingers grazed them and the still evident pounding of his heart, almost made her sink back into him and give in. Give him his night and have it done.

Steeling herself against the weakness, Kelsey pushed again, more insistent. "I can't."

His head reared back, his eyes rounding with shock. "You're kiddin' me."

"No, I'm not *kiddin'* you. Get away from me!" The note of panic in her voice got his attention. As though she had suddenly caught fire, KD all but dropped her and took several steps back, raising his hands as though to let her know exactly where they were.

A thick moment of silence passed. KD stared, chest heaving with the aftereffects of what they'd almost done. Right up against the kitchen sink. Kelsey looked somewhere off to the side, too abashed to meet his gaze.

"Did I miss something?" His bewildered question filled her with guilt. "Did I misread you?"

"No." God, he didn't think she was accusing him of *that*. "No, I...wanted you to do...everything. Sorry. I just can't."

"Oh." She heard derision in his voice. "I think you *can*. And I'm guessing you need to."

"Don't read so much into my reactions. It's been a long time for me." *Understatement of the year.*

"You sure know how to boost a guy's ego."

"I really don't think your ego needs boosting, KD, but if that's what you want, I'm sure any one of a dozen women in town would take up where I've left off."

The minute she said the words Kelsey felt a wave of near-nausea grip her. The thought that he might do just as she'd suggested was appallingly abhorrent and she experienced more than a twinge of possessiveness. Utterly ridiculous. And selfish. She had no right to keep anyone else from having a good time at his hands when she didn't want to indulge herself.

An annoying little voice laughed at her whopper of a lie. You *don't* want to indulge? Pull the other leg, honey.

"I could do that," KD agreed, stopping Kelsey's breath and forcing her to stare at him. His leisurely, hot grin told her he was teasing. "But I want you. And since I know that you and Mr. Perfect aren't sleeping together, I figure I'm in with a shot. If you're going to make me wait, that's fine. I mean, I'd rather have you right now, but I can stand to be patient."

The unbelievable arrogance of his proclamation should have angered her, but instead another wave of longing assaulted Kelsey so strongly her body actually leaned back to his, as though a magnetic charge connected them. What was *wrong* with her? The man was insufferable. How could she want him so much? How could she be losing every ounce of control she had fought so hard to gain over the years because of this guy?

Anger at herself, not him, finally propelled her to say, with a flinty determination, "You'll be waiting a long time, KD McKinley. Because despite what you think in your cavemanlike brain, I won't ever sleep with you."

"I reckon you will." He stepped forward and placed a hand on either side of the sink behind her. Being crowded only reminded her how close she had come to, ah, coming at the movement of his hips moments ago. She couldn't hide the way she shrank away as though to avoid his magnetism.

He smiled. "You're as frustrated as I am."

"So? I can take care of that."

To her chagrin, he threw his head back and laughed. "Ah, Kelsey. You are one hell of a woman." His gaze returned to hers and, despite the tension in the air, their tendency to get on each other's nerves and the fact he must be nearly in pain with sexual frustration, KD smiled in a way that made her feel he liked her, even cherished her.

She was losing her marbles, for sure.

"Tell you what, sugar. I'll think about you while I'm taking care of—ahem—*that*, if you do me the same courtesy."

“You have some nerve.”

“Oh, you think *I’m* the one with nerve?”

“Yes. I’ve told you I’m seeing someone. Yet you continue to suggest I might want to—”

He grasped her shoulders and kissed her, hard and emphatic, on the mouth. Then he pulled back and set her away, leaving her tingling and wanting him to do more of what she’d just claimed she wouldn’t let him do, ever.

“You have a good weekend, Kelsey. I’ll see you around.” With a shake of his head, he turned on his heel and left. For real this time. The house seemed silent and cold and empty after she heard his truck drive away. And despite her brave words about taking care of herself, she wanted nothing more than for him to come back and finish what he’d started.

Damn the man.

* * *

Kelsey jogged. Fast, like she was timing herself and aiming for a spot on the Olympic team.

It didn’t surprise KD. It seemed the sort of controlled, autonomous sport Kelsey would be drawn to. He pulled his truck into her driveway as she was coming up the street and he couldn’t help but appreciate the sway of her chest as she ran, the swing of her thick pony tail behind her and the smooth strength of her legs, left mostly bare by the diminutive size of her white cotton running shorts.

He grew thirsty just looking at her, but not in sympathy for the exercise she was doing, that was for sure. Good Lord above, but she was undoubtedly the sexiest woman he had ever met.

She drew to a stop beside his truck as he was getting out, checking the pulse at her throat with two fingers. Consulting her watch she stated, like she was less than impressed, “You’re early.”

“Not that I don’t want the brownie points for being eager to get to work, but I think you’re late. You’re usually long gone by now, avoiding my sorry presence by planting yourself at your office at this premature hour.”

KD had let her avoid him for a couple of days, even though after that encounter the other night all he wanted to do was drive back here and pound on her door until she let him in to finish what he’d started. But he had noticed she didn’t like to be steamrolled, so he had to be patient. If he gave her some time to stew over what had almost happened between them, she’d come to her own decision. She’d realize she needed the sex as much as he did and take the logical step.

KD smiled to himself. He wouldn’t mind giving Kelsey some of the lead in that department, a new feeling for him. He usually made all the moves when it came to the opposite sex. But the thought of Kelsey adopting that bossy, dominant stance with him in bed... Well, it took his breath away.

She leveled a stare at him and sidestepped any discussion of her avoidance tactics. “I did sleep a little late today.”

“Having trouble sleeping through the night? I know I am.” KD gave her the killer grin he had sometimes used to procure himself some female company. He couldn’t think of a time where it had failed him.

Until now. Kelsey drew herself upright, hiking a brow over one eye. “I sleep perfectly well, thank you.”

KD fell into step beside her as she strode toward the house. “Suppose you’re exhausted from all that work you’ve been doing stripping the paint inside. You don’t have to, you know. It’s all part of the McKinley service.”

“I’m not doing you any favors. I’m trying to save on labor costs.”

“So you’re not using the activity to work off your...frustration?”

She turned on him. The angle gave KD a front-row view of her tight white tank top where it stretched across her still heaving chest. The material was damp with her sweat and he could clearly make out the shape of a white sports bra. Hell, he really needed a cool drink. His mouth felt like he’d swallowed a bucket of dry sand.

"The only thing that frustrates me, KD, is your cocky attitude. Just because I let you kiss me."

"Which you enjoyed."

"Which I *enjoyed*," she conceded through gritted teeth. He had to give her credit for honesty. "It doesn't mean anything has changed. You are my employee. You work for me, nothing more."

"Well, that is a fact. So tell me, boss lady, just what is it you want from the hired help?"

KD didn't know why he had such an incurable urge to needle her. Perhaps the return of her haughty demeanor, while not unexpected, sideswiped his male pride nonetheless. Had some small part of him hoped that she would be as warm and cozy this morning as she'd been over dinner the other night? That she'd be less able to resist his charms, such as they were, because she'd almost come apart in his arms?

Maybe it came down to nothing more than sheer sexual frustration. Despite his teasing her about having too much pent-up energy, he had to be the one suffering the most. He was feeling somewhat raw and frayed at the edges from imagining Kelsey Simmons in all sorts of wicked scenarios and having no outlet, so far, to make use of his mental inventiveness.

"What I want is for us to maintain a professional relationship while you're working for me. I think this type of flirting steps over the line."

KD couldn't help but smile at the glimmer of hope she had unwittingly presented him. "Right, while I'm working for you, I promise I'll keep the flirting to a bare minimum."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"And I start work"—KD consulted his watch—"in twenty-five minutes. Whatever will you allow me to get up to until eight o'clock?"

She let out a sound of frustration and stormed up the stairs. "Just when I think you're almost human, KD McKinley, you do something so darned irritating I could hit you."

KD followed her, watching in fascination as she began a series of stretches. She rested her sneakered foot on the verandah railing and

brought her forehead to her knee as she spoke. "I mean, you can't seriously tell me this format of yours really works with women."

"I'm not working on a format here," KD replied distractedly. She was bent at the waist, holding her ankles while her ponytail brushed the planking. Her legs seemed impossibly long for such a petite woman, her calves well-shaped and her thighs slender and smooth.

"Well, perhaps you ought to get one, and fast. Not for my sake, you understand. But if you don't think of a better way to charm the ladies I'd be concerned for *your* frustration levels." She straightened and placed one hand flat on her back between her shoulder blades, holding the elbow of that arm steady with her other hand. The stretch caused her magnificent breasts to jut toward him through her tank top, just begging to be touched.

It was some time before he noticed she'd momentarily ceased her diatribe. "Hmmm?"

"I was talking about your frustration levels, KD. Which—if what I felt when you kissed me the other night is any indication—I'm guessing are pretty high." She finished that sexy-as-hell stretch and put her hands on her curvy hips as she moved toward him. "Now, why would you want to hang around me being all frustrated, when, as I already told you, I'm never going to sleep with you?"

There was something of the uppity know-it-all in her expression and it hit KD that she knew exactly what kind of effect her little stretch and wiggle show had on him. His jeans had grown so tight he thought they were constricting his breath. Then he realized Kelsey's nearness was doing that.

"Maybe I'm in the mood for a challenge," KD told her when he found his voice. A half-truth. She was a challenge alright; one KD, to his surprise, was enjoying. But the whole truth was that he just didn't have much choice. He wanted Kelsey more than he had ever wanted another woman and he had the feeling that he wasn't going to be satisfied until he had her.

Something flickered in her eyes. KD couldn't read it, but he suspected she was a little afraid she wouldn't win this battle.

But when she spoke her voice was cavalier. "Suit yourself. I'm not going to stand here all morning trying to prove you're wasting your time. You'll figure that out soon enough. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to shower and get to work."

She spun on her heel and strode into the house, cute little nose high in the air. A grin spread across KD's face as he watched her go. Man, she was going all out to project that haughty exterior. He was beginning to sense she used it to conceal some seriously hot emotions. Why try so damned hard to put him off if nothing simmered beneath her cool surface?

Time. He just had to give her some time. He could do that. He wasn't an impatient man.

The sound of the shower running drifted out to where he stood. The morning sounds of birds singing in the trees were drowned out by that noise. The vivid mental pictures it conjured—Kelsey stepping into that shower, being sluiced by the wet spray, her skin glistening and soft...

For the first time KD wondered how his patience was going to fare under the Kelsey Simmons assault.

* * *

The following morning Kelsey got company on her morning jog.

She almost tripped over her own feet when KD fell into step beside her, his longer legs covering the ground with greater ease than her own. "What are you doing here?" she demanded without stopping. She'd be damned if the man was going to spoil her morning fitness ritual.

"Jogging?" He smiled at her, his teeth impossibly white against the morning shadow of his beard.

"Very funny." Kelsey did her best to pretend he wasn't there, but the sound of his deep, even breathing and the solid *thwack* of his footfalls proved distracting. As did the sheen of sweat plastering the light dusting

of dark auburn hair to his well-toned legs. She picked up her pace marginally. KD remained level with her. She moved from a jog into a near sprint, but still he kept up with that loping pace that seemed effortless.

What gave him the right to be so fit? She was the one who jogged almost every morning. He should be lost in her dust! But no matter how fast she went, KD had no difficulty keeping up. He ran beside her all the way to her house and proceeded to do stretches with her.

“Spare a glass of water for a thirsty man?”

“No.”

“Coffee then?”

“No, I will not spare a cup of coffee. Can’t you tell I’ve been ignoring you?”

“Yeah, but I figure it can’t last forever.”

Forever was not a word he had a right to use in any context. Not with her. “Try me.”

A wicked grin appeared at her choice of words. His gaze flickered over her in open appraisal. “Don’t you tease me like that, sugar.”

Kelsey experienced an electric charge at the look he raked over her. Goose bumps erupted all over her sweat-damp skin. Oh, how she wished she could fire his sorry butt.

But she couldn’t do that to Frank. He was out of the hospital now, his recovery at home going well from all accounts. She didn’t want to risk upsetting him. And she still wanted her renovations done, and fast. From what she’d seen of KD’s work, he was the man for that task.

If only she could convince him carpentry was the only job she wanted him for.

First, she had to convince herself.

“In future, I’d prefer if you’d find somewhere else to jog.” She walked up the stairs to her front door, leaving him without his glass of water or so much as a smile.

He smiled though, making no attempt to hide the way he watched her ascent. When she turned to glare, he simply lifted his hand in a casual wave and jogged away.

She wasn't surprised when she encountered him again the following morning. But she absolutely *refused* to speak to him, afraid her heart was softening and that her voice would show it. She couldn't let him know she didn't detest him.

Didn't she? Kelsey had to think about that. He was actually considerate in many ways—like the other night when he'd washed up for her and made her coffee. He had enough charm to offset his macho cockiness—like when he'd insisted Stefan would have to be gay not to want to spend the night with her.

Not to mention the sight of him made her heart race, over and above the effect of exercise. Her sexual response wasn't his fault, but he was bearing the brunt of her self-recrimination. If it hadn't been for her attraction to him, they might have had a civil, even friendly, relationship.

But the attraction *was* there, despite her firm wish it wasn't. She'd taken an ice cold shower after yesterday's jog—not that it had done any good. She'd still felt hot and bothered when she'd reached her office, where not even the air conditioning had done much to cool her flushed skin. Every time she saw KD, she was reminded of how he'd kissed her. How it had felt to almost reach orgasm from the mere touch of his finger inside her. Each night it took a superhuman effort to banish the memories. And despite what she'd told him about *taking care* of her own frustrations, she had absolutely refused to do so with the image of KD McKinley's arrogantly grinning face on her mind.

That determination was starting to cause her actual physical pain.

They jogged in silence all the way to her house. This time he didn't follow her into the yard, but said, with that killer smile, "Thanks for the run," and continued on his way.

To Kelsey's despair, she was disappointed he hadn't tried to wrangle an invitation for coffee.

* * *

Late the following morning, Stefan phoned her at the office and invited her to lunch.

"I went ahead and reserved our usual table at The Central. Unless you'd prefer to eat at Rhonda's?"

"The Central is fine," Kelsey agreed eagerly. Stefan had been out of town for a few days, so she hadn't seen him since the night he had stood up her dinner invitation, the night KD had stayed and they had almost...

Again with KD McKinley. *Stop thinking about him.*

A few hours later, Kelsey walked the two blocks to the pub with a spring in her step. Stefan had called last weekend, effusively apologetic about letting her down on Friday night and full of promises about making it up to her when he returned from the urgent business trip that had pulled him away at short notice. Lunch with a man who tantalized her mind and promised her a future was just what the doctor ordered to help rid her of her persistent KD-related fantasies.

She found Stefan in the beer garden and returned his wave as she headed toward him. He stood as she approached, looking debonair in navy slacks and a crisp white shirt with a pale blue tie. The heat of late spring had forced him to shuck his jacket, something he rarely did.

Kelsey appreciated the more casual look and said so as she gave him a kiss on the cheek and took her seat across from him.

She wasn't surprised to see him blush. Stefan wasn't all that comfortable with compliments on his physical appearance, a proclivity hinting at an innate modesty she thought rather sweet. Certainly preferable to a man who brashly told a woman he was going to take her to bed whether she agreed or not, who all but told her she needed to get laid and had the temerity to suggest he was the best man for the job.

Yes. Stefan's gentlemanly ways were much preferable to *that*.

"I went ahead and ordered you the chicken salad. Would you like a Chardonnay to go with it?"

Kelsey was momentarily taken aback. Stefan had never ordered for her before. “Actually, I was thinking of having a steak today.” She hadn’t thought of what she would eat ahead of time. But she *was* starving.

“You never have a steak at lunch.” Stefan’s shocked look would have been comical had Kelsey not felt a niggles of annoyance.

“I’m not always so very predictable, am I?”

“No, it’s just that you usually watch your figure.”

She sent him the type of stare she ordinarily reserved for the likes of KD. “Are you saying I *should* be watching my weight?”

“No!” Stefan immediately denied, flushing a deeper shade of crimson. “Of course I didn’t mean that. You have a lovely body.”

One he apparently couldn’t stand to look at, if the way he avoided doing so was any indication. Clearing his throat, he glanced past her shoulder until he located a waitress and signaled her over. Kelsey changed her order to a medium rare rump steak with mushroom sauce. In a little rebellious move her hips might not thank her for, she asked for the garlic mashed potato on the side, with an extra dollop of butter.

She also ordered a glass of Chardonnay and asked Stefan about his business trip. She half-finished the wine and started on her steak before he got through replying.

“Kelsey, I’m sorry about before. What I said about your figure. You’re not still mad at me, are you?”

Kelsey sighed. He seemed genuinely contrite. “No, I don’t care about that.” She had been more stung by his capacity to so effortlessly keep his eyes on anything but her. Frustration at the way he seemed to flounder whenever she turned the conversation to anything seriously approaching a relationship discussion had her blurting, “Where do you suppose this relationship is going, Stefan?”

He gaped at her. “Going?”

Kelsey quelled the urge to roll her eyes. “Yes, going. I deserve to know if you’re serious about me. If you intend to take things...further than they are now.”

“Oh.” He wasn’t blushing anymore. In fact, he looked so pale Kelsey wondered if she should offer him a glass of water. “Is this because I didn’t make it to dinner last week?”

“Partly.”

“I told you it was business. But I know I should have spoken to you in person, not left a message on your machine. I’m sorry if you went to any trouble.”

“It’s not about the steaks, Stefan.” They hadn’t gone to waste. Kelsey pushed aside the reminder of that night. “I sometimes get the impression you don’t really want to spend time with me.”

God, why couldn’t she just say exactly what was on her mind? *I want you to bonk my brains out and I’m starting to think you don’t want to.* She had to smother a perverse chuckle. If Stefan was flabbergasted at her ordering steak for lunch, using such crass language might kill him stone dead on the spot.

“That’s not true, Kelsey,” he said, fervently enough that she felt a little better. “I really did have to go out of town, but I suppose I was also a little bit nervous.”

“Nervous?”

His blush returned and he smiled shyly. “We’ve never been alone together in your house.”

Kelsey stared. He was worried about being alone with her? Surely, men didn’t get anxious about such things. It was women who placed such high expectations on themselves, who fretted about what men thought of their flabby bits, their cellulite, their performance as a sex kitten.

Apparently, her assumptions had been wrong. The thought that Stefan was apprehensive about sleeping with her made her attitude toward him soften.

“I was thinking about asking you to come to the coast with me Friday night. There’s a place in Mooloolaba that has great seafood and...dancing. If you’d like to join me, that is.”

Seafood was great. Kelsey loved seafood. Dancing was even better. Stefan would have to hold her in his arms. And the place sounded upmarket. She could wear her red dress.

Stefan wanted to move things along as much as she did. He was just a bit more cautious than she was used to, that's all.

Unlike KD.

She pushed all thought of that particular man aside and sent Stefan a beaming smile. "I'd love to join you. It's a date."

Chapter Five

“So when am I going to get to see the work you’re doing on Kelsey’s house?”

Frank’s question made KD turn from where he was boiling the jug for his morning coffee. Before he could reply, his mother looked up from her crossword and gave her husband a sharp look. “What kind of a silly question is that, Frank Brevan? You’re not going anywhere near that place.”

“I just want to see what KD’s doing. No harm in that.”

Laura McKinley-Brevan scoffed loudly. “I know you. You wouldn’t be able to resist picking up a hammer and trying to do something. You know what the doctor said.”

“Yes, yes, no strenuous activity. It never stops you from arguing with me. Now *that’s* a strenuous activity. Ever think of that?”

KD tuned out his parents’ bickering with a faint smile and spooned instant coffee into his mug. His mother was right. No way would Frank be able to stop himself getting involved in the project. And Kelsey’s place had all those steps leading up the front door. He didn’t like the idea of Frank climbing them.

By the time KD made his coffee and took a seat at the head of the small kitchen table, Frank had given up the idea of going to the job site. With a heavy sigh, he asked his wife, “At least let the boy tell me where he’s up to, will you?”

His mother slid a glance toward KD and lifted a shoulder. “By all means.”

“Work’s going well.” KD pictured Kelsey’s master bedroom in his mind as he outlined what had been done.

The French doors looked great framing the view of the leafy fig tree in the yard. The walls were clean and covered with undercoat, awaiting Kelsey’s final decision on paint color. The doorframe he’d built between the bedroom and bathroom had now been fitted with the sliding, frosted glass door Kelsey had picked out of a catalogue.

At first he’d thought she was nuts, suggesting frosted glass. He thought it would spoil the historic effect of the room. The door’s timber edging made it blend in, the glass adding a unique touch that gave the impression of space. You could just make out the shadow of the clawfoot tub in the bathroom and his mind’s eye usually added the detail of Kelsey stripping off her robe and stepping into the steamy water. Her hair would be tied up so a few dark tendrils fell against her neck. Her breasts would be full and perky, slippery from the soap as she lathered herself—

“What about the skirting boards?”

Frank’s question brought KD back to the present. Jeez, he hoped he hadn’t given away the direction of his thoughts. His imagination had taken on a life of its own lately. “I’m replacing those today. And I’ll undercoat the rest of the walls.”

“Another busy day,” his mother commented. “I’m surprised you have the energy to take up jogging in the mornings.”

She kept her attention on the crossword, yet KD wasn’t lulled into a sense of security by his mother’s apparently casual remark. The woman was shrewd. Getting away with anything, even as a teenager in a busy mining town, had been impossible.

Escaping her scrutiny in small town Holly Hill? Forget it.

Still, KD shrugged nonchalantly. “I thought you’d be happy I’m keeping fit.”

“Oh, I’m happy. I don’t want you to end up with Frank’s health problems.” Frank rolled his eyes for KD’s benefit. “Seems going on a

health kick is the in thing these days. You're not the only person in town who enjoys a morning jog."

"You don't say?"

"Hmm." Finally raising her eyes from the newspaper, his mother fixed him with a pale blue gaze. "I hear Kelsey Simmons is quite the devotee."

"The girl would have to do something to work off all those sweet baked goods."

The wistful look on Frank's face drew a scowl from Laura. "Seems she gives all those away rather than eat them herself. To beggars and thieves."

"You're an unforgiving woman, Laura."

"Anyway," his mother said on a lengthy sigh. "Shirley tells me Kelsey was spotted jogging with someone yesterday morning. She seemed to think this someone looked a lot like you."

"Is that right?" KD replied with deliberate ambiguity. Shit. There was nothing his mother would love more than for him to find a reason to settle down in a little house within driving distance of hers. Much as she said she respected his choice to travel and live a no-ties kind of life, she had never made a secret of her wish to see him more often than annually.

If she thought Kelsey could do something to make that happen, she had another think coming. But what could he say? What was between him and Kelsey was purely sex and, once they both gave in to their cravings and got it out of their systems, he'd be ready to move on to the next construction job without one regret. He could hardly tell his mother that.

So he opted for evasion. He downed the last of his coffee in one gulp that nearly scalded his throat and stood. "I ought to get my stuff together and head out." He could hardly go jogging now. His mother must have her spies on surveillance duty and he didn't want to encourage her I-wish-my-son-would-settle-down thinking.

It was probably a good thing. The jogging was killing him. Those itchy-bitsy running shorts of Kelsey's and those tight, little tank tops that

accentuated her fantastic set of tits. The determined, focused look she got on her face when she tried to make sure he didn't best her. It had driven him crazy for three mornings, so crazy with lust he wondered why he kept coming back for more.

He really had to get her into bed, and soon. Then she would be out of his system and he wouldn't have to jog with her or be disappointed when he didn't get to.

"Alright, hon," his mother said in a singsong voice. "Can you help me think of a four-letter word for *infatuation*?"

Lust. But that wasn't the four-letter word beginning with L his mother was hoping he'd say.

With a shake of his head, he gave her a you're-a-crazy-old-woman look. "Goodbye, Ma." He sauntered out the door.

* * *

Later that day, KD pulled into a parking space right outside Simmons Realty. The storefront looked newly painted and inviting, the window filled with snapshots of local properties for sale and rent. Kelsey's name was etched in gold on the glass door and when he pushed it open an old-fashioned bell gave a jaunty ring.

A girl looked up from behind a short reception desk. She appeared to be in her early twenties and had jet black hair springing out like a fountain from a hairband atop her head. "Welcome to Simmons Realty. Are you a renter, buyer or browser?"

The question took KD aback. What was he supposed to answer? *I had to make a trip into the hardware store and I couldn't resist swinging by because I missed seeing your boss's face this morning?* Jeez.

At length he said, a twist on the truth, "Browser."

Bright purple-painted lips drew back over uneven teeth. "Great! See, I'm working on a new greeting. This way I know straight away that you're not looking to buy right now or rent, and so I won't hound you with questions or anything."

“Great. I appreciate it.”

“Not that I normally hound people. But Kelsey, I mean Miss Simmons, is kind of showing me the ropes when it comes to real estate. I don’t want to be a receptionist forever. Not that there’s anything *wrong* with being a receptionist. Miss Simmons is a fantastic boss, when she’s not being too...” The girl made a face KD supposed he was meant to understand.

“Too what?”

“You know. Straight as an arrow. I ran the greeting idea past her, but she didn’t like it. I think it’s really working for me though.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” KD said, mesmerized by the girl—he read her nametag—Donna’s inane chatter. He had to shake himself before he could ask, “Is Miss Simmons here?”

The sound of Kelsey’s voice came out from behind a glass partition that walled off the blue-painted reception area from her office. “No, Tash, monsters do not live in little girls’ cupboards. Your brother should never have told you that. You two just sit there and finish your coloring in, okay?”

There was an answering duet of *Yes, Auntie Kelseys* before Kelsey emerged carrying a manila folder. “Okay, Donna, I need you to enter this correspondence into the—”

She froze mid-sentence when she saw him. “Oh...hello.”

“Hi there.”

From behind the smoked glass a high-pitched wail sounded. “Ouch! Thom—as! Auntie Kelsey, Thomas is pinching me again!”

Looking uncharacteristically flustered, Kelsey stuck her head around the partition. “I really don’t want to have to tell your mother you’ve misbehaved, Thomas. Stop pinching your sister.”

“They sound like quite a handful,” KD observed when she turned back. “Something you haven’t told me about?”

“What? Oh, no.” She made a sound that was almost a laugh, her gaze sticking to some apparently fascinating spot behind his left arm. “I’m

watching Gabby's kids while she's at the doctor for a checkup." She brushed an imaginary speck of lint off her slimline navy skirt. "What can I do for you?"

He resisted the urge to make a teasing remark. She seemed jumpy, nervous, when she'd always come at him with all guns blazing. He felt the unfamiliar clutch of concern. "Are you okay?"

"Me? I'm fine. I'm just busy, that's all."

"She's real busy," Donna added as back up.

Kelsey turned, blinking as though she just remembered the girl's presence. "Oh. Donna, this is KD McKinley. This is my assistant Donna Leggins."

"Thom—as!"

"I didn't do anything!"

A little girl came running out of the office and clung to Kelsey's leg. The kid had a riot of blonde curls framing a pudgy-cheeked face, her expression the picture of distress. Kelsey's hand went down to smooth back the girl's hair. "It's alright, sweetheart. Boys are just awful sometimes and you have to learn to be strong."

Telling words if ever KD had heard any. He sensed there were secret hurts buried inside Kelsey and he wished that she would consider sharing them with him.

Which was weird. He'd never wanted to share a woman's sad stories before.

The little girl chewed on a thumb as she regarded him with wariness, her crying ceasing the moment she saw him. "Is he awful?"

To KD's relief, Kelsey said, "Of course not, Tash. This is Mr. McKinley, he's making my house nice and new." She flicked the necessary glance at him. "KD, this is Natasha—Tash for short. Her brother Thomas is hiding in my office."

Tash took her finger out of her mouth. "lo."

KD gave the girl a courtly nod. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance, ma'am."

“What’s a k-aint-ents?”

“It means I think you’re the cutest little lady in the whole town.”

Tash smiled bashfully and buried her head against Kelsey’s skirt. Thomas came out to join his sister tentatively, looking at KD with curiosity.

“Have you two finished your sandwiches?”

“Aw, Auntie Kelsey, I don’t like egg sandwiches.”

“Me, neither,” Tash agreed.

“But that’s all you have,” Kelsey insisted. “It’s either eat that or go hungry until dinnertime.”

KD had hoped for a moment or two alone with Kelsey. He wanted the opportunity to kiss her again. So it was with some surprise that he found himself suggesting, “Why don’t I take you all out to lunch?”

The kids’ faces lit up like flashlights at KD’s suggestion and Kelsey was helpless to stem the flow of enthusiastic *Please, Auntie Kelseys*. She sent KD a withering look to which he just smiled with satisfaction at having two kids he’d just met already pushing his agenda.

“Alright, we’ll go to lunch with Mr. McKinley,” Kelsey assented, unable to summon the energy to argue. Darn the man, she hadn’t agreed just for the sake of the children either. Lunch with KD held an appeal she couldn’t deny.

Kelsey could hardly believe she was leaving the office unattended in the middle of the day. Not completely unattended. There was Donna.

Not exactly a confidence-inspiring thought.

She shouldn’t go to lunch with KD, she thought, even as she followed him out onto the street. Especially since meeting his eyes was proving rather difficult. Last night she’d had a particularly...vivid dream of which he was the star and it was still uncomfortably forefront in her mind. When she had seen him standing in her office, she had alternated rapidly between wanting to jump all over his solid, manly self and wishing the floor would open up and swallow her.

She fought those same conflicting urges now as he pushed open the glass door of Rhonda's and waited for her and the kids to pass by him. His body heat engulfed her and he gave her a glance that said he wished she were on the menu, instead of the café's usual range of sandwiches and cakes. "What'll you have?" he asked as they found a table and sat. "My treat—anything you want."

The cheeky double meaning in his offer was unmistakable, but he sent her one of his slow smiles just to make sure she understood. Kelsey's mouth watered, and not from hunger for food. With an effort she pulled her gaze away from his.

She ordered a Caesar salad and a black coffee, the kids both wanted cheese on toast and KD asked for a steak sandwich. Kelsey's eyes roamed the café's interior as though it held great fascination, although she had seen the rainforest mural that stretched expansively across one wall at least four hundred times. The native timber dining settings complemented the myriad of greens and browns in the artwork and gave the café a rustic character Kelsey had always liked.

Incredibly, the kids were on their best behavior and sat in their chairs without having to be told repeatedly. KD's presence had them in thrall; Thomas felt the need to act exceedingly mature and Tash had someone to fire her endless questions at.

"Why are you so big?" she asked.

"Just the way I was made, kiddo."

"How *old* are you?"

KD smiled at her emphasis on the word *old*. His tone turned very serious. "I'm *twenty-seven*."

"Auntie Kelsey's almost *thirty*," Thomas informed him.

"Thank you very much, Thomas," Kelsey said wryly. She hadn't realized KD's age. Not that it mattered. These days, women went out with younger men all the time and three years hardly constituted a generation gap.

None of which had any relevance, because she was *not* going out with him. This didn't count because they had the kids with them.

A discussion about ages, involving much counting off on fingers, and about birthdays and presents ensued. Afterward Tash continued her line of questioning until the young waitress delivered their orders. The girl's name was Rachel, according to her nametag, and she gave KD a sparkling smile as she delivered his steak sandwich. Kelsey spent the next few minutes trying to iron the stubborn scowl from her forehead by concentrating on her salad.

KD answered all Tash's queries with patient inventiveness. Until she asked the showstopper.

"What's sex?"

Kelsey's mouth fell open and KD had to hide his mirth behind his steak sandwich. "Tash! That's not the kind of thing you should ask Mr. McKinley."

"You and Mummy were saying it the other day! You were whispering. Mummy said you needed some of it and you said something I didn't hear. And then Mummy told you to shush, like she does to me when she's on the phone, and she asked if I wanted a sandwich and I said yes and she made me cheese and tomato sauce. I like cheese and tomato sauce."

Kelsey felt KD's sidelong smirk and patently ignored his presence, fighting the urge to slide under the table and hide. "Ask your Mummy to tell you what it means later," Kelsey instructed, in a tone she hoped would put an end to the matter.

But Kelsey didn't have as much experience with "the tone" as Gabby and her attempt at censure fell on deaf little ears. "I did. She said that I was too little to un'erstan'. But I'm four." She held up four emphatic fingers to prove her point.

Thomas snickered. "Sex is how come Mummy's having another baby. Dad told me."

"Is that true, Auntie Kelsey?" Tash's eyes widened like saucers full of liquid toffee.

Oh, brother. KD was too busy chuckling into his sandwich to save her and Kelsey could see neither of the kids dropping the subject until they got an answer. She sighed. "Sex," she found herself whispering to

ensure none of the other café patrons would overhear, “is how two people who love each other make a baby, if they want to. After they get married,” she added hurriedly, thinking Gabby might approve of that addendum. She thought of another. “After they’ve known each other a very, very long time, like your Mum and Dad.”

Phew. She’d made it out relatively unscathed. If you didn’t count being humiliated in front of KD, her secret fantasy man.

“Is that how come you don’t have babies, Auntie Kelsey? Don’t you have sex?”

Damn. KD’s laughter changed from a smothered chuckle to a near silent shudder of the shoulders.

Kelsey could think of no response that wasn’t mortifying, so she pushed a piece of cheesy toast into Tash’s open mouth. “Just be quiet and finish your lunch.”

When the kids were happily eating again, KD leaned over so his lips almost touched Kelsey’s ear. The heat from his breath sent warm shivers down her neck. “Nicely handled. Maybe you could teach me a thing or two as well.”

Kelsey drew an uneven breath, forcing an offhand tone. “Oh, I doubt it.”

“Anytime you want to put an end to your ah...drought, you just let me know, sugar.”

Kelsey went back to nibbling at her salad. Allowing KD to take her and the kids for lunch had been a big mistake. The difficulty of answering a four-year-old’s curiosity about adult issues convinced her of that. But Kelsey also admired the way KD had deftly handled Tash’s questions, despite what she assumed was a lack of experience. But what did she know? Maybe he had been around children a lot.

Either that or he had a natural talent. Kelsey had to force herself to remember KD was not father material. Staying here in Holly Hill and settling down with her didn’t top his to-do list. Marriage and white picket fences were an anathema to him.

Dear Lord, did she want that? Kelsey had to admit that if KD showed any signs of being a settling down type of man...

Relief filled her when they all finished their food and stood to leave. The direction of her thoughts frightened her.

The heat of the midday sun shining from a clear blue sky warmed her through her blouse and Kelsey was glad she had decided not to wear her jacket. She was just about to thank KD for lunch in the hope that he would get the hint and leave, when both Tash and Thomas raced ahead to press their faces to the window of the small toy store beside Rhonda's, leaving the two of them relatively alone.

"Lunch was nice." She reluctantly turned toward KD. "The kids really enjoyed themselves."

"Did you?"

Looking into his deep blue eyes, his features shadowed by the brim of his hat, Kelsey answered honestly. "Yes. At least until Tash decided it was time for the birds and the bees talk."

"You handled it well. You're good with them."

So are you, Kelsey thought, and was infinitely glad she hadn't blurted the words aloud.

They stood facing each other, unmoving, while the door to Rhonda's opened and a young couple walked past them. From the road, a car horn honked in greeting, yet neither of them broke eye contact.

Despite her fear of her own reactions, Kelsey couldn't deny his nearness affected her. Her response was unbidden and unstoppable. Her heart raced as he stood looking down at her, a wealth of promise in his heated gaze. He wouldn't kiss her in such a public place, but she knew with certainty that he wished he could. She was drawn to him by that magnetic force once again.

KD felt himself melt at the sheer vulnerability in Kelsey's expression. For a change her brown-eyed gaze hid none of her true feelings, revealing emotions she still refused to voice.

She wanted him as much as he wanted her.

From what seemed like far away he could hear Thomas say, “Hullo, Mr. Henley.” Kelsey must have heard, too, for she blinked, her eyes widening, and the tenuous connection snapped like a dry and fragile twig.

“Stefan!” Kelsey exclaimed over-brightly and stepped about three feet away from KD.

KD turned and saw *him*. The legendary Stefan. The kids went back to staring in a nearby shop window.

And *her* hands were clutching the front of Stefan’s suit jacket, as though he were a life raft, her face turned up in a very damsel-in-distress-like expression.

“Stefan, I was just having lunch with...someone,” Kelsey explained in breathless haste.

Someone?

“KD McKinley.” KD stepped forward and offered his hand, if for no other reason than the guy had to release Kelsey to shake it.

His shake was firm, lasting a measured two seconds, as though he had taken courses in handshaking-to-impress. He was a good-looking guy, KD supposed, and maybe just a few years older than Kelsey. His blond hair, gray eyes and symmetrically featured face might have belonged to anyone, they so lacked distinctiveness. His smile was brief and perfunctory. “Of course, Laura Brevan’s son.”

“Mr. McKinley is doing the work on my house in Frank’s place. I told you about it,” Kelsey further explained.

KD cast her a curious look at the *Mr. McKinley* title, but she merely tilted her chin and avoided his eyes.

“Oh yes. How is Frank? I’ve heard he’s recovering well at home now.”

KD forced himself to answer. “As well as you’d expect, yeah.”

KD endured the rest of Henley’s appropriate list of questions, all the while keeping an eye on Kelsey or, more precisely, the way she stood. Up close to his side and cozy, like a lover.

Jeez, they hadn't, had they? He was pretty sure he'd been right the other night when he had picked up on the fact Kelsey hadn't slept with Mr. Perfect yet and she hadn't denied it. But that had been a week ago. Maybe the situation had changed.

The thought made his stomach roil. A feeling that only got worse at Kelsey's next, breathily issued question to the other guy.

"We're still on for tonight, aren't we, honey?"

Chapter Six

The question sharpened KD's focus, the endearment cutting at him like a scythe. The fact that it came out of Kelsey's mouth, not the boyfriend's, made it worse.

Stefan reacted as well, with an expression of complete and utter perplexity. "Of course. If you still want to."

"Dinner and dancing at a beachside restaurant with the handsomest man in Holly Hill? Of course I still want to!"

It was the other guy's bewildered aspect as much as Kelsey's effusive tone that made KD sure she had announced their evening plans with such singular ebullience for his benefit. The urge to lift Kelsey up, toss her over his shoulder and carry her off down the street almost overwhelmed him. This guy wasn't right for her.

But when Kelsey left, it was with the other guy. Of course, she would want *him* to walk her back to the office. Mr. Appropriate.

Reluctantly, KD stepped aside so the two of them could pass, though he didn't give Kelsey a lot of room. Maybe subconsciously he wanted to get a whiff of her perfume, to make it impossible for her to proceed without looking at him again.

When she did, it was only to glare heatedly, her jaw set as she tip-tapped by. Accidentally-on-purpose stamping on his booted foot with a two-inch heel as she did so. KD stifled a grunt of pain, at which Kelsey smiled sweetly. With altogether too much sincerity, she said, "Sorry." Then she carried on her determined way down the street, alongside Stefan Henley and away from KD.

“Bye-bye, Mr. Mekinney.” Tash’s little girl voice managed to drag his attention away from Kelsey’s retreating form. Her big brown eyes stared up at him expectantly, salving his emotional bruises somewhat.

“You can call me KD, short stuff.” He smiled.

Tash gave him a smile that dimpled her chubby little cheeks. “Bye-bye, Mr. KD.” She skipped off after Kelsey.

At least he’d won over one girl’s heart today.

* * *

Less than half an hour later, Kelsey helped Gabby pile the kids into the red station wagon. She was still thanking heaven she’d come to her senses and not kissed KD in full view of the diners at Rhonda’s, and Stefan.

Once the children were safely tucked inside, Kelsey pulled her friend aside. “I think I ought to tell you something. About Tash.”

“My God, what? She didn’t break anything, did she?”

“No, no. She’s fine. It’s just that she asked a couple of questions about”—Kelsey glanced at the kids, but they were playing Thomas’s Game Boy—“sex.”

Gabby groaned. “Not again. She’s been asking questions ever since she walked in on us talking about hunky handyman the other day.”

“We were not talking about hunky—I mean KD. *You* talked and I ignored you.”

“Whatever. She picked up on all the whispering and thinks there’s something she needs to know, and right now. So, what did she ask you?”

“Actually, it wasn’t me she asked.” Kelsey bit her lip. “It was KD.”

“KD?”

“He dropped by the office and offered to take me and the kids to lunch. The kids got so excited I couldn’t say no.”

“Did you get excited?”

“Gabby.”

“Just curious.” Gabby smiled unrepentantly. “I mean he’s dropping by, taking you to lunch...”

“He wanted to talk about the renovations,” Kelsey said, although they hadn’t discussed her house for even a minute.

“Uh-huh. Sure. That’s why you went bright red as soon as you mentioned his name.”

“I went bright red because your daughter asked him what sex was right in the middle of lunch!”

“And if you had no interest in him that way, you wouldn’t give a hoot.”

Kelsey growled in frustration. “For the last time, I don’t want to have a fling with him before I settle down. If you must know, I’m embarrassed because...oh, nothing.”

“Nothing, my butt. What is it?”

“I, uh, had a dream last night.”

“A dream?” Gabby took a second look at her and gasped. “You mean a sex dream?”

Kelsey pursed her lips. “Something like that.”

Gabby fairly squealed with delight. “I knew it! I knew you had a thing for him. Is he interested in you? What am I saying? You’d only have to crook your finger and he’d be yours.”

“Hardly,” Kelsey denied with a derisive twist of her lips. “It hasn’t exactly worked with Stefan, has it?”

Gabby waved a dismissive hand. “Stefan, schmefan. Tell me about KD. Has he given you any signals? You know, that he’s interested?”

It was way too late to get out of telling Gabby everything now. Kelsey rested her weight against the car, feeling some of the pent-up stress leave her body. It could only do her good to get it off her chest, notwithstanding the hours of ribbing that would surely ensue. “I told you KD stayed for dinner last Friday night.” She’d downplayed the significance of the evening. “Well, I didn’t tell you he kissed me after.”

Kelsey thought Gabby might hyperventilate. “Was it good?”

Kelsey's eyes fluttered closed on a sigh as she remembered that kiss, the sound being matched by Gabby as she sank against the car. "Oh, it was *that* good."

"Hmm. And this week I can't go for my jog without 'running into' him. He flirts outrageously and tries to get invited in. At least he did for three days in a row, until today." Kelsey didn't like the way that last tidbit came out sounding disgruntled. As though she'd missed him. *Not the case*. This morning she'd had a nice, pleasant run on her own and she'd loved every minute of it. "He says he wants me and he's going to be around when I come around, or something like that."

"Oh Lordy me," Gabby breathed. "What a guy."

"What a guy? He's openly pursuing me, Gab, even though I've told him how serious I am about Stefan. He has no manners. No honor."

Even as she said the words, they didn't ring true. KD had been courteous and mannerly in inviting the children to lunch, even if he did have a hidden agenda. He had come back to her, humble pie in hand, asking for the renovation job for his stepfather's sake, when it must have nearly choked him. He had been honest with her about his feelings from the start. And he was a fantastic carpenter. The way he worked with timber, creating something unique and specialized out of natural materials, seemed almost noble.

God, could the stars in her eyes get any brighter? Over a half-assed cowboy who indulged in casual sex with whomever he wanted, whenever he wanted. The fact she had a boyfriend didn't deter him in the slightest. Nothing noble about that.

"Yes, he's pursuing you," Gabby agreed, sending her a small smile. "Isn't it nice for a change?"

"Mu-um! I'm thirsty."

Gabby turned to address Thomas. "There's water in my bag."

"I don't want water. I want Coke."

"Well, you can't have Coke." With a groan she turned back to Kelsey. "I have to go. Will you please, *please* keep me posted on your love life

from now on? It's no time to shut me out, just when things are getting interesting."

"Sure, sure. But there won't be anything else to tell, not where KD is concerned. I'm going out with Stefan tonight, remember. And I'll wear the dress."

Gabby looked at her, a thoughtful expression on her face. "Maybe you should forget about 'operation seduction'."

"This from the woman who proposed the idea in the first place?"

"The best laid plans have been known to go astray," she quoted. Walking to the driver's side of the car, she opened the door, but turned back to Kelsey before she got behind the wheel. "I just want you to do what makes you happy, Kels. What feels right."

"That's Stefan."

"I didn't say what looks good on paper, what seems like it might work because it makes sense. I said what *feels* right, now. Will you just think about that when you're with Stefan tonight?"

* * *

I said what feels right.

Gabby's statement still bounced around in Kelsey's head later that night as she sat across the elegant table at Riley's Seafood and picked at her meal. The arrangement of seafood, crusty breads and gourmet salad on her plate looked heavenly, but Kelsey barely noticed the delicious flavors, or the well-played Latin music.

All she could do was think of what Gabby had said and try to find something about the evening that felt right.

"Didn't the platter meet your expectations?"

Stefan's query made her look at him. One thing that wasn't right—the way he spoke. He always had an air of professionalism, even when they were supposed to be on a hot date. Did the platter not meet her *expectations*?

Kelsey wanted to say *screw the platter! Nothing about this evening meets my expectations!* But she forced a wan smile. "I'm getting really full."

"Ah. How about a dance to work off those calories?"

Another thing. Where did Stefan get off talking about calories to her? First, that crack about her watching her figure the other day, now this. Okay, so she could stand to lose a few pounds, but he shouldn't point it out. He should tell her she was a hot little biscuit just the way she was.

"A dance would be nice." She took Stefan's hand and allowed him to help her stand. She had come here to be wined and dined and danced by the man. Not to find fault with everything he did.

But once she was swaying in his arms, Kelsey grew irritated once again. Stefan had noticed her red dress. His eyes kept straying to her cleavage. But it was also clear he was uncomfortable with her wearing it in such a public place. He kept glancing around at the other dancing couples, particularly the other men. Several cast appreciative glances her way when their partners weren't watching and each time Stefan acted like he wanted to bolt from the building. Irrational jealousy would have been better than his embarrassment.

And, although he was a wonderful dancer, he held her stiffly, as though afraid for his body to make any contact with hers. When Kelsey moved a fraction closer, allowing her breasts to brush against his chest, Stefan nearly jumped out of his skin.

It was the last straw. With a sigh, she stepped out of Stefan's arms just as the song finished. "I have a headache, Stefan. Would you mind taking me home early?"

"Of course not." No, of course he wouldn't, thought Kelsey as she walked beside him out of the restaurant. He fairly leapt at the chance to get rid of her.

The half-hour drive back to Holly Hill was thick with silence. Gabby had been right. If things didn't feel right with Stefan now, how would that ever change in future? She'd thought he had all the qualities she could ever want in a man, but she'd forgotten to consider the most important

one. Chemistry. They really had none. He was attractive and polite and dedicated and nice, and Kelsey liked him. But that was it. She didn't love him now, nor did she think any longer that she would learn to love him with time.

She had made a huge mistake. Stefan Henley was too timid. So easily flustered Kelsey was afraid to speak her mind.

She never had that problem with KD and, though it meant they had a tendency to argue, her ability to be honest with him felt *right*.

Every rational thought told her KD was all wrong, yet something about the way they fit together felt natural in a way it never had with Stefan.

Kelsey was relieved when Stefan pulled his car into her driveway. She wanted nothing more than to lock herself inside and lick her emotional wounds. "Thank you for the evening, Stefan."

He stopped her as she moved to alight. "Wait, Kelsey...aren't you going to invite me in?"

Oh brother. Surely Stefan hadn't mistaken how badly their date had gone? "I'm sorry, Stefan."

"If I didn't say before... You really do look beautiful tonight, Kelsey."

Poor Stefan. He looked as perplexed as he might over the Sunday crossword puzzle. Feeling a tug of regret for how things were ending, Kelsey smiled and leaned forward to press her lips to his cheek.

She was just about to say goodnight and escape when his arms slid around her with lightning speed. He pulled her across the handbrake and flush against his chest. His mouth covered hers before she could say a word.

All Kelsey could think was *tongue. Way too much tongue.* And hands. His hands were suddenly urgent with grabbiness. Was grabbiness a word? Oh Lord, she was being swallowed by a giant squid.

Eventually, Kelsey wormed her arms between their bodies and pushed against Stefan's chest until he tore his lips from hers. "Stefan, what are you doing?"

"I'm sorry to be so clumsy," he said, breathing hard. "I'm just overcome. You're a very exciting woman."

He moved forward, about to kiss her again. She turned her head to the side, just managing to avoid the contact. "Stefan, please! I don't want you to kiss me."

Stefan pulled back, as though she'd attacked him with a stun gun. He blinked, confused. Had he always been so easily bewildered? "I thought...you said the other day you wanted to take the relationship further. And the way you're dressed..."

"Is not an invitation to be mauled," Kelsey pointed out.

"Of course. I see I've misinterpreted. If you weren't ready, Kelsey, I wish you hadn't made it seem like you were."

Oh brother, brother! How was she to explain a change of heart she didn't understand herself? She didn't want to bring KD's name into it. This wasn't only about KD anyway. It was about her and her stupid ideas about what made the perfect relationship. Stefan wouldn't be the man for her if KD was in the picture or not. His presence only made the truth clearer. For that she had to be grateful.

"I'm sorry I've sent you mixed signals. I didn't mean to lead you on. I've just changed my mind about us. I don't think we should see each other anymore."

"I see."

He didn't see, not really. But his petulant profile told her a prolonged explanation wouldn't make things any clearer. With a sigh of regret, Kelsey said, "I think it's best I just go inside. I really am sorry, Stefan."

She heard his tires on the gravel as she dragged herself up the front steps. Then his car was gone and the night quietly wrapped itself around her as she stood on the front porch, staring at the crescent moon and thinking about what an idiot she was.

She had no idea how long she stood there before she finally turned to go inside. When she flipped on the hall light, an earsplitting pop drew a scream from Kelsey. Instinctively, she covered her head with her hands, then felt a little stupid when she realized the light bulb had just blown.

Great. Just what she needed.

Moving tentatively along the darkened hallway, she felt around for the switch in the next room. She flipped it on only to find that light wasn't working either. She must have blown a fuse or tripped the safety switch.

All the things she would dearly love to do right now required working electricity. Put on some soothing jazz. Boil the kettle for a cup of tea. Take a long, hot shower. She thought of the rust-coated, old fuse box located beneath the house in the storage area covered in dust and grime and cobwebs. The idea of the innumerable creatures flapping, slithering and crawling around down there made her shudder. Besides, she'd never had to change her own fuse. She had no idea how to do it.

If the end of their evening hadn't been such a humiliating disaster, Kelsey might have called Stefan and asked him to come help her. That was almost as repugnant as fighting the creepy crawlies. Gabby and Paul, exhausted from kid-care, pregnancy and a busy working life, routinely fell into bed by this time of night. So she should just leave the job until morning.

That decision made, Kelsey was shocked to find herself, moments later, scrolling through her mobile's phonebook to find a number she really shouldn't be dialing, and dialing it anyway.

KD answered on the third ring. The words that came out of her mouth couldn't have been more badly chosen.

"KD? It's Kelsey. I really need you."

That afternoon KD had decided, after being forced to watch Kelsey walk away with another man, one she had clearly telegraphed her intentions of getting intimate with, that he was done. He might have discovered a taste for masochism he hadn't been aware he possessed over the past couple of weeks, but a man had his limits. Time to forget about bedding Kelsey Simmons and find a woman willing to meet him halfway.

Four little words swept away all his resolve like dust in the wind. *I really need you.*

He didn't mean to go completely quiet on her, but his heart had leapt to his throat, strangling him. After a lengthy silence, she said, "I'm sorry to ring so late."

"S'okay." God, he sounded drunk. He'd had a couple of beers after dinner, but she was going to think he'd tied one on.

"It's just that I have no electricity. There was a big pop and the lights went out."

"Are you okay?" The thought that she might have been electrocuted caused a leap of panic before he realized she wouldn't be calling if she'd been badly injured. *Use your brain, McKinley.*

"I'm fine. I just don't know my way around that old fuse box downstairs and I really want..." She let out a nervous laugh. "This is so stupid. I shouldn't have bothered you."

"Kelsey?" he said when he thought she was about to hang up.

A heartbeat passed. "Yes?"

"Sit tight. I'll be there in five minutes."

His mother sat in the living room watching a Cary Grant movie and fitting pieces into Frank's jigsaw puzzle. Frank slept on the couch, oblivious. KD strode past them. "I've got to go out."

His mother demanded, in a predictably mother-like way, "Where?"

"Kelsey's blown a fuse. I'm going to go fix it for her."

She gave him a *look* through her eyelashes. "Of course. We can't leave the damsel alone in the dark."

Damn. He should have told her he was going to the pub for a nightcap and to pick up a floozy. Her censure he would have preferred to her pestering. "Quit it, Ma."

She smiled, a teasing glint in her eyes. "Should I just pretend I don't know what you're really going to see her for?"

"Yes." KD swiped his keys from the kitchen counter and headed out the door. "I'll see you later."

His mother's laugh followed him. "I won't wait up for you, hon."

Mothers. They thought they knew everything. He really was going to fix Kelsey's fuse. He wouldn't pursue her anymore, so that was that. Still, his accelerator foot itched to break the speed limit as he drove through town, taking the last left past the tiny police station and heading up the hilly road toward Kelsey's house. His mind raced. Where was loverboy when she needed a fuse replaced? Had he actually had the dense-headed nerve to stand her up *again*?

And if so, what was KD going to do about it?

KD had a few ideas, but he was getting ahead of himself. Willing his heart to stop jackhammering, he pulled into her driveway and reached for his toolbox. He took the stairs two at a time and stood at the open front door.

"Kelsey?"

"I'm here."

He turned at the sound of her voice and she emerged from the shadows on the front porch. Even with barely a skerrick of moonlight, he could tell by the way she held her arms around herself that she wore that red dress. The sensuous *swish* of fabric and the delicate waft of her perfume teased his senses. His heart took off again and he prayed for more light. Where was a full moon when you needed one?

"Thanks so much for this. I wouldn't have been surprised if you'd told me where to go when I rang."

"I wouldn't do that." It hadn't been an option. Not once she'd said those magic words, *I really need you*. Even if it was only for a bit of routine home maintenance, the fact she needed him made something swell uncomfortably in his chest.

Jeez, McKinley, don't get fanciful. It's not your chest that's swelling. His discomfort was lodged firmly in his pants.

"I guess I knew that," she said, an odd note of surprise in her voice. Then she warned, "It's really creepy under the house."

"I'm a big boy." He squeezed his eyes shut. Now he sounded like he was big-noting himself. "And I have a flashlight. I'll just head down and check things out."

KD's boots thudded on the stairs, getting farther and farther away. Kelsey felt like slapping herself. What had she been thinking, asking him to come out here? She should have just crawled into bed and tried to sleep without the comfort of hot tea and jazz. Now she had to deal with the nerve-racking notion of KD at her house after ten at night and her still wearing her designed-for-seduction dress. Not to mention he would know dinner with Stefan hadn't led to a night of passion. A major embarrassment, after the way she had played up the date for his benefit.

Cursing her idiocy, Kelsey wandered back inside. Her eyes had adjusted to the dark enough that she could find her way down the hallway to the kitchen, where she sank into a chair and put her head on her hands.

She didn't wait long. In a few minutes the sound of the fridge purring to life alerted her to the fact the electricity was back on. She stood and flicked the kitchen light switch, giving a little cheer when it came instantly to life.

Maybe she'd have time to change before KD returned. Or at least throw a T-shirt over her plunging neckline dress. She'd sweat like a hog in this heat, but she didn't want KD to think she'd called him out here for anything other than a fuse.

She had raced into her bedroom and switched on her bedside lamp when KD returned. From her doorway he announced, "All fixed. I've replaced the fuse, but you should probably get an electrician to check things out, just to be safe."

"Okay. Thanks."

"These old places can have tricky wiring."

"Yeah. Thanks." Hadn't she said that already?

Nerves fluttered in her stomach. He had made no secret of his desire the past week or so, but now his expression was neutral. After this afternoon, she could hardly be surprised. He'd treated her to a perfectly

nice lunch, had even included Gabby's kids with good humor, and she'd ended it by throwing her relationship with Stefan in his face and stamping on his foot like a five-year-old.

"How'd the date go?"

His question seemed to surprise him as much as it did her. His jaw set in a hard line, as though wishing he could take the inquiry back.

Kelsey wasn't sure why she still felt the need to lie. Self-protection, probably. "It was fine. Nice."

"Can't have been that nice. You're here alone."

She could have done without him pointing it out. "Not every successful date has to end in sex, you know."

"I guess that depends on what you're aiming for."

"I suppose that shows what *your* aim of any date with a woman would be."

"Sugar." That slow, insolent smile spread across his face and made her insides quiver. "If I went on a date with a woman like you, dressed like you are, she wouldn't be home trying to fix a busted fuse on her own."

"Really?" She'd tried for disdain. It came out sounding more like an invitation to elaborate.

He took a couple of steps toward her, breaching the threshold of her room. Instinctively, Kelsey backed up, wishing she had the mettle to stand her ground. She could retreat no farther when her legs came flush against the bed. Disoriented already, she fell onto the mattress with an undignified plop.

Oh great. She was sitting on her bed now. Talk about sending a man signals.

"If I'd taken you out tonight, I wouldn't have been so easily turned away at your door." Moving closer with the unhurried calm of a predator who knows his prey is trapped in an inescapable situation, KD knelt before her. At her level, his eyes smoldered with a rapacious hunger that took Kelsey's breath away.

“I’d have had to kiss this sexy, pouty mouth of yours.” His hand came up to hold her chin, his thumb idly tracing the line of her lower lip. “Red lipstick suits you, sugar. Bold and hot and seductive. You look so damned amazing, I just couldn’t have left without touching you.” He drew a line down her throat with his fingertip. “Here.” He moved his touch to her shoulder. “And here.” With a skillful tug, he slid the thin spaghetti strap of her dress down her arm.

Kelsey sucked in a shallow breath, feeling as stunned as though he had bared her breast. But the dress clung to her flesh, catching on the hardened bud of her nipple. Closing her eyes, she didn’t move as his knuckles brushed feather-light across the distended peak.

His next question brought her eyelids, which felt weighted down, flying open.

Gruffly, he demanded, “Did *he* touch you?”

Chapter Seven

He was serious, a possessive gleam in his blue eyes. He was actually asking about Stefan? Now? Through her brain-addling lust, Kelsey felt a surge of annoyance. “That’s none of your business.”

“I need to know if he touched you,” he insisted. “*Where* he touched you, dammit. If you let him. If you liked it.”

Kelsey was too outraged to speak. Almost. “You’re acting like a Neanderthal. I do not belong to you.”

“You do tonight.”

She sputtered in astonishment. “You are way too sure of yourself, KD.”

With deliberate slowness he cupped her breast more fully in his hand, gently kneading the flesh. A moan escaped her lips without her consent, evoking a knowing smile from KD. “I don’t think so.”

Damning her traitorous body, Kelsey fought to control her physical reactions. “You have no right to be possessive of me. You only want me for a one-night stand, anyway.”

Something Kelsey couldn’t identify flashed through his eyes. Hurt, her instinct told her, but they both knew what was going on between them was purely sexual. He’d practically spelled out his desire for only one encounter when he’d kissed her and said he wanted her.

I’m going to love you long and hard, sugar. All night long.

Her pulse leapt at the remembered words. It was what she wanted, too. She could finally admit that to herself. But now he was ruining it by expecting her to be accountable to him, when he offered no such thing in return.

What a chauvinistic double standard.

“And you want me for something more?” he challenged, shaking his head. “Sorry. I guess I’m just the kind of guy who needs to know the woman in bed with me is really with me, not wishing she was with someone else.”

He walked away before Kelsey could answer. She couldn’t make sense of what was happening. He was deserting her? Once again, he was leaving her all hot and bothered and yearning for him?

Oh, no, he darn well wasn’t.

“KD, wait.” Her call invoked no response. “KD, stop!”

That she had gone so far as to practically plead for attention and he was ignoring her made her livid. Her legs sprang into action. With dogged strides, she pursued him down the hallway. “Damn you, you...bullheaded man. Don’t you have manners enough to listen when a person tries to tell you something? Hey!” Catching up, she tugged adamantly on his arm. “I’m talking to you.”

He stopped to face her. His expression was halfway toward amused as he rested his hands on his hips. “Alright. I’m listening.”

She mirrored his posture. “What is it you think I’m doing back here early, you numbskull? I’m not with you thinking about him. I can’t be with him without thinking about you. And I couldn’t do it anymore. You’ve ruined everything and you don’t even have the decency to take me to bed.”

His expression changed. The derision disappeared, replaced by disbelief. His eyes darkened, focusing on her with such intensity she felt it right down to her feet. His lips parted, but no words came out. He stood so perfectly still Kelsey wondered if he was breathing.

She knew she wasn’t.

He was the first to move forward. After that, Kelsey stopped keeping track. She took a step that felt like a flying leap and was in his arms. Their mouths came together with a sound something between a whimper and a groan.

His lips were commanding, demanding. His tongue sought entry to her mouth and she enthusiastically gave permission, arching against him as he tasted her. His hands tangled in her hair, the fierceness of his grip lifting her to her toes.

Kelsey had no idea how much time passed before KD pulled back. He looked into her eyes, his inky-blue with a desire that drew an answering response. Her body was on fire.

He pushed her hair back from her face, smoothing the mess he'd made. "I could have told you before there's no decency in me." He breathed heavily. "I've wanted to do nothing but indecent things to you since the second I saw you."

His words made the flames inside her reach new heights. How could she have ever thought of making love with Stefan, given the way KD affected her? "He tried, but I couldn't...Stefan, I mean. It's—"

He put a finger to her lips, his voice turning gruff, authoritative. "I don't want to hear his name again tonight." He moved his hand down to grab her behind, settling her more closely against him. The rock-hard ridge of his denim-covered erection pressed with erotic insistence into her abdomen, making her ache with yearning. "Tonight, you're all mine."

Really, she shouldn't find his macho I'm-going-to-brand-my-name-on-your-ass attitude so tantalizing. But her body warred with her independent streak, growing ever damper at her core, quaking inside with the desire to succumb and be his. To let him do whatever he wanted with her. To beg him to.

"Caveman." She'd tried to put some power in her voice, but merely sounded breathless and turned on.

"Temptress," KD growled and took her mouth again.

Kelsey met each thrust of his tongue, devouring him like a desert she had long denied herself. When he swung her into his arms and strode back down the hall to her bedroom, she had no thought of protest.

Despite the urgency of his assault on her mouth, he lowered her to the bed gently, covering her with his body as he continued to kiss her. Kelsey whimpered and arched off the bed. Understanding the message,

KD reached up to haul the thin strap of her dress down her arm, baring her flesh to his greedy touch. He molded her in his big, rough, carpenter's hand and Kelsey nearly screamed with pleasure.

He dragged his lips away from hers, drawing back to look at her. He gentled the movement of his hand, drew his thumb slowly across her erect nipple. "Sweet Jesus, Kelsey, you're so beautiful," he whispered, his voice filled with awe. He reached to slide the other strap down her arm, feasting on the sight of her bared to the waist. "So full and soft and perfect." He twirled his thumbs around both her nipples in unison, the twin assaults drowning her in sensation. With deliberate indolence, he dipped his head and took one aching peak into his mouth. Heat exploded inside her.

It was something she had dreamed of over and over again, having his mouth on her there. But nothing had come close to how incredibly good reality felt. She speared her fingers through his hair, silently compelling him to suckle her harder. A sound grazed her throat as he pulled her nipple between his teeth and tugged. Her womb throbbed. Her entire body cried out for his touch, his possession. "Oh God, KD. Please."

His head reared back, regret in his eyes. "Shit. Sorry. I'm being too damn rough."

"No! You're being too slow." Lord, had she really said that?

The quirk of KD's brow told her she had.

"See what you do to me?" Her tone was accusatory. "You're making me lose my mind."

"I lost mine long ago. You'll get no sympathy from me."

His hands trailed fire along her thighs, slipping beneath the hem of her dress so his fingers could trace the outer edge of her satin panties. Heat pooled instantly inside her. "KD...don't you want me to undress?"

His voice was as thick as molasses. "I've had a lot of fantasies about you in this dress, so I'll decide when it's coming off. Lie still."

His imperious command thrilled rather than annoyed her and she did his bidding before she could wonder what he was going to do. She had

her answer soon enough when he pushed her dress to her waist and rested, just rested, his lips against the damp shield of her panties.

Oh God, not... She opened her mouth to tell him not to bother. Her past experiences had not proven this particular activity a favorite. But when his tongue moved to dampen the satin material, the ball of tension in her stomach began to liquefy, melting her bones and her hesitancy. He used his tongue again and her insides quaked, like the land around a volcano about to erupt after many still, silent years.

"Relax," he urged and Kelsey realized her body was still rigid with tension. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, allowing KD to ease her legs farther apart. She trusted him. She would never have accepted his lead so readily otherwise.

He pulled her panties aside so she was bared to him, and all cognizance fled as his tongue dipped inside her. There was only sensation, sparking fire that set off millions of tiny implosions as he loved her with his mouth. He wrapped her legs around his shoulders and held her still while he stroked the sensitized tissue at the heart of her with his tongue and coaxed his finger into her slick center, beginning a sensual massage that drew a response from her so swift and unexpected it shocked her.

As she fell over the edge of reason, Kelsey felt rather than heard herself scream in ecstasy. She grabbed the bedpost, needing to hold onto something for support, lest she spin off the earth and into zero gravity. The explosions eventually died down to minor quakes that left her body shaking—sated, yet somehow still needy.

With a dexterity that belied the screaming urgency shaking him up inside, KD eased the panties down Kelsey's legs, stopping at her feet to undo the tiny buckles on her sandals and slip them off. He whipped the T-shirt over his head, using it to wipe Kelsey's sweet, honey taste from his mouth before he rose to his feet and braced a hand on either side of her head.

Despite the near desperate jut of his cock against the rough denim of his jeans, KD felt his lips form a smile. Her face was the picture of

wonder, her eyes wide and dark, her lips parted. And she embodied sensuality, her cheeks flushed with the aftereffects of her orgasm, her chest still rising and falling heavily, her rosy dark nipples peeking out above the neckline of her designed-to-tempt dress.

KD just had to say it again, the words wrenched from his soul when he had previously too-oft used them merely as a means to an end. "You are so beautiful."

She smiled slowly and trailed her eyes across his face, down over his bare chest, and sighed. "You, too."

His heart constricted and his erection grew astonishingly harder. He couldn't wait. "Sweetheart, do you have any protection?"

"In the dresser, top drawer," she told him, as though just as eager to have him inside her as he was to be there. KD leaned over her to pull open the drawer and fish out the cardboard box. A full packet, he noted as he drew out a condom, immediately pushing aside the intrusive thought of the man she had undoubtedly bought the package for. Kelsey was with *him* tonight and if, as he suspected, all she would give him was one night, he'd be a fool not to make the best of it. He wanted to hear her scream again before the night was through.

Kelsey ran her hands over his chest, spreading fire wherever she touched. She reached the top snap of his jeans before he did, and together they pushed them and his briefs down his legs. He had a frustrating moment with his boots, before he returned to his position above Kelsey and donned the protective sheath.

She opened herself to him eagerly and the first sensations of her muscles tightly gripping his cock almost overwhelmed him. Be damned if everything about her didn't exceed all his wild expectations.

"KD?"

He must have stayed there, motionless for longer than he thought. He opened his eyes again and gazed into hers. "I'm trying not to beat the world speed record here."

"Oh." She smiled in comprehension and lifted her hips to meet him in an unmistakable challenge. He groaned and eased his way within her

clenching slickness. He tried to keep the pace slow, but before long Kelsey's moans of renewed rapture, the increased rapidity of her breathing that told him she was close to coming, made him lose all semblance of control. He thrust into her again and again, fully and deeply, crying out his fulfillment just as she reached the peak of hers, and together they went into freefall.

Afterward, still braced on his elbows above her, he slid his lips onto hers and kissed her until he couldn't breathe. Then he rolled onto his side and took her with him so her face nestled cozily against his still thudding heart. A gentle breeze ruffled the sheer white curtains covering the window, cooling his heated skin.

Gradually his breathing returned to normal. At length Kelsey sighed, an awestruck sound. "Wow."

KD smiled and lifted a strand of her silken hair. "Is that all you've got to say?"

"I'm speechless."

"I guess I'll take that as a compliment." His heart thundered, making him realize how very important her pleasure was to him, how nervous he felt that she might offer praise only out of politeness.

Jeez, he'd never been insecure before. He took instruction well, was good with his hands and practiced every chance he got. He was usually as confident as a guy could be in his abilities as a lover.

But with Kelsey...he didn't just want to be adequate. He wanted to blow her away.

She lifted her head, surprise in her eyes. She arched a teasing brow. "Is that a touch of uncertainty I hear? From the brash and cocky KD McKinley?"

Kelsey could hardly believe it. She'd just had two mind-blowing orgasms in rapid succession and it actually sounded as though KD was looking for reassurance. The idea astonished her. It also hinted at a deeply buried vulnerability he wouldn't dream of letting show in other circumstances.

Her heart melted, then raced with alarm. Why was she letting her heart get involved?

To her relief, KD's expression turned to one of arrogance, putting her firmly back in familiar territory. "I'll show you cocky, sugar," he growled, flipping her onto her back and pinning her arms above her head. She felt his shaft, long and once again hard, pressing against her clitoris. When he rocked his hips she moaned. It would only be moments before he had her climbing toward release once again.

He held her wrists easily in one hand, moving the other down to cup her breast possessively. "I'm going to take things slow this time." His voice, a husky rasp against her ear, sent shivers through her. "I'm going to use my mouth, my hands, my body, until you're screaming for me to end it all. Until you're begging me to fill you, make you come. Think you can handle that?"

Dear God, no, thought Kelsey, even as she grew instantly drenched with arousal. She was very much afraid she couldn't deal with what this man did to her without risking her heart.

When she didn't answer, he sought her gaze, his hand stilling. "Kelsey?"

The thought that he might not fulfill every sensual pledge he had just made because of her hesitancy sent panic through her. The risk to her heart notwithstanding, the idea of him not making love to her was unbearable.

"Yes," she said at last. "KD, please. I want everything."

* * *

Propped up on his elbow, KD watched Kelsey sleep. He didn't think he'd ever seen anything so enchanting as the sight of her curled up next to him in bed, relaxed and peaceful, a faint smile curving her luscious lips in slumber. The suggestion of dawn cast an ethereal glow over her, making her look delicate, fragile.

Delicate and fragile. The description should have surprised him after last night. Nothing delicate about the way Kelsey had responded, the way she had followed wherever he led with lusty enthusiasm. The way she had made a few demands of her own.

At one point, she had taken control in the most definitive way a woman could. Waking from a light doze to find that delectable mouth wrapped around his cock was like a fantasy come true. The memory had him stirring to life even now, when he should be exhausted beyond all sexual capability.

That's what she was. Like every erotic fantasy he'd ever had brought to life. The sex had been like nothing—

KD stopped the thought, frowning. The word didn't fit, was somehow inadequate to describe what he and Kelsey had shared last night. He had a vivid memory of staring into her eyes, connecting with something in their depths as he entered her that third time in the small hours of this morning. Something squeezed tight in his chest.

He hadn't merely had sex. He'd made love to her.

Hell.

He didn't fit into the neat little portrait of her life, *The World According To Kelsey*. Wasn't even sure he wanted to. He pictured a white picket fence, kids and a station wagon. He would not welcome the weight of expectation that would come part and parcel with a relationship with Kelsey, and he couldn't bear the thought he would eventually disappoint her.

KD knew he wasn't a bad person. He always tried to do the right thing. But he had no illusions he could ever meet Kelsey's criteria for Mr. Reliable.

For the first time in his life, KD wished he was a different—a better—man than the one heredity had made him.

Kelsey's eyes fluttered open to find him watching her. She smiled softly and shuffled closer, slipping a silky smooth leg between his and murmuring drowsily, "Hey, you."

"Hey," he replied, dismayed to hear a catch in his voice. The warm morning air had grown thicker and his lungs struggled for air. *Christ, Kelsey, I can't be the kind of man you want. But it might just kill me to walk away.*

"Do you want some breakfast? I could make something."

He forced himself to answer. "Nah. I'd better get going."

"Oh?" She lifted her head from his chest, her eyes wide and so openly disappointed that it almost had him changing his mind. What he wouldn't give to spend a long spring Saturday in bed with this woman.

"A town like this, my car in your driveway at dawn would start a lot of talk." He didn't want to do anything to sully her reputation. She had a business to run and the respect of the townspeople. But he also had to get out, needed to think. And he wanted her answers on a few questions before he left.

One thing he knew for sure; he wanted more nights like last night. Even knowing getting them was a long shot. "So, what now?"

She moved away, shifting onto her stomach and hugging her pillow to her chest. She didn't look at him. "You tell me."

"Don't play that way, Kels. The ball's in your court here." *Ask me to stay dammit*, KD willed her, while another part of him wanted her to kick him out, make it easier on both of them. They'd had their night together. From the beginning, that was all he'd wanted.

KD hated that the rules had changed mid-game.

"I don't know how you figure I'm calling any of the shots here," Kelsey said to him, bewildered.

KD shrugged, trying for nonchalance. He wasn't sure he carried it off. "Your house, your bed. Do you want me in it?"

She answered without hesitation. "Yes."

KD felt his heart take off like light aircraft. As much as he knew it would probably mean trouble, it was the answer he had hoped for. He reached out and speared his fingers through her hair until she met his

eyes. She gave him a tremulous smile. She looked as afraid and confused as he felt.

He tried to inject reassurance into his gaze. *We're in this together, sweetheart.* He didn't know how he would achieve it, but he damn well wasn't going to hurt her.

"I know it's going to be tough, telling Stefan about last night. Do you want me to be there with you?"

She blinked at him, appearing perplexed. KD felt the light aircraft go into a nosedive even before she said, "Why would I tell him about it?"

Kelsey wondered where the warmth in KD's eyes had suddenly fled to. His expression hardened and the sardonic sneer that spread across his face made her go cold all over. "So you want a stake on both sides do you? To hedge your bets?"

Kelsey's breath caught in her chest at his icy tone. She didn't know what he was talking about. "What?"

"I may not be your idea of the perfect guy, sweetheart, but I damn well won't be your bit on the side."

He was out of bed and pulling on his jeans before Kelsey began to comprehend. He had taken her reluctance to tell Stefan about last night completely the wrong way.

Kelsey couldn't think of anything more horrible or pointless than telling Stefan that she'd jumped in the sack with KD. He might not be the most outwardly passionate man in the world, but she wasn't going to rub her exploits in his face. She owed Stefan better than that.

It finally dawned on Kelsey that she hadn't mentioned she had ended it with Stefan. She'd been too caught up in KD and every little thing he did to her to make the truth of the situation clear. And now, KD must think she had slept with him when she was still committed to another man, and that she wanted to carry on an illicit affair behind Stefan's back.

So tell him it's over with Stefan.

Kelsey wanted to. She opened her mouth but the words stuck. If she told him, what next? Just because her relationship with Stefan had

turned out to be wrong didn't make this one right. KD didn't even want a relationship, not in the way she did. He wanted sex.

And he believed she wanted the same. Admittedly, her behavior last night didn't contradict the notion. And truth be told, if he so much as slid his arms around her right now she'd morph back into the writhing jumble of hormones she'd been. But he thought she was willing to be mercenary about it. "That's what you think of me? That I'm the two-timing kind?"

"You go after what you want. Nothing wrong with that." She wouldn't know it by the gruffness of his voice. When he met her eyes, his were blank, empty. "But you'd better work out what it is you do want."

That was easy. She wanted to wake up again and start the morning over. She didn't want to feel this hurt that he'd pegged her as a heartless user. Just like Adam Scalia had. The pit of her stomach sank. That long ago, hot-and-heavy affair had ended when a very pregnant girl claiming to be Kelsey's lover's fiancée confronted her in the street. Shocked, Kelsey had gone straight to Adam and demanded answers. He'd laughed and said it was she who had pursued *him*, that she hadn't asked his status because she hadn't cared either way.

You got what you wanted, sweetheart. A bit of no-strings sex. You didn't seriously think it was anything more?

She had left in tears, taunted by the sound of Adam's laughter. Humiliating enough, but she had been grateful she hadn't blurted out the truth—that she was in love with him. That she'd slept with no other man before him. That she thought he felt the same way about her.

But Adam had treated her like a tramp. A woman only interested in sex who didn't care who might get hurt by her actions.

Just like KD.

"How do you know I won't tell loverboy about last night?"

"Why would you?" To rub sex with her in Stefan's face? Kelsey suspected KD had a ruthless side when it came to getting things his way, but she would never have guessed he'd do something so petty and cruel.

"Maybe he has a right to know what he might be getting into. Most men take exception to their girlfriends sleeping around on them."

Damn, that hurt. But Kelsey refused to be immobilized by the pain. She would have plenty of time to dwell on that later. Furious, she grabbed her robe and slipped it over her shoulders before climbing out of bed. She'd be darned if she would have this confrontation in the buff. "I do not *sleep around*. And don't you think that's the pot calling the kettle? I can barely take a breath without being assailed by tales of your exploits, your *expertise* with women."

"I didn't hear you complaining last night. When you wanted me to fix your 'fuse'."

She gaped with indignation at the pointed sarcasm. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you knew callin' me over here in the middle of the night would lead me to tinker with more than your fuse box. Admit it. You were the one using *me* for sex."

The nerve of him. Kelsey was feeling less and less flattered as this conversation went on. She felt a childish urge to play tit for tat. "You think you're such a stud, don't you? Yes, I'll admit I enjoyed last night, but don't kid yourself it was all about your talents. It's been years since I've been with a man." Kelsey swallowed and forced herself to take a leaf out of Gabby's more bluntly worded book. "I *really* needed to get laid."

He'd been bending to retrieve his crumpled T-shirt from under the bed and Kelsey heard him swear graphically. He straightened and paused to look at her, his eyes unreadable. Then he dragged his shirt over his head and said quietly, "Well, I gotta hand it to you. You sure do know how to kick a guy in the guts."

Kelsey's heart contracted as she realized she'd hurt him. She just stopped from begging forgiveness by recalling what he'd said to her about sleeping around. "Likewise," she pushed the word past a sudden lump in her throat that belied her attempt at insouciance.

He was clear across the room on the other side of the bed, but Kelsey could read the sad acceptance in his eyes. *It's for the best*. If KD didn't

leave now it would only drag out the inevitable end of their affair. He wasn't a man to be easily tied down—she wouldn't *want* to tie him down, if it meant changing him. Moreover, he knew she wasn't the type to try the footloose and fancy-free kind of life he lived. That was the path her sister Genevieve had chosen and not one Kelsey had ever yearned for.

She couldn't tell him it was over with Stefan. Not only was it pointless, he would use it to his advantage. He'd smile in that way of his and call her sugar and kiss her neck and pull her under the covers again. Soon enough she'd start dreaming he'd stay and make an honest woman out of her and when it didn't happen she'd be heartbroken.

KD had convinced himself it was good that he was leaving now. The right thing to do. Then he made the mistake of looking at Kelsey.

Her bottom lip trembled where she bit into it with her teeth and her eyes were wounded, the sheen of tears making his heart ache. He wanted to hold her, despite everything, to soothe the hurt he'd somehow inflicted. But if he did that they'd end up back in bed, only to go through this all again later. He wouldn't play second fiddle to Henley, even though a part of him was desperate to take those crumbs if they were all she was willing to offer.

Hell, he had to get out of here before he did something stupid. "Kelsey—"

"Don't." She held up a hand, as though she couldn't bear to hear whatever he'd been about to say. "Don't say anything. Just go."

The pain in her voice had him swiftly turning on his heel. If there was one thing besides building things he was good at, it was knowing when to walk away.

* * *

It was a singular kind of hell having KD work for her after that morning. She would arrive home to find more of the renovations completed, the evidence of his presence in her house during the day

indelible. It made his absence from her bed at night seem all the more acute.

And it was acute. He'd only stayed one night, but it had been a heck of a night. She longed to feel his arms around her, to feel his length, long and rigid, inside her. To feel his warm breath at her throat as he told her what he was going to do in that sexy, soft drawl.

He'd made an impression on her as permanent and obvious as a tattoo she'd gotten in a moment of weakness and regretted once the enormity of what she'd done sunk in. Four years of celibacy laid to waste because she'd allowed her body to make decisions for her.

It was almost a week after he'd stormed out of her bedroom before she saw him again.

She was emerging from her office, with a couple interested in buying a house in the area. She was laughing politely at something the young woman said when she glanced up and saw KD staring at her.

The laughter died in her throat at the look in his eyes. He was carrying a can of paint in each hand, having apparently come from the hardware store two doors down. He seemed unaware of the fact for several moments before he glanced down at the paint with a confused frown.

Turning, he dumped the cans in the back of his truck and began striding toward her.

Kelsey's heart leapt, jackhammering in her chest. She couldn't read the mood in his eyes, his intention. For a brief, crazy second she wondered if he was going to grab her and kiss her in front of her clients.

But he stopped several feet away. "I need a minute."

Not the words of a man dying to kiss you. Kelsey glanced at the couple who were watching with curiosity. "Now's not a good time."

"I'm going out of town for a few days."

His words shocked her into silence. A sick feeling roiled in her stomach. "Oh."

"I have to talk to a guy in Brisbane about a job. I'm going to send a young guy by the name of Greg Danvers around to work on the painting so you won't be affected by my absence. Frank said Greg would do good work."

"I know Greg." Greg worked nights at The Central and Frank sometimes hired him to help out with the easier but more labor-intensive jobs, such as painting. Greg would do a good job. The anger boiling inside her wasn't due to KD's hiring Greg, or even the fact that he went ahead and did so without discussing it with her. Her focus snagged on his other words, *you won't be affected by my absence*, and the undertone of sarcasm she detected.

Did he really think she was such a cold-hearted bitch?

"Just letting you know."

"So now I know." Darn it. She sounded just as cold-hearted as he thought her to be. But she couldn't ask all the questions clamoring in her mind. *Does this mean you're moving on now? When will you be back? Will you ever come back?* She'd sound as desperate as she felt.

"Right. You must be busy. I won't keep you."

She'd never doubted it for a second. KD didn't want to keep her. Kelsey squared her shoulders and put on her professional face. "Have a good trip," she said for want of anything better and returned her attention to her clients.

She felt his eyes on her back. Much as she tried, she couldn't seem to get her words to the young couple out. Apologizing to them, she excused herself and whirled around.

But KD's long purposeful strides were already taking him away from her.

Chapter Eight

Rain streaked down the window of Kelsey's office, forming rivulets on the glass. She sat at her desk and stared blankly at the patterns created. The liquid gray was washing away the familiar colors of the shop fronts that advertised the wares available in Holly Hill's main street. The blanket of gloom it threw over everything thoroughly suited Kelsey's mood.

The rain had been brought to town by a thunderstorm five days ago, the day KD had approached her in the street, and it had yet to leave. And Kelsey had yet to see KD again.

"Kelsey, are you ready to go?"

Donna's words roused Kelsey from her despondent reflection. The girl held out the office keys, a question in her eyes.

With a start, Kelsey realized it was after five o'clock. She looked at all the pending work on her desk and knew she should stay and do some overtime. *Later.* Her stomach growled, demanding to be fed. "Yes, let's lock up. I'm going to head down to The Central and grab something to eat."

She piled all the work on her desk into her in-tray and helped Donna lock up. They said their goodbyes at the door, Donna heading to her car while Kelsey dashed the two blocks to the pub through the now light rain.

"Kelsey, wait up!"

She turned under the awning of the hardware store to see Gabby waddling after her, raindrops clinging to her shoulder-length curls.

Kelsey waited for her to catch up before saying, "Hey, you. What are you doing out of the house at the kids' bathtime?"

Gabby grinned. "Great, isn't it? My mother's been watching them while I get a few last-minute things picked up for the new arrival. She told me to take my time and I wouldn't dream of contradicting that order."

"Of course not. Do you have time to come to the pub for a few minutes while I order a takeaway?"

"Why not? Paul will be home by now to help Mum with the kids. Lead the way."

They walked the remaining distance to the pub side-by-side, Kelsey's heels clicking on the footpath beside the subdued thud of Gabby's sneakers. As they entered the hotel, Kelsey saw the other woman wince and give her rounded stomach a soothing rub. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine. It's just Braxton-Hicks. I've been getting them all afternoon."

Kelsey felt a twinge of concern. "Are you sure they're false contractions?"

"I'm not exactly new at this, Kels. Besides, my kids come overdue, not early. It's their thing." Gabby shrugged. "Now, are you going to buy me a ginger ale or what?"

The pub was crowded for a Wednesday and Kelsey had to weave her way to the bar. She ordered two ginger ales and a portion of grilled fish and salad to takeaway, at the last minute asking for a side order of fries. What the hell. She'd missed her jog three times this week already, might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb.

The saying reminded her of KD. Of him standing in her kitchen, telling her she hated him anyway so he might as well make the most of it. Of his annoyingly effortless strides on the road as he jogged beside her. She hated to admit it, but rain hadn't been the only reason her motivation for jogging had deserted her lately.

Jogging made her miss KD.

"Kelsey?"

Kelsey whirled around, drinks in hand, to come to face-to-face with Stefan. Ginger ale sloshed out of the glasses, spilling down the front of her cream blouse.

Fiercely apologetic, Stefan grabbed a napkin off the bar and moved to dab at the stain. His actions brought his hand much too close to her breast, but with her hands full she couldn't do much to stop him. "It's fine, Stefan. I'm heading home shortly and I'll soak it."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have startled you." He looked into her face for the first time, an awkward moment passing between them. It was the first time they had spoken since the night in his car when she'd ended their relationship. Kelsey cleared her throat. "No harm done."

Stefan made a throat-clearing sound of his own. "How have you been?"

"Fine." Of course, she wasn't fine. Her love life was a god-awful mess, but she hardly wanted to get into it with Stefan. Besides, she had other things demanding her attention—like the fact that Stefan's hand still hovered in the general vicinity of her chest. "Do you suppose you could"—she glanced pointedly at his hand—"give me a little room?"

"You heard her. You want to take a step back there, Stan?"

With a start, Kelsey turned. She'd know that distinctive lilt anywhere and only one man would presume to be so peremptory where she was concerned.

He'd had a hair cut, the thick mass clipped close to his neck where it used to curl over his shirt collar. He wore the perennial cotton T-shirt, in white this evening, and blue jeans. He also wore an expression of calm menace, which he directed squarely at Stefan.

Kelsey doubted Stefan had ever had a glare quite that threatening directed at him before. He wasn't the type to get into pub brawls with other men over a woman. KD, on the other hand, was another story. He looked like he wanted to drop Stefan where he stood, and she wouldn't put it past him to do it.

"Stan was just trying to help," Kelsey said, trying to diffuse the situation.

Both men stared at her. KD appeared about as impressed with her as he was with Stefan. And Stefan seemed as stunned as the proverbial mullet.

She directed her gaze toward Stefan. He was much easier to deal with. "Why are you staring at me like that?"

"You called me Stan."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes," he said, a little huffily. "You did."

"You sure did, sugar. You said Stan, as clear as day."

Kelsey sent KD a menacing glower of her own, to which he reacted by tilting his lips in grim amusement.

"Thank you. I'm not crazy, am I?" Stefan turned to Kelsey, opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. His brows drew together in a frown before he swung back to KD. "Did you just call her *sugar*?"

"Hey, I hate to break up this little..." Gabby's voice trailed off as she glanced from Kelsey to Stefan, then to KD before her eyes settled back on Kelsey. "Whatever it is. But I have to get going."

Bless you, Gabby. She must have seen her anguished demeanor from across the pub and come to save her. "No problem. I'll come with you."

Looking down at her hands Kelsey realized they were still clutching the now half-empty glasses of ginger ale. She turned to deposit them on the bar.

"Kelsey, come on. I need to leave *now*."

Talk about going out of your way to help a friend. She wanted to at least *look* like she wasn't in a huge rush to escape. "Hold your horses, Gab," Kelsey said under her breath. "I've still got to get my fish—"

"Screw the fish!"

That response got her attention. For the first time Kelsey realized how flushed Gabby was, as though she had been running five miles. She hadn't looked like that when they'd met in the street.

Her friend's hand clutched at the sleeve of KD's T-shirt, her other grasping her stomach. "I've really...got to...goooo!"

Gabby's wail had Stefan's attention, as well. "What in blazes is wrong?"

"Oh my God," Kelsey breathed in comprehension. "Gabby, are you in labor?"

She pushed out a long, harsh sigh. "Brilliant deduction, Watson."

"This is no time to be snide, Gab. I thought you were having Braxton-Hicks contractions."

"I was wrong. You want to argue with me about this?"

Gabby's expression was enough to intimidate Kelsey into action. "Heck, no. Have you called Paul?"

Gabby shook her head. "My battery's...dead." She puffed up her cheeks and began breathing in short panting breaths. "*Kelsey...*"

"Okay, okay. Someone has to get her to the hospital."

"Kelsey...my car seats are leather..."

Kelsey barely heard Stefan's anxious words. His wasn't the gaze she sought. Her rising alarm called her to seek assistance from the one man who wouldn't fall apart in the frenzied situation.

Without vacillation KD said, "My truck's right out front. We can make it to the hospital in under half an hour."

Kelsey nodded, the breath she had been holding sighing out of her. It would be alright now. KD would help both of them. As capable as Kelsey thought she was in most situations, this one was brand new and she didn't like the idea of facing it on her own. "Thank you. I'll use my phone to call Paul on the way."

KD helped Gabby to his truck, letting her clutch at his shirt to the point it almost ripped. He opened the back door, was helping her inside, when a sudden gush of fluid spilled down her legs, right onto KD's boots.

"Oh shit!" Gabby exclaimed. "Sorry about that. My waters..."

"It's okay," KD assured her with all appearances of calm.

Kelsey stood stock still, gripped by a momentary panic. If Gabby's water had broken, didn't that mean the baby could come any minute? Would they even make it to the hospital? Oh, God. She wished she'd read

more articles about pregnancy and birth. She was totally unprepared to deliver a baby.

KD turned after shutting the truck door behind Gabby and caught her stare. His blue eyes were bright, but cool and unruffled like the sun-warmed Pacific at dead calm. "She'll need you relaxed, Kelsey."

Swallowing her panic, Kelsey nodded and ran around to the passenger side of the truck. She hopped in beside Gabby and dialed her phone as KD fired the engine and took off down the street. "Hi, Paul, it's Kelsey. Is Gabby's mum still there with you?" She glanced at Gabby, watching her strained expression as he answered. "I think you'd better get her to come back. We're taking Gabby to the hospital, she's having labor pains. Yeah, I know. Two weeks early. Most of the day. She thought they were Braxton-Hicks—"

"For God's sake, Paul!" Gabby hollered. "Stop asking questions and get moving!"

Kelsey spent another minute on the phone with Gabby's husband, assured him that his wife was in good hands before ringing off and telling Gabby, "He'll be right behind us. He'll get to the hospital in time."

Kelsey just prayed *they* would.

The ride was a little bumpier than Kelsey liked, but she offered her friend the bones in her hand to crush whenever a contraction caused pain to seize her. Which was a lot more often than either of them wanted.

"Oh God, oh God. How long was that?" Gabby wailed, when the pain of another contraction eased enough to allow speech.

Kelsey consulted her watch. "I think about two minutes." She swallowed. "That's fast, right?"

"Shit, shit," Gabby swore, grimacing as a scream poured out of her. "I don't know if there's time to get to the hospital, Kelsey. Oh, shit. My babies come late, not early. Never...this"—she started breathing in short pants, her eyes bulging—"fa-a-st!"

Kelsey shot a look at KD. His expression was grim, his concentration fixed firmly on the road ahead. Even as she knew the answer wouldn't reassure her, Kelsey asked in a strained voice, "How much longer?"

"Maybe ten minutes." He glanced down at the speedometer. "This is as fast as I can push it in the wet."

"Not long now, Gabby. Just hang on."

But Gabby shook her head, bracing her feet on the door and pushing her back against Kelsey's front. Kelsey absorbed her friend's weight and squeezed her hands, anxiety gripping her. "Can't. Baby wants...out. Now. I have to push." Her eyes squeezed tightly shut, her face growing tomato red.

Oh God, Oh God. Kelsey looked back at KD. "KD, she's pushing."

"I heard dammit, I heard." He took a deep breath, the only evidence that he wasn't as calmly in control as he appeared. He shot a wry smile over the back at Gabby. "Don't suppose there's any chance of you *not* pushing right now?"

Gabby gave him a look that the toughest cleaner couldn't have wiped off. "You wanna have this baby...funny man?"

KD chuckled. "Not on your life. Okay, I'm going to have to pull over."

"Pull over?" Kelsey questioned as KD moved the truck off the road. Her earlier resolve to be strong for Gabby seemed to have flown out the window as panic seized her. "We need to get Gabby to the hospital!"

Kelsey felt Gabby squeeze her hand and she turned back to face her. Her friend was shaking her head. She was drenched in sweat now, her hair plastered to her forehead. "No time, Kels. Just help me. Please."

She had no idea what to do. She had no training for something like this. Neither had KD.

Pushing those thoughts aside, Kelsey swung into action as the truck came to a stop on the side of the road. She forced a confidence into her voice she didn't feel. "You're the only one who's done this before, honey. Tell me what to do."

KD felt utterly useless as Gabby went through the unimaginable pain of labor with Kelsey issuing encouraging words while checking out what was going on down there at the business end of things.

He was glad he hadn't been assigned *that* job.

Instead, Gabby called for him as a contraction approached and he went around to the other side of the truck, sliding into the space Kelsey had vacated and supporting Gabby's head on his chest. He offered his hand as she bore the pain. He found a bottle of water and a rag he hoped wasn't too dirty, wetting it and pressing it to Gabby's forehead.

"I see the head!" Kelsey's exclamation had his eyes shooting to hers. Her expression was stuck between terror and excitement. She smiled tremulously before turning her attention back to Gabby. "I think one or two more will do it, Gab."

Taking her cue from Kelsey, Gabby bore down, crushing his hand as effectively as a vise and pushing with all her might.

"Yes, that's it. That's it, Gabby. Just one more..."

Gabby let out an ear-splitting howl. "You're doing fine, Gabby." KD knew it was true, even given how little he understood of what was going on. "We're right here with you."

He'd seen a calf born once, on his grandfather's ranch back in Texas. He'd only been ten or so, and had had no sense of the grandeur of the situation. The sheer, blinding power and magnificence of this experience wasn't so lost on him. He was witnessing a true miracle of Mother Nature as Gabby strained once more, her shoulders shaking against his chest, her fingernails digging into his hand until they drew blood, sweat pouring down her face.

"Oh my God!" Kelsey cried, her wondrous exclamation followed immediately by the unfamiliar, yet instantly recognizable, bellow of a newborn healthy enough to express utter indignation at being wrenched from its cozy cocoon. Kelsey looked at both of them and grinned, her smile the most brilliantly beautiful thing KD had ever seen. "It's a boy."

She held him in her arms, so small and perfect. His tiny hands clenched into fists, his legs bent to his chest, his face screwed up like a prune. Another howl issued from his obviously healthy lungs, making Kelsey laugh, joy and relieved stress mingling. The baby was slick with dark fluid and KD whipped off his T-shirt, helping Kelsey wrap the infant

as they followed Gabby's instructions for tying off the cord with a shoelace they unraveled from KD's boot. At last, together, KD and Kelsey handed Gabby her son.

The look on her face was like nothing KD had ever seen, nothing he could have imagined. Despite what she'd just been through, Gabby glowed with an inner joy, a pure love that only a parent understands.

With a shock, KD realized he wanted to understand. He looked up and caught Kelsey's gaze. Her eyes were wide and moist, and they mirrored his sense of wonder. Her clothing was disheveled and stained, most of her hair had come loose from its pulled-back style so it fell across her face, and any remnants of makeup had been washed away by the tracks of her tears.

He finally admitted to himself the true reason he hadn't been able to take his old friend Russ Watson's job offer and leave to spend twelve months in Western Australia. He'd given up big money, taking a much less lucrative proposition that was offered him because it allowed him to work only forty minutes from Holly Hill. He hadn't done it because he liked the area, although he did. He hadn't done it to be nearer to his mother and Frank, although he wanted to be.

He'd done it for Kelsey.

He'd done it because he was in love with her and couldn't bear the thought of never seeing her again.

Even more staggering was the realization that he wanted this. Seeing Gabby with her child, it was shockingly easy to imagine the way Kelsey would look if she had given birth to *his* baby. The mental image took his breath away and changed the way he had always thought of himself. He deserved better than the life he had lived and needed more than he had ever imagined.

As he watched, Kelsey's tongue darted out to wet her lips and KD wondered if she wanted to kiss him as much as he needed to kiss her—like he'd rather kiss her than take his next breath. But before he could do anything about his overpowering urges, the sound of car tires screeching to a stop on the wet road behind them drew his attention.

A man shot out of the red station wagon and ran to the truck. KD stepped back to grant him access to his wife and new child. Kelsey stepped back, too, leaving the new parents to share a private moment while she called the hospital. After a few minutes she clicked off the phone. "An ambulance is on its way."

"Who needs an ambulance when you two are around?" Gabby asked, taking her eyes away from her new son for long enough to glance at the two of them. "You make quite a team."

Kelsey shifted uncomfortably beside him, turning away when he wanted her to look him in the eye and give him a clue as to what was going on inside her head. She'd been with Henley at the pub and they'd looked mighty cozy together before he had interrupted, even if she had been telling the guy to give her space.

It was disconcerting to know that he was madly in love with a woman and he had no idea how she really felt about him.

* * *

"Someone here for you, boss."

Donna's announcement brought Kelsey's gaze up from her paperwork. The adrenaline of delivering her best friend's baby yesterday still coursed through her bloodstream, making concentration next to impossible. "Who is it, Donna?"

The cheeky girl gave her only a sly wink. "Someone I wish was here to see *me*." She disappeared behind the partition.

Lucky that girl was so keen to move into the sales side of real estate. A great receptionist, she was not.

Kelsey was rising from her chair when KD walked in and it was all she could do to keep from falling back with a revealing *thunk* when her knees weakened. He wore new blue jeans and a cream knit shirt and, darn it, he looked good enough to eat lunch off.

But not as good as he had yesterday, standing shirtless in the light drizzle that started up just as the ambulance had arrived to check Gabby

and the new baby over. He'd been awestruck and real and human, something in his eyes betraying a yearning Kelsey recognized.

The yearning to have what Gabby and Paul had.

"I didn't expect to see you," she said unnecessarily, sure she appeared as flustered as she felt. She'd be foolish to read too much into that expression she'd seen on KD's face yesterday, more likely due to stress than any deep longing for the connection of a real family. He'd made his thoughts on staying in one place quite clear from the beginning. It would be extremely unwise of her to forget.

"You sure do know how to make a guy feel welcome, sugar," KD drawled, casually strolling into her office and, without being invited to do so, making himself comfortable in one of the leather chairs opposite her desk.

Kelsey felt a flash of irritation. Wasn't it so like him to saunter in here like he owned the place, like he owned her? The way he had yesterday, acting all macho and overbearing, bossing Stefan around. "Forgive me," she drawled back, mimicking his derisive tone. "Were you expecting open arms?"

His slow smile made her skin sizzle. His gaze raked lazily over her black skirt and sleeveless cream blouse. "Can't say I would have been disappointed."

Kelsey was galled by the heat that flashed through her. She imagined the two of them amongst her twisted sheets, locked together. Or right here, on her desk. Lust spilled inside her and brought fire to her cheeks.

She could *not* picture things like that now. KD's watchful gaze reminded her how perceptive he was when it came to her desire for him. She had to be immune or she'd act on her feelings and get her heart bruised further, compliments of KD McKinley.

"Let's get one thing straight." Kelsey forced a cool, even tone into her voice. "I don't know what you're doing here, but if you think for one minute you can just jump back into my bed because we shared something...special yesterday you have another think coming. Are we clear?"

Looking down her nose at where KD sat, Kelsey allowed herself a moment of pride. A blanket of silence stretched out while KD regarded her with an inscrutable expression that unsettled her. His voice flat, KD replied, "It's obvious how you feel. Now it's time I made *my* point. I'm here because I need to find a place to live. I don't see myself staying with Ma and Frank long-term. I'm sorry if my presence bothers you, but you are the only real-estate agent in town."

Kelsey swallowed and maintained eye contact with a Herculean effort. He was seeking her professional services, not her body. Mortified, she sank into her chair and did her best to appear professional. No easy deed when her cheeks were stinging with heat. "What kind of place were you looking for?"

"I'm not too particular. Something nearby, since I'll be traveling to Caloundra every day for work."

"Work? You're working locally?"

"A new estate's opened up there and I've accepted a contract to work on ten new display homes."

"Really?" Kelsey couldn't keep the surprise from her voice.

"Really," he said wryly. "My skills are actually in demand in some parts. Don't worry, I don't start for a few weeks so I'll be able to finish up at your place. Check out what Greg's been doing and all."

"Greg's been doing a great job," Kelsey told him, her mind reeling. KD was working in the local area—for a lengthy period. He was going to live in Holly Hill.

What was she supposed to make of that?

"I'm glad. But I'll come over and check things out, nonetheless."

KD was coming to her house. Dear Lord. Her heart raced a mile a minute, adding to the adrenaline of yesterday. She didn't think she'd need to drink coffee for a week.

Clearing her throat, Kelsey turned to her computer to avoid his vigilant gaze. "What kind of price range a week are you looking at?"

"Actually, I was thinking of buying."

“Really?” God, she sounded like a parrot.

Her surprise irked KD. Did she think he was an irresponsible drifter? “I’m good for the money.”

She frowned. “I never said you weren’t. It’s just that...I didn’t know you had plans to settle.”

Was she opposed to the idea of him living near her? “I thought I might renovate a fixer-upper. I like to keep my hands busy.”

“Oh.” Her voice caught and she cleared her throat. He hadn’t meant to sound suggestive, but her moment of discomfiture made him think she was as affected by memories of their night together as he was. Even now, he had difficulty controlling the insistent stirring of his body. It was all he could do not to drag her out of her chair and kiss her air of professional distance into oblivion.

But he already knew sex worked between them. So did she. He also knew Kelsey needed something more substantial than no-strings-attached sex. And for the first time in his life, so did he. He just had to work out how to show Kelsey he was capable of giving her what she needed. He had highly employable skills in the current housing market, he had savings. When it came down to it he could, and would, do anything for her.

Even settle down and build a white picket fence.

Yet he had no assurances that Kelsey even *wanted* him in that way. Especially as the specter of Stefan Henley still hovered, threatening competition. KD had never been in this position and he had no idea how to handle it. He wanted to give Kelsey the time to realize they could build some kind of relationship, that they had more in common than sexual chemistry. That meant not trying to seduce her back into bed the minute he set eyes on her.

He just hoped to hell he didn’t blow it by acting *too* cool, allowing her time to turn to Henley instead.

She looked back down at her computer. “Well, there are a few places I could show you in that category. When might you be free?”

“How about now?”

“Right now?”

KD shrugged, pretending nonchalance. “I’ll make another appointment, if you’re busy.”

“No need.” She stood with an air of efficiency meant to keep him at bay. It made him wildly horny instead. Trying not to seduce her was one thing in theory. In practice, it was going to be the hardest thing he’d ever done. “I’m free for the next hour. Let’s go.”

Chapter Nine

The late spring rain had moved on, freeing the hot summer sun to bake the damp earth dry and set steam rising from the black asphalt. Kelsey thanked heaven for her car's air conditioning as she pulled into the driveway of Gabby and Paul's red brick home the following Sunday afternoon. Tash was playing with her dolls on the front verandah and she ran to greet Kelsey, who reluctantly stepped out of the car into the stifling humidity.

"Auntie Kelsey, Cindy got a new dress. See?"

Kelsey admired the doll's fashionably combined pink tutu and denim jacket. "Ooh, isn't she beautiful. Have you been swimming?" Kelsey gestured toward the little girl's bright green swimsuit.

Tash nodded her damp curls. "But I don't wanna go on the swings no more. Thomas pushes too high."

Wondering what Tash was talking about, Kelsey's curiosity was soon satisfied as she followed Tash around the side of the house. In the back yard she saw a newly constructed swing set, on which Paul was pushing a gleeful Thomas back and forth.

Paul waved when he saw Kelsey. "Hot enough for you?" he asked jokingly.

"Any hotter and I'd melt. This is new."

"Great, isn't it? KD helped me put it up yesterday. Gabby's in the house making salad and there are heaps of cold drinks in the fridge. Help yourself."

"Thanks," Kelsey replied absently, still reeling from the mention of KD's name. Since when did KD help Paul build things?

The air was cooler inside the house, thanks to the ceiling fans on high speed. Kelsey found Gabby humming as she chopped shallots and sipped from a tall glass of iced lemonade. “Gab, what do you think you’re doing? Shouldn’t you be resting?”

Gabby returned Kelsey’s hug. “I am resting. The baby is down for a nap and this is all I’m making. Paul will cook the barbecue. Is that cheesecake?” Gabby eyed the plastic container Kelsey carried.

Kelsey nodded. “Pineapple and lime, your favorite.”

“As always, you have proven worthy of your standing invitation to Sunday lunch. There should be room on the bottom shelf of the fridge for that.”

Kelsey found a space for the dessert and poured herself a glass of lemonade. She asked Gabby how she was feeling and they talked about the new baby before she got up the nerve to broach the subject that was bugging her. “Paul tells me KD helped him put up the swing set.”

Gabby’s face spread into a grin. “Isn’t he a treasure? No way Paul could have done that himself in one afternoon. I mentioned that I was worried the kids might be jealous of the new baby and before I knew it KD was offering to build them a swing set as a distraction. Great idea, huh?”

“You *mentioned*? When was this?”

“When KD came to see me in the hospital last Thursday,” Gabby explained, as if that should have been obvious.

It was last Thursday afternoon that KD had come to her office and she’d suffered through that interminable tour of the local properties she thought he would be interested in. She had been trapped with him in the car for over an hour during which he made polite conversation and asked her “getting to know you” type questions that she had felt compelled to answer. It had driven her crazy that he seemed so interested in small talk about her favorite movies and ice cream flavors, as though they were nothing more than acquaintances, when she was burning up inside from the effects of sitting so close to him and hating her weakness.

"I didn't know KD had suddenly become such a good friend of the family," she groused.

Gabby sent her a speculative glance. "He *did* help deliver our baby, Kels, remember? Paul thinks he's a stand-up guy. In fact, we both do, but apparently you disagree?"

Kelsey didn't know what to think. "I never said anything either way. I...hardly know him, really." Which suddenly felt all too true. She had pegged KD as a loner, a drifter who wasn't interested in putting down roots, so why was he buying a house and making friends around here? In some ways Kelsey knew him intimately, in other ways she didn't know him at all.

"I know you two slept together."

Gabby's statement had Kelsey gaping. "Did *he* say that?"

"No, but I can tell. You've both been pining around the place like something was up. And you just got all flushed when I was talking about him."

"I did not," Kelsey denied, then brought a hand up to her cheek. It was hot to the touch. "Did I?"

"You definitely did. So what gives? You slept together but you're not together. What—was it terrible?"

Kelsey gave her a shocked look. "Are you kidding?"

Gabby grinned. "Didn't think so. So tell me why you're here with me having boring family time when you could be with him?"

Kelsey cringed inwardly when she remembered the spectacle she had made of herself in her office last Thursday. "You're not boring."

"And you're not answering."

Luckily, the new baby chose that moment to let out a mewling cry from the nursery. Kelsey took a deep breath as Gabby left the room. Was KD really pining around the place, just as she was, or was Gabby being fanciful? She may not have been the reason KD returned to Holly Hill, but now that he planned to stay a while, what was she going to do about it?

Gabby returned a moment later, cradling the infant in her arms. "Here you go, little guy. You finally get to meet your Auntie Kelsey properly. You want to hold him?"

Kelsey had seen the baby just after he was born, of course, and once again in the hospital when he'd been fast asleep. Now she stretched out her arms to cradle him close to her chest, marveling at the perfection of his features, the bright blue of his eyes that would no doubt turn a soft brown like his parents' in time. His plump little lips pursed together as he gazed up at her and Kelsey felt the heaviness in her chest lift. "Oh, Gabby, he's beautiful. He has your nose."

"Yeah," Gabby agreed as she looked adoringly down at her son. "Hey, we've decided on a name for him, finally. We originally had Theo picked out for a boy, but after the way he came into the world Paul and I wanted to go in a different direction."

"How so?"

"We want to call him Dexter. Dexter Kelsey Murray."

Kelsey's eyes widened. A gasp escaped her lips. "You...you want to name him after me?"

Gabby nodded. "You and KD, if you don't object."

"KD?"

"As in Kirkland Dexter McKinley," Gabby clarified. "Sheesh. I know more about the man than you do and you're the one who slept with him."

"He didn't tell me what the KD stood for, okay?" Kelsey sounded defensive.

"Did you *ask*?"

Well, if that didn't make her feel suitably chastised. She knew so little about KD because she'd never made much of an effort to find out more. Would he be as forthcoming with her as he seemed to be with Gabby if she asked him right out how he felt about her? If, despite the fact he had made no moves, he still wanted her?

“Just so you know.” Gabby brought Kelsey out of her reverie. “Paul wants to induct KD as one of the Murray clan. He now has his own standing invitation to Sunday lunch.”

Kelsey’s jaw dropped. “He’s coming here?”

The tone in her voice must have upset little Dexter. He screwed up his face and let out a frightened sound that worked its way toward a full-fledged wail. As Kelsey handed the baby back to Gabby for a feed, the doorbell chimed.

Who else could it be but *him*?

At Kelsey’s hesitation, Gabby said, “Surely you don’t expect me to open the door to him with my boob out?”

“I dare you.” But Kelsey left the mother alone to nurse while she walked with steps that wavered between tentative and elated toward the front door.

Oh, make up your darn mind, Kelsey.

She steeled herself before she swung back the door, but the sight of him standing on the threshold floored her, as though she hadn’t been expecting him. He wore navy board shorts and a crisp white T-shirt that shouldn’t have looked as good on him as they did.

Something in his eyes flared when he saw her, reminding her of a match being struck. His gaze trailed over her simple sunflower print sundress in a way that made her feel as though she wasn’t wearing it. He smiled appreciatively. “I really do enjoy it when a door opens and I see you standing there, sugar. It never fails to be a pleasant experience.”

Kelsey tried not to melt at his words. She knew the polite thing to do would be to thank him for the compliment, but she could barely speak enough to say, “Paul’s around back. I’ll show you out.”

KD spent most of the afternoon vacillating between regretting his decision to accept the Murrays’ invitation to lunch and drinking in the sight of Kelsey. He watched her in her sexy-cute sundress with the same thirst he downed the lemonade he had with his steak and salad. When he ate the pineapple-lime cheesecake Kelsey had baked, he imagined eating it off her naked body.

He almost choked on a mouthful when Tash asked eagerly, "Are you going to swim with me, Auntie Kelsey?"

Jeez. If she took off that dress to reveal some itty-bitty bikini, he wasn't going to be able to leave the table for another hour at least.

"I don't think so, Tash."

"Aw, come on, Auntie Kelsey. I want to show you how I can swim from one side to the other with my floaties on."

"Go ahead, Kels. Paul will help me clear up. KD, why don't you take a swim, too? It's as hot as the devil today."

Gabby sent him a knowing wink across the table. Somehow, although they had never spoken about it, he sensed she was an ally in his fight to prove himself to Kelsey. Not that he didn't appreciate the help, but he wasn't sure he should swim in the pool with Kelsey when there were kids about.

He needn't have worried. Kelsey was too smart to get herself caught in any situation she didn't like. "Bite your tongue, Gabrielle Murray. You're not doing any more work. I'll clear up while you take a nap and I won't take no for an answer. I'll swim with you in a little while, Tash."

The women disappeared into the house, leaving him alone with Paul and the kids. Tash and Thomas ran straight to the pool, Thomas doing a dive bomb that sprayed water all over them while his sister squealed.

"Hey, calm it down, kids, the baby's sleeping," Paul scolded.

"The baby's *always* sleeping," Thomas groused.

"Not always," Paul muttered. "Oh sure, he sleeps like a log in the day," he told KD. "But at two a.m.? Forget it."

"That's got to be tough."

"Yeah, but it's worth it. These kids and the wife? They're everything. And Gabby's a great mother." The pride in the other man's voice was obvious, the smile on his boyish face as bright as the afternoon sun as he watched his kids play. After a while, he breathed a contented sigh. "This the life."

“It sure is,” KD agreed, for once not thankful for the relative simplicity of his own life when viewed next to a life full of chaos and responsibility. Instead, he saw the good in it all. The easy camaraderie he sensed between Paul and Gabby, the effervescent enthusiasm with which their kids approached everything. The overwhelming fullness of it. By comparison, his life of contract jobs and meaningless flings seemed empty.

He’d gone soft, for sure. Between Gabby and Kelsey, he hadn’t stood a chance. Gabby had gone and named her kid, in part, after him—Dexter Kelsey. Little DK Murray. He’d always hated his middle name, but he had to admit he was touched by Gabby and Paul’s decision to use it.

And Kelsey had...well, just been Kelsey. She’d bowled him over with her beauty and her strength and her hidden sweetness. Okay so sometimes it was hidden a little too well, but he knew it was there. Had known it in the rare moments they’d laughed together, when he’d seen the soft vulnerability in her eyes while they made love. And the way she’d handled Gabby’s roadside birth had filled him with admiration. If he hadn’t already been in love with her he would have fallen, there and then.

With women, he’d always taken the easy path. Chosen the willing, uncomplicated ones who wouldn’t make demands, who were happy to be a part of his life for whatever short period of time he deemed desirable. In the beginning he’d thought he could do that with Kelsey. But when he’d left last week, the thought of never seeing her again had knifed through his heart.

She’d changed him and there was no going back.

He felt Paul Murray watching him with astute brown eyes. After a long, thoughtful moment all he said was, “You and Kelsey?”

“I think so.” KD ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “At least, I bloody hope so. If she ever decides I’m worthy.”

Paul laughed. “Yeah, she’s a tiger. But a marshmallow inside, I reckon. Be patient. You’ll do that if you love her.”

KD heard the unspoken question and looked the other man in the eye. Gabby and Kelsey had been friends since high school, so Paul had known Kelsey for as long as he'd known his own wife. His readiness to protect her was as plain as the dimple in his left cheek.

His mother had been snooping, trying to get him to open up about why he was sticking around, but he hadn't revealed the truth. Neither had he confided in Frank. Despite the fact he barely knew Paul Murray or maybe because of it, KD found himself admitting throatily, "Yeah. I love her."

Saying the words out loud was like having an ocean wave sweep him a hundred meters off course in an instant. He sucked in a breath and downed the last of his lemonade.

Paul only chuckled at his distress. "Shit. You're too far gone to save, pal. I hope you're ready for all this."

You and me both. KD caught sight of Kelsey emerging from the house. Without casting a glance his way, she walked up to the pool and announced, "Coming in, ready or not!" before stripping off her dress in one swift move, revealing a perfectly modest, yellow halter-neck swimsuit that had KD thinking entirely immodest thoughts. In a smoothly graceful action, she dove in, eliciting a round of laughing splashes from Tash and Thomas.

"What are you waiting for?" Paul asked, before heading inside. "Go get her."

Easier said than done. But if for no other reason than he needed badly to cool down, KD stripped off his shirt and dove in after her.

Many times that afternoon Kelsey thought of escaping, but never quite managed to make the move. She wanted to be around to help Paul with the kids while Gabby had a much-needed rest.

At least that's what she told herself. She refused to examine the fact that she was simply enjoying herself, splashing in the pool with the kids and KD. He never tired of tossing the beach ball around or tossing Tash in the air until she grinned from ear to ear. As studiously as she avoided

swimming anywhere near him, she felt his presence in the pool as though the water were warm as bathwater, not as cool and refreshing as it was.

The sun was maybe an hour away from setting by the time Kelsey gathered her things to leave. "Are you sure you don't need me to stick around and help with the kids' bathtime?"

"I'm sure." Gabby spoke softly so as not to disturb the baby, who was resting peacefully on her shoulder after his latest feed. Though she looked tired enough to fall asleep on her feet, Gabby's smile was sheer contentment. Pure earth mother in her element. "You two head off and enjoy your evening."

With KD standing right behind her, Kelsey could do no more than send her friend a scolding look at her suggestion. KD leaned down to kiss the cheek Gabby offered him and followed Kelsey out the door.

"Well, I know I'm worn out," Kelsey announced as she headed in the direction of her car.

"Don't worry, Kelsey. I wasn't going to take Gabby's hint and suggest we continue the evening."

She glanced over her shoulder, her brows hiking. "You weren't?"

He smiled at her expression. "Disappointed?"

Kelsey pursed her lips. "Like I said, I'm exhausted." What on earth was wrong with her? She'd spent the afternoon wishing he would leave so the singular torture of seeing him naked to the waist, dripping wet and gorgeous, would end. Now she longed for nothing greater than to spend a few more stolen moments with him.

"Me, too. And I'm not going to make a mess of things like I did last time."

Reaching her car, Kelsey spun around before opening the driver's door. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'm not going to go all out to pressure you into bed."

"You didn't pressure me." Kelsey bent her head to hide her face when she realized how much she'd admitted. Still, she felt the need to clarify. "You know I...wanted you."

"I know." He sounded more like the cocky devil she was used to. She faced him, crossing her arms over her chest in a way that only made him smile with very male amusement. "But all things considered, I would rather have waited until you were completely free of other entanglements. I just didn't think it mattered to me at the time."

Kelsey held her breath. The lengthening shadow of Gabby's house cast his face in partial darkness so she couldn't read his expression. She swallowed. "What about now?"

His tone was gruff with feeling. "It matters." After a heartbeat's pause he prompted, "Gabby tells me it's over between you and...him."

"It was before we were together," Kelsey said without hesitation, needing him to know that truth, at least. "I broke up with Stefan earlier that night."

At his look of surprise, Kelsey continued, hurt clearer in her voice than she wished it to be. "I'm not proud of the fact I slept with one man only hours after ending a relationship with another, but I'm not the kind of woman who enjoys toying with two men at once. It was you who assumed otherwise."

He studied her face and she didn't try to hide the wound. His expression changed from puzzlement to remorse. From there it moved on pretty quickly to frustration. "And you didn't think to tell me this at the time?"

"Would it have made a difference?"

He muttered an epithet that made her flinch. "I deserved to know. I thought you still wanted him, even after we slept together. Do you know how that made me feel?"

"I think your ego can handle it."

"Dammit, I'm not talking about my ego, although it takes a hell of a beating with you around." He looked away from her, toward the setting sun, his hands on his hips and his profile so hard it pierced Kelsey's

heart. At length he muttered, almost too softly for her to hear, "You are one harsh woman sometimes, Kelsey."

Her heart ached further. Was she harsh? She wanted to deny it, but the realization swept over her that it was true. She hadn't used to be like that. What had happened?

Life had happened. Adam Scalia had happened and a series of others just like him followed. She'd been nice, agreeable, accommodating—*lovable*. But they hadn't loved her. They'd made all the demands and she'd acceded to each and every one, thinking that would make them commit. When she'd finally realized how wrong she was, she'd vowed never again. From that time on, *she* made the demands.

She'd been too obstinate in her attempts to protect herself. In ensuring that she didn't get hurt, she'd ended up hurting the man who'd treated her better than any of them. Who'd been honest with her from the start.

At length KD said, "I shouldn't have left the way I did."

Kelsey frowned. "I don't blame you." Lord, she'd been such a shrew. And after he'd been everything she could ever want in a lover. So KD didn't want to commit. He hadn't lied about it. He'd been nothing but upfront with her. And what had she done? She'd wasted time pursuing the wrong man and made attempt after attempt to push KD away.

"I took the easy way out. You made things complicated so I bailed." He let out a derisive scoff. "I guess the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree."

It took Kelsey a moment to digest his meaning. She thought about how natural he was with Gabby's kids, how strong and reliable he'd proven to be. She shook her head. "No, KD. You're nothing like your father. You're always around when people need you."

He studied her face with shrewd eyes. Kelsey blushed, realizing how her comment had sounded. "I mean, not that *I* need you. I didn't mean that."

"Didn't you?" His voice was as soft as a velvet caress. He moved forward. Not a fast maneuver, but one that had her trapped against her

car before she could prevent it. He cupped her face in his hands, forcing her to keep eye contact. His gaze stole her breath. “Do you need me, sugar?”

She remained motionless, her lungs fighting for air as he slowly dipped his head. Her eyes drifted shut, awaiting the kiss, but instead of taking her mouth he simply brushed his lips across one cheek, his breath warm on her face. Then he tilted his head and moved to the other cheek. His unhurried movements kept her heart suspended, until at last he found her mouth. He whispered against her lips. “Do you?”

Air stuttered from her as she tried to speak. The words to say no wouldn’t come. Her hands were at his waist, clutching his shirt. She’d hardly breathed since KD had dipped his head. His nearness, the feel of his long, hard body pressed so softly against hers was a powerful aphrodisiac, enough to completely scramble her brain.

When he threaded his hands through her hair and tipped her head back, Kelsey’s whole world tilted. The gentle touch of his mouth at her throat made something she’d been holding tightly inside unwind. She unfurled her hands and pressed them flat on his smoothly muscled back, drawing him closer as the air gushed out of her. “Yes. Oh yes, KD. I need you.”

His groan reverberated against her neck, his fingers twisting in her hair. His body turned hard, unyielding, pushing her back against the car and all Kelsey could think was *yes*. Yes, she needed this. She was well and truly hooked on KD McKinley’s kisses and she thanked God none of her querulous behavior had been enough to drive him away. “I’m sorry, KD.”

He drew her tighter to him and pressed tiny, urgent kisses across her cheek. “*I’m* sorry. I should have known you weren’t the cheating type. That’s not you. I just went crazy.” He buried his face in her hair and drew in a long breath, sighing it across her ear. “God, you smell good.”

So did he. Fresh and manly and so wonderful. And it felt extraordinary to say something nice to him for a change. “I shouldn’t have said what I did at the office. About not wanting you.” She let out a

choked laugh. How had she ever thought she'd be able to pretend he didn't drive her wild with lust? "I wanted you right then. Every minute since you left."

She didn't notice the way his kisses slowed, the way his hands stilled, until he drew back and surveyed her face. "That's what you meant when you said you needed me?"

He wanted reassurance and for once Kelsey was happy to give it to him. "Yes. I'm through denying it, KD. You drive me nuts." She stood on tiptoes to wind her arms around his neck. She put her lips to his throat and felt a thrill when a shudder rippled through him. "I can't even think straight. I don't want to. All I want is you."

He ran his hands over her back almost absently, making no move to pull her closer, to kiss the breath out of her. His blank expression puzzled her. "You want an affair."

Kelsey felt like laughing. She wouldn't have thought KD needed such an explicit invitation. "Yes, you dummy. So why don't you take me home and—"

"Damn, sugar. Don't say it," he growled. "I won't be able to say no if you say that."

"Say no?" Kelsey felt shell-shocked as KD set her away from him. He put his elbows on the roof of her car and rested his head on his arms. She could hear him forcing air in and out. "KD, what are you doing?"

"Breathing."

"I meant, why are you saying no?" She wished she didn't sound so petulant. She'd finally let her guard down enough to admit how much she wanted him and he was saying no? Was he trying to get revenge? She might well deserve a taste of her own medicine, but she couldn't believe KD would be that cruel.

Heaving a sigh, he stretched to his full height. His eyes held a rueful gleam and something else Kelsey couldn't decipher. It looked like disappointment, but how could it be? He was getting what he'd wanted all along.

He lifted his hand and softly stroked her cheek with his knuckles. The touch was electric, sparking off the arousal lying banked inside her.

But he dropped his arm without exploring further. "I can't take you home right now, sugar. You still don't get it."

"I don't get *what*?"

"I'm taking a hell of a risk here. I need you to take one, too."

"What are you talking about? I'm practically throwing myself at you."

"Don't think I don't appreciate the effort. Two weeks ago I wouldn't have hesitated. But things have changed."

"I don't see how."

There was something sweetly tender about the way he looked at her. "Think about it."

He was leaving before she could make sense of what he was getting at. What was she supposed to think about? She'd done nothing but think about him since the moment they'd met.

"Later in the week, I'd like to take you out," he called over his shoulder. He turned and walked backward while he continued, as though he was in a mad hurry to get away from her. "Like a proper date. Okay?"

Okay? Of course it wasn't okay. She didn't want to wait a week to see him again, just to end up *talking*.

Kelsey was left staring as his truck disappeared in the orange-tinged light. What on earth had just happened?

He wanted to take her out on a "proper" date? What was that supposed to mean? She'd done things properly with Stefan, taken things slow, making sure they were compatible before rushing into a sexual relationship and look where that had gotten her. She didn't want KD to start acting genteel on her. She wanted him just the way he was—arrogant, audacious, demanding and sexy-as-sin. She wanted him hot and wild and in her bed.

And he had wanted her. That much she sensed from the restrained energy in his kisses. It was confirmed by his words *I won't be able to say*

no if you say that. If he'd given her the chance she would have said it ten times, just to make sure he lived up to that threat.

He'd picked a fine time to start acting reticent. And it was an act, Kelsey knew it.

Maybe she hadn't been obvious enough.

Chapter Ten

“It’s just around this corner.” Kelsey indicated her turn and pulled the car up in front of an old timber shack with peeling white paint and a rusted tin roof. A massive fig tree in the front yard cast a shadow over the house and was the closest thing to a garden the property could boast.

“Well, I think fixer-upper describes this place,” KD commented as he stared out the passenger window.

“That is what you asked for.”

“That I did.” He cast a sidelong glance at her, his eyes narrowed with curiosity. No doubt he wondered what on earth had gotten into her today. “I guess it’s strange when you get what you wish for.”

Kelsey was no longer certain he was talking about the house. Had he been wishing that she would be nicer to him? If so, she had gone out of her way to give him his wish this afternoon.

She had worn her shell pink skirt—the one that was a little shorter than her others—over bare legs, because it was just too hot for stockings, and had teamed it with a sleeveless white blouse made of lightweight material that bordered on transparent. She had felt an excited little thrill earlier when she had caught KD checking out the lacy imprint of her white bra beneath the blouse and had thoroughly enjoyed every time he had admired her legs as she drove.

“You want to take a look?”

The spark in his eyes told her he didn’t miss the double entendre, but he said nothing, merely opening the passenger door and stepping out

into the warm afternoon. The sun was sinking, casting a bright orange glow over them and shining on the auburn glints in KD's hair.

Kelsey had driven home early to pick him up before he left for the day, announcing that she wanted to show him a property he might be interested in. He wore his worn blue jeans and a gray T-shirt that had smudges of dirt and paint all over them. Kelsey knew she would willingly dirty up her carefully put together outfit if he'd just kiss her.

But he had been friendly and polite, injecting none of his usual teasing or smiling innuendo into their minimal conversation. He was silent now as Kelsey opened the front door of the house, the tired creaking of the hinge almost deafening in the quiet.

"The electricity has been disconnected," Kelsey explained as KD surveyed the living room with a critical eye. "The place has been empty for quite a while because..."

KD paused in the act of running his hand along a windowsill and looked at her. "Because?"

"It used to belong to Bill Sturgess. He lived a bit like a hermit out here until he died. They found him sitting in his rocking chair on the back verandah with a beer in his hand. Some people still think his spirit hangs around or something."

KD made no comment on that as he walked through the remaining rooms. Dust particles floated in the shafts of orange light pushing through the uncovered windows, the only sound that of KD's boots on the creaking floorboards. Kelsey had to admit, the silence was kind of eerie, no doubt one of the reasons she hadn't been able to sell the place. The old house hadn't occurred to her the first time she'd driven KD around because so few people showed any interest. And, if she was honest, because that day she had been too flustered to think straight.

Not so today. Today she knew what she wanted and was determined to get it.

She jolted with surprise when KD re-entered the living room and announced, "I'll take it."

"You'll buy it? This place?"

A smile reached his eyes for the first time that afternoon. “You don’t have to sound so shocked. You must have thought I might buy. Why would you bring me here otherwise?”

Why indeed? Had he guessed she had used the tour as an excuse to meet with him again? “So you’re not concerned about old Bill Sturgess’s spirit?”

KD gave her a wry look. “All I see is a house that needs some TLC. I could do a lot with this place.”

Kelsey didn’t doubt his ability to turn this crumbling old shack into something livable, even something beautiful, and she felt a moment’s admiration for his taking on such an ambitious project. He really was a most incredible man. “Great. I can’t wait to see how it goes.”

At her words, KD raked an assessing glance over her face and Kelsey made some excuse to duck her head so he wouldn’t see her blush. Silently she chided herself for her moment of shyness. Some self-assured seductress she’d turned out to be.

To hell with it. She forced her eyes to his face with a steady gaze. “How about I take you out for a drink—to celebrate?”

* * *

At The Central, KD ordered a bottle of beer for himself and a glass of white wine for Kelsey, still a bit bewildered by her congenial disposition.

He figured she’d been annoyed when he’d taken off so abruptly after lunch on Sunday. If the wide-eyed look on her face was any indication, she’d been more than a little confused, too. He hadn’t meant to mess with her head, but he’d had to leave, quick, or he would have had his way with her that night, laying waste to all his efforts to show her he could court a woman with more finesse than he had done to this point.

Refusing the glass he was offered, KD hooked the neck of his beer bottle between his index and middle fingers and carried the Chardonnay in his other hand. As he headed back to the table Kelsey had claimed for them in the shady beer garden, he drank in the sight of her, legs crossed

so that already short skirt rode downright indecently high on her thighs. She hadn't seen him coming yet and he watched with stilled breath as she reached up to take her trademark pins out of her hair, letting it fall in a silken tumble around her face before she fluffed it up with her fingers. The action caused the soft flesh of her breasts to sway fetchingly beneath the flimsy material of her blouse, making KD feel a bit like a dog salivating at a bone held just beyond his reach.

Turning, she saw him. She smiled, slow and real, the devilish sparkle in her eye knocking whatever breath KD had still been holding right out of him. He wondered if she had known he was standing there after all, watching her.

He wondered if Kelsey was trying to seduce him.

He handed her the wine and took a healthy swig of bitter brew, soothing his parched throat, before taking a seat opposite her and propping his right boot on his left knee. All the better to hide his stirring erection from her knowing eyes.

She held up her glass. "To you and your new house."

KD acknowledged the toast with a tilt of his beer bottle and took another long gulp. The liquid wasn't enough to keep his mouth from drying up again when Kelsey brought her glass to her lips, eyeing him over the rim as she took a slow sip. Her lashes fluttered as she put her glass back on the table. Her tongue slipped out to taste the wine on her soft-pink-painted lips as she ostensibly concentrated on stroking the long stem of her glass between her thumb and forefinger.

KD felt himself snap to attention inside his jeans at the erotic message she was sending out. Her lips moved as they formed words, but damned if he heard a word over the thundering of blood in his ears. Over the astounding realization that she *was* trying to seduce him.

Well, hell.

The throttle roar of his libido was tempered with caution. He was supposed to be giving her time, giving them both time, to get to know each other better. It was difficult enough to keep his hands to himself around her, without her making it downright impossible.

He felt her light touch on his arm and his skin tingled like it had just become capable of conducting electricity. His newfound plans to be a better man were in serious jeopardy. If Kelsey was offering herself, he didn't have the strength to turn her down again.

"KD, have you been hearing me?" she asked, amused.

"Not a word," he admitted. Hell, he had to find out what was going on one way or another. "You're distracting me."

She touched her hair. "I am?"

"The naïve thing doesn't suit you." He put his beer on the table and leaned toward her. "You wouldn't be trying to get me into bed, would you now, sugar?"

Finally, Kelsey thought in relief. If she were any more obvious she would have to wear a bright red sign around her neck. She fought down a flush of embarrassment at being called on her actions so openly. She should have known he would want to play it this way, in his cut-the-crap manner. "Would you object?"

"Would I object?" he muttered, pinning her with stormy blue eyes. "You know damn well I'd like nothing better than to ravish you on the spot."

His words sent warmth spreading through her. But his next ones made her heart stutter in her chest.

"But I want more than another roll in the sack with you."

She tried to swallow, but found her mouth dry. Heck, she wanted more, too. She wanted to roll and roll and roll and roll...

"I don't want to just have a fling with you."

"Y-you don't?"

He shook his head slowly, his gaze never releasing hers. "I want *you*, Kelsey. All of you. And I don't want to settle for less this time."

Stunned, she merely stared, her mouth dropping open. At length he brought his hand to her face and trailed his fingers down her cheek. When he reached her chin, he gently closed her mouth, a smile softening his features. "You seem shocked."

"I...you..." she stammered. "You think you didn't *get* me last time?"

"I know I didn't. As beautiful as your body is, Kelsey, there's more to you than a great set of curves. That's what I want, the more part."

Kelsey felt a burst of frustrated anger. She sat back in her seat in order to evade his touch. "You expect a lot. You want me to...to give my heart to you, is that it? What will you give *me*?"

"Whatever you want." She heard the quiet honesty in his words and her heart leapt. "Name it and it's yours. You want me to get a steady job, I've done that. I may not be next on the Fortune 500 list but I make a decent living. I can—"

"You're talking about *money*?" Kelsey asked, furious. How could he think his wallet had anything to do with her interest in him or in any man?

"You're a practical woman, Kelsey. Money equals security, you know that. I'm just trying to say I can give you the same things Henley offered."

"Stefan had nothing to offer me," she stated baldly, knowing now how true it was. "I thought he did because he was stable and decent and respectful..."

When she trailed off, KD filled in, comprehension lacing his voice. "And safe. He didn't demand anything of you, emotionally, did he? That's why you went for him."

The truth hit her between the eyes. Yes, Stefan had been safe, undemanding. Why had she thought they were good qualities?

"You went for him," KD began slowly, answering her question for her, "because you knew he couldn't hurt you. He didn't make you feel vulnerable. Ah, Kelsey." He sighed and gathered her hand in his. "Who hurt you?"

Avoiding his searching gaze, Kelsey pulled out of his grasp with great effort. "You're making this more complicated than it needs to be, McKinley."

"It's already complicated."

“No, it’s not. We have chemistry. We’re good together in bed. There’s nothing more to it than that.”

He looked at her a long time. She felt the weight of his regard on her like a boulder pushing her down, making her feel small, afraid. Making her feel like a bald-faced liar.

After a lengthy silence, she sensed his weight shift as he rested back against his chair. She chanced a look at him and what she saw in his expression shocked her to her core. Sadness. Disappointment.

Yearning.

“I’m not thirsty anymore.” He pushed his half-full beer aside and got to his feet. He reached down and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, tracing its shape with a gentle touch. “You know where I stand. Let me know when you want to talk again.”

Kelsey had no idea how long she sat there, staring at nothing and not drinking her wine, before a voice called her out of her near catatonia.

“Kelsey, there you are!” She looked up to see Stefan Henley weaving his way toward her through the tables. “I went by your office but you weren’t there.”

“I was...” *I was what? Just sitting here losing my mind? Wondering if I’m throwing away something really good I didn’t even know I could have?* One thing was certain, she didn’t feel up to dealing with Stefan right now. “I was just leaving.”

“Please, don’t. I was hoping to persuade you to stay a moment. I’d like to talk.”

“I really have to go.”

Stefan looked into her face with an earnestness she hadn’t seen before. “Please, Kelsey.”

His gray eyes looked almost moist, as though her walking out on him now might drive him to actual tears. *Stefan, tearful?* The notion was so surprising that Kelsey acquiesced, staying while he ordered them a bottle of white wine from the bar. A good bottle, that the publican brought over himself. When Kelsey saw it, she said, “I really can’t stay long, Stefan.”

"I know, I just thought we could have something nice. This is your favorite, isn't it?"

Stefan showed her the label before pouring her a glass of the crisp Chardonnay. Surprised he had remembered, she dutifully touched her glass to Stefan's proffered one and took a sip of the excellent South Australian wine. "It seems like business has been booming lately," Stefan commented.

"I've been busy," Kelsey replied. "Is that what you wanted to talk about, my business?"

"Not really. I wanted to talk about us."

"Stefan—"

"Kelsey, please," Stefan intercepted. "Let me speak. I've always known you were a woman with your own mind, perhaps someone even more worldly than myself. It's something I've had trouble with. You're such a powerhouse, Kelsey, brimming with energy and life. At times, you intimidate me."

All Kelsey could do was stare. She had never heard Stefan speak with such frankness.

He cleared his throat. "I've tried to hold you back, because my father brought me up in a very old-fashioned manner. I was raised to believe a woman's place was in the home, supporting her husband, caring for his children. I realize it sounds terrible in this day and age," Stefan said at the look she shot him, "but it was something ingrained in me. It was difficult to accept that you were such a successful businesswoman. I've often felt...inadequate beside you. Not truly a man."

"I want more than just a career, Stefan." Good Lord, he made her sound like some ball-busting feminist who wanted to wear the pants in every situation. "I want marriage and children and a home. How can you assume I couldn't support a man in every way emotionally, just because I want to continue working?"

"I was wrong, I admit it," Stefan was quick to concede. "And about the other... Well, I've had a few people lending me advice lately. Unwanted, but good advice I think. Understand though, I simply didn't

know you were interested in a family life. If I had... Well, I may not have been so reserved about our relationship.”

All this time she had wondered if she was the one at fault, if Stefan was at all attracted to her. She had assumed she lacked some quality needed to win his affections. Yet Stefan had felt inadequate. His stark admissions gentled her feelings toward him. She laid a hand on his. “I’m a little sorry you couldn’t have admitted this to me sooner, but now that you have it’s helped me understand what went wrong. Thank you.”

Stefan smiled broadly, with more enthusiasm than Kelsey had ever seen him display. He covered her hand with his free one. “I knew we just needed to talk, to get everything out in the open—that it would fix things between us.”

“This doesn’t ‘fix things’, Stefan. We’ve parted ways, remember?”

“I know you said you wanted to stop seeing me and you were right to say so. It’s given me an opportunity to think things through. I don’t care about you being a career woman or any of that. I’d be mad to let you go.”

Didn’t he understand that she had let him go? In breaking things off gently had she been too equivocal? She truly hadn’t expected him to go to any effort to win her back.

Stefan got out of his chair and, to Kelsey’s horror, got down on bended knee in the middle of the pub. “Kelsey, I realize I’ve made mistakes, and I hope you’ll forgive me for being blind and a fool. I’ll spend every day making it up to you, that is, if you’ll be my wife.”

Kelsey made a shocked sound in the back of her throat as Stefan opened a black velvet box to reveal a gold ring with a trio of diamonds sparkling on the top. She stared so long Stefan was prompted into repeating, “Kelsey, I’m asking you to marry me.”

Kelsey let out her breath in a gasp. “I can see that. I don’t believe this. Stefan, I can’t. I’m sorry, I just can’t.”

“Of course you can! I’m ready to give you what you want.”

Kelsey felt the eyes of every patron in the beer garden on the two of them, probably waiting for her to throw her arms around Stefan and

start crying with happiness. She kept her voice low. "You don't understand, Stefan. Things have changed."

"I know they have. But I believe we can get things back to the way they were."

"*You don't understand,*" Kelsey reiterated, more firmly this time. "I don't want things to be the way they were. I'm really sorry, Stefan, but I thought you knew it was over between us."

Kelsey felt like a heel when his face slowly fell. Who would have thought Stefan capable of such emotion? "Are you saying your feelings have changed?"

Kelsey swallowed. It would have been cruel to admit that her feelings for him had never been that strong. That she'd only been with him because he was "safe". "I'm sorry but yes, I am."

Stefan's shoulders drooped and, in confusion, he looked down at the ring box he still held. Eventually, Kelsey was able to coax him back into his chair so at least the other customers would stop staring.

At length, the stunned mask of Stefan's face furrowed into a frown. "It's that carpenter, isn't it?"

"Stefan, don't do this."

"There was talk. About how the two of you seemed... I ignored it, because I knew he was not at all your type, that he's not in your league. But, the rumors are true, aren't they?"

"I don't know what rumors you're talking about." He was still clutching her hand and Kelsey determinedly extracted herself. She felt a fierce spike of fury at the way Stefan had referred to KD as not *being in her league*. She thought of all KD had said about earning a decent living and giving her things. Had she made him think she thought herself better than him? "But that carpenter's name is KD McKinley."

"KD," Stefan scoffed. "That's not a name, it's a...a numberplate."

Kelsey had the sudden urge to laugh, but just managed to hold it back. Dear heaven, was Stefan actually jealous?

"If there's no one else, Kelsey, I don't see why you can't consider my proposal."

"I didn't say there was no one else," Kelsey said, sorry Stefan compelled her to be so blunt. "The thing is, there is something between KD and me." She sighed and admitted, as much to herself as to the man across from her. "I have feelings for him, Stefan."

"I see."

They sat in taut silence. Kelsey took a sip of her wine for something to do, but found it had lost its chill in the warm atmosphere of the pub. The irony wasn't lost on her, that only a month ago she would have been ecstatic at Stefan's proposal.

"He'll hurt you, Kelsey. He's a drifter. He won't commit. He may just be hanging around until he gets what he wants, then he'll leave without a second thought to your feelings."

Kelsey didn't have the heart to tell Stefan that KD had already gotten "what he wanted" from her long ago. There was another reason she stayed silent though. Because Stefan's words rang true. If any man on earth could hurt her, KD McKinley was the one. He said he wanted more than just a fling, but how would she survive if she let him into her heart only to have him break it?

"Why don't you put off this decision for a while? Just don't say no yet, Kelsey. I know you think you won't change your mind, but perhaps when this man shows his true colors... I'd like to be here for you, Kelsey. You're too lovely a woman to be alone. I'm just sorry I didn't see that sooner."

Kelsey was touched into silence by his words. Maybe he was right... Maybe KD would leave again and there were plenty of reasons besides love that people got married. Why not her?

Because she could never settle for that. Perhaps if Stefan had spoken to her like this months ago, they might already be married and she might never have given KD's appearance in town a second thought. But she'd never know if things would have happened like that. She did know she couldn't marry Stefan. Not now, not ever.

But she couldn't hurt him any further tonight. When he pressed the ring box into her hand and closed her fingers around it, she didn't have the heart to fling it back at him. She tucked it into a side pocket of her handbag. "I'll return it to you when you've had more time to think this through, Stefan. I know you'll ask for it back."

And he would, once he realized he would be no happier settling for some other man's leftovers than she would be making a life with one man while carrying a torch for another.

Kelsey said nothing else, but squeezed Stefan's hand before rising from her chair and leaving for home.

Chapter Eleven

Kelsey had just stepped out of the shower when she heard the knock on her door.

She frowned. It was after ten at night. She had given up on television, deciding to shower and slide into bed. She was still reeling from the emotional drama of the afternoon. First, KD surprising her with his declarations, then Stefan's even more shocking proposal. And now a late night visitor.

What next?

She approached the front door, holding the bath towel firmly around her. She was about to ask who it was but the words died on her lips. Who else would knock on her door at this time of night? She barely hesitated, decided to ignore the fact she wore next to nothing and swung open the door.

He had obviously showered as well. His hair glistened dark and damp in the glow of moonlight and he wore a clean, black open-necked shirt, the shirttails loose above freshly laundered jeans. His gaze trailed over her with undisguised hunger, giving Kelsey a delicious feminine thrill that overrode all her questions about why he was here.

"I'm not a good man," he announced, his voice husky.

Her instinct was to disagree immediately. "What?"

He stepped over the threshold and kicked the door shut with a negligent foot, never taking his eyes off her. "I was supposed to stay away from you. A good man would stick to his damn guns and leave you be."

His hands came up to frame her face, his fingers spearing through her damp hair as he brought his lips to within an inch of hers. Kelsey

held her breath, rendered motionless by his piercing stare. “You win, Kelsey. You’ve got me here.” The tension in his face eased into a slow, lethal smile. “Now, what are you going to do?”

Oh God. He was going to make her take the lead. The notion sent feverish excitement thrumming through her bloodstream.

Her hands shook as she laid her palms flat against his chest and moved forward so KD backed up. She walked until he hit the door with a soft thud. Then, her heart pounding faster, she slipped each button on KD’s shirt free of its buttonhole. Parting the soft fabric she ran her hands freely across his skin, marveling at the purely male magnificence of him. His chest was taut and muscular without being bulky, covered with silky, lightly springing hair that narrowed to a V on his flat stomach and disappeared beneath his waistband. She loved the way his muscles flexed when she touched him, the way his flat nipples sprang to life when she raked her fingernails over them. His stomach clenched when she slid her hand downward and he moaned when her fingers traced the hot skin just inside the top of his jeans.

“Kelsey...what are you doing to me?”

Kelsey wasn’t sure if his rasped question was rhetorical, but she looked at him with a gleeful smile, reveling in the power she had. “Anything I want.”

He moaned again when she leaned forward and ran her tongue over his nipple, arching his back and twisting his fingers in her hair. She lavished the same attention on his other nipple before working free the snap on his jeans and drawing down the zip of his fly. She stood on tiptoes to kiss him as she dipped her hand inside his jocks to curl her fingers around his magnificent erection.

His hand fisted in her damp hair and he groaned into her mouth. His kiss became almost brutal as Kelsey used her curled hand to steadily stroke his rigid length.

The need for air eventually won over their torrid melding of mouths and Kelsey pulled back to look up into KD’s eyes. They were the darkest blue she had ever seen them, his need shining clearly from their ocean

depths. Kelsey felt her thundering heart catch and reminded herself, *just having a good time here, that's all*. She ignored the warning voice in her head. He might want *all* of her, but he would accept her body if it was all she offered. His presence here proved that.

Feigning innocence as she continued to slowly pump his shaft, she inquired, "Do you like that?"

KD shook his head and made a frustrated sound in the back of his throat. "You have quite the wicked streak in you, don't you, sugar?"

"That's a good thing, right?"

"Oh, it's a good thing." He smiled.

"Good. 'Cause you ain't seen nothing yet, mister." Kelsey pushed his jeans down his legs and, ignoring KD's half-hearted protest, bent to her knees to take his throbbing shaft into her mouth. She laved him tenderly with her tongue, stroked him with her lips, loving the musky taste of him and his murmurings of encouragement so much she felt her own arousal grow in tandem with his. She had meant to affect him, to take total control. Instead, she felt more and more like a wild woman, untamed and capable of anything.

Abruptly, KD used his grip on the back of her head to pull her mouth up and away. She could feel his forearms shaking. He had stopped her because he was about to explode. She kissed his flat stomach, felt his abdominal muscles tremble against her lips before she was drawn upright. KD's hands gripped her bottom and pulled her up against him so her legs had to wrap around his waist. The towel unraveled and fell to the floor, the sultry night air caressing her skin. She gasped when she felt herself swiftly impaled on his hard cock, her inner muscles stretching to accommodate his penetration until his length and width filled her to completion.

"Ah, sugar."

"KD..."

Eyes wide, Kelsey stared into the intense blue of his. She felt the iron restraint with which he controlled his body, heard the tight power in his

voice. "I'm sorry, sugar. I just needed to feel you around me, without anything between us this time. Just for a minute."

"Yes." She nodded and leaned forward to kiss the corner of his mouth.

When she pulled back, his expression was serious. "I would never make you pregnant and leave you, Kelsey. Never."

Kelsey smiled. She hadn't placed as much importance on the example set by his father as he had. "I know." And she did. KD wouldn't intentionally let anyone down. He was an honorable, decent man whom she trusted with her life.

But, could she trust him with her heart?

The thought sobered her and she wondered why her goal of uncomplicated, physically satisfying yet emotionally safe sex kept coming unstuck. *Your heart has nothing to do with this, Kelsey. Nothing.*

KD used his shoulders to push off the door and turn the tables on her by backing her up against the adjacent wall. He framed her face with his hands and kissed her, moving inside her with such careful, aching slowness Kelsey thought she might die of frustration.

She groaned his name into his mouth and he pulled back. "Yes, sugar?"

"I need you. I need more."

"God, I know." He pumped inside her twice more, sending Kelsey near the edge of orgasm before, groaning with obvious reluctance, he pulled out and set her on her feet. He toed off his boots and stepped out of his jeans. He shucked his shirt as he followed her backward retreat down the dimly lit hallway, placing kisses over her face as they went.

Once in her bedroom, Kelsey immediately pulled a condom from her bedside drawer and ripped open the foil packet. The sound of his rumbling laughter brought her avid gaze from his crotch to his face.

"You are impatient, aren't you?"

Kelsey arched a brow. "Don't tell me you want to do that whole so-slow-it-drives-me-insane thing again?"

“You didn’t like that?”

She sent him a mock scowl. “You know I did. But don’t you dare do it to me now.”

“Next time, then.”

KD kissed her forehead tenderly as she sheathed his erection, smiled indulgently when she urged him back onto the bed so she could straddle him.

Kelsey sighed her pleasure when she settled around his hips and speared herself on his silken steel rod. Somehow, despite the fact that KD was a good head taller, they seemed to fit together perfectly, as though they were made to do so. *Made for each other.*

No, Kelsey told herself. Rocking her pelvis, she closed her eyes and concentrated on the sensations of sex. KD’s hands on her breasts, teasing her already painfully erect nipples with his thumbs. The slow, fevered building of her orgasm.

“Open your eyes.” She wanted to refuse. “Kelsey, look at me,” he prompted again, his voice soft with entreaty and she could no more have denied him than she could have stopped making love to him. Yet she opened her eyes with a sense of foreboding. When she saw the raw, naked emotion shining from his gaze, it felt like someone had punched her in the chest.

He smiled, touched her face. Said with stinging clarity, “I love you.”

Kelsey stilled, her heart suspended. It couldn’t be true. It was a lie. A lie he told to women when he took them to bed. The idea horrified her. “Don’t say that.”

“Why not? It’s the truth.”

She shook her head, moved to get off him. He held her in place with his strong hands. He appeared bewildered, even hurt. “Kelsey, I’m in love with you. Why don’t you believe me?”

“Because.” It wasn’t an answer. Kelsey tried to find a logical explanation for her emotions. “You move around. You don’t get attached.”

“I’ve gotten attached to you.”

“Don’t.” Kelsey heard the pleading note in her own voice and felt the fear overwhelming her. She felt it clawing at her from the inside, rising to her throat and bringing the sting of tears to her eyes.

In one swift move, KD flipped her on her back and was on top. He wiped at the wetness at the corner of her eye and looked at her with such tenderness it made Kelsey’s bad memories seem as though they belonged to another life. “I can tell you’ve been hurt before, Kelsey, but I’m guessing it was a long time ago. You have to know that whatever happened before has got nothing to do with what happens now, not if you don’t let it. It doesn’t change the fact that I *love* you.” He moved inside her, stroking her so expertly she felt herself arch to meet him, powerless against the rising tide of pleasure. “I don’t need you to say it back. But I need you to believe me.”

“KD, please. Just...make love to me. Please.”

“Ah, Kelsey,” he sighed and gave in to her request, increasing the pace of his thrusts. “My sweet Kelsey.”

The pressure inside her mounted. Pure physical pleasure engulfed her, the intensity of her emotions adding a piercing element to it. She dug her fingernails into KD’s shoulders hard enough to leave marks, rocking to meet his rhythm. Her breath stuttered as she reached the peak, the spasms gripping her. She threw her head back, moaning as the ecstasy came in waves that threatened to drown her. She heard herself call KD’s name, heard him swear and felt his body stiffen when he reached his own climax as she slid down the other side of hers.

Afterward, he lay for long moments atop her, the weight of his body supported on his elbows. Kelsey ran her touch across his shoulders, felt the corded strength there, the light sheen of sweat dampening his skin.

Eventually, KD lifted his head and placed a soft, slow kiss on her mouth. The look in his eyes wrapped around her heart before he moved to his side, taking her with him so she was gathered in the shelter of his embrace.

The strong, measured thump of his heart vibrated against her forehead and Kelsey noted with some amazement the way her own pulse seemed to slow to keep pace with his. And she felt emotions so indescribable she knew it wasn't possible to speak them aloud. Not yet.

* * *

"I was twenty when I fell in love for the first time."

Kelsey still lay cocooned against KD's body, the thought of moving away unthinkable. She spoke in a soft whisper, one she might have thought he hadn't heard except for the way his arms tightened around her. He didn't ask her to elaborate. He didn't say anything. He simply waited.

"He was all wrong, of course. I knew he went through women like T-shirts and he had ethically questionable written all over him. But, for me, it was love at first sight. I went after him, really. Not that he objected. It all moved pretty fast. We were in bed before our first date ended. He was my first, not that it mattered to him. I was so blind in love I just figured he must feel the same way.

"The first clue I got that he didn't was when a woman I didn't know approached me in the street. She was pregnant and so hateful toward me. She said the baby was Adam's, that he was going to marry her. I was speechless. It never occurred to me that he was involved with another woman. It was only when I confronted him that he made it pretty clear that *I* was that other woman. He wasn't two-timing me, he was two-timing *with* me. It wasn't his fault, he said, that I'd confused sex with love."

KD's voice was gravelly with anger. "He was a prick. He didn't deserve you."

"I know that," Kelsey rolled onto her back and turning her face to the wall. "But he was right about one thing. I did confuse sex with love. It was something I continued to do for years after he was long gone. I kept falling into these bad relationships with men, any man who even acted

like he cared. I slept with them too soon, often unwisely. I'm not saying I was promiscuous...at least, I didn't mean to be. But when I started looking back on all the failed relationships—flings really—I started to feel ashamed. Stupid.”

His fingers on her chin urged her to face him. “If you say you're ashamed of us...”

“No, I didn't mean that. But I *am* confused. I gave up that life before I came here. Moving to Holly Hill was like a fresh start. I'd read this article about ‘born again virgins’, waiting for Mr. Right.” She twisted her lips. “I know that must sound ridiculous.”

“No, it doesn't. Well, maybe the virgin part.” He sent a pointed glance to her naked body spread out beside him in bed. “At least, *now*.”

“Hmm.” Kelsey was surprised to feel a grin tugging at her lips. “Why, Mr. McKinley, you've laid waste to my virtue.”

He groaned and fell back on the pillow. “This is exactly why I wasn't supposed to sleep with you. I don't want you to be confused, Kelsey. Not about us.”

They lay like that for a long moment in the moonlight-silvered dark, side-by-side, staring up at the play of shadows on the ceiling, lost in their own thoughts. At length, KD grumbled, “This is all your fault.”

“*My* fault?”

“If you hadn't set out to seduce me...”

Kelsey warmed to the teasing banter. “You loved it.”

“If you weren't so darned sexy. So bloody irresistible.”

“If you weren't such a hot-blooded male with a raging sex drive.”

He turned his head toward her. “If I didn't love you so much.”

Kelsey kept her eyes trained at the roof. But she couldn't stop her heart from pounding to life. Oh, darn it. She wanted so badly to believe him.

She felt him shift beside her so he was propped on his elbow. He touched her face. “You're afraid to believe me. You think I'm not afraid?”

Hell, the most meaningful relationship I've had before this has been with my truck."

Kelsey forced out a laugh. "Kinky."

"You don't know the half of it. I have this idea about getting you in the back seat..." He groaned. "But I'll leave that for another time. I couldn't prove how much you mean to me by conducting any kind of proper courtin', as it turns out. I couldn't keep my hands off you. So I figure I'll just have to prove it by staying real close instead."

Kelsey's heartbeat kicked up several notches, exhilaration chasing down her fear. Oh, she really did like the sound of that.

She sighed when his hand found her breast and cupped it, moaned when he brought his head down and drew his tongue languidly over her nipple. When he brought the turgid peak all the way into his mouth and gently suckled, Kelsey arched off the bed and threaded her fingers through his hair, urging him closer. He obliged, increasing the pressure of his lips and tongue by slow degrees, adding intensity to her pleasure in incremental steps that chased away all coherent thought. She could think of nothing other than his mouth on her, driving her toward a state of heightened arousal that had dampness bursting inside her, drenching her sex and leaving her panting raggedly on the bed by the time he lifted his head.

And then he started on her other breast.

"Oh God, KD," she husked when the pleasure fast approached unbearable. "You're driving me out of my mind."

"Good," he growled, shifting so he was settled between her legs, both breasts molded in his hands as he placed a trail of kisses over her stomach. "I don't want you to think. Just feel, sugar. Savor everything I do to you."

Kelsey's stomach fluttered as he traced a circle around her navel with his tongue. Her hips rocked against his chest and she felt a spike of gratification that made her gasp.

He traced kisses over her abdomen, his hands still caressing her sensitized breasts. "Tell me what you're feeling, Kelsey. Talk to me."

“I feel...like I might come if you so much as...flex a muscle.”

His soft laughter was all male satisfaction. “I think I can do better than that.” Taking his hands from her breasts, he positioned them on her hips, lifting her pulsing flesh toward his mouth.

The brush of his hot breath alone made her quiver. When he flicked out his tongue and moved it slowly over her labia she melted, damp heat pooling at her core. He licked again and again, millimeters away from the place she most wanted that tongue to go. She shifted impatiently, silently hinting.

“Talk to me, Kelsey.”

She couldn’t do it. She had to do it. “I want you to...lick me. Make me come with your tongue.”

He made a guttural sound and lowered his head. Parting her folds with his lips, he found the nub of her clitoris and slid his tongue over it. Slowly, drawing out the sensation so Kelsey whimpered. “Yes, that’s it. Just like that.” He drew his tongue over her again, adding pressure. Kelsey moved her hips to meet the thrust of his tongue. His hands clamped over her thighs, holding her still as he kept lavaging her, gradually increasing the urgency.

At last, Kelsey cried out with release, heat and wetness bursting from her. As her sounds of ecstasy subsided, KD dipped his tongue inside her hot cavern and lapped up the juices her orgasm had produced.

Rising on his arms, KD stalked up the bed until he was face-to-face with her. His expression was one of primal determination. “I love the way you come, Kelsey. So wild and sweet. I’m going to make you come again. Roll over.”

He could have demanded anything and Kelsey would have complied. She rolled onto her stomach, placing a leg each side of his knees. His hands caressed her buttocks, his sounds of appreciation mingling with the crinkle of another foil package. He slid a hand beneath her stomach and lifted her until the front of his thighs rested against the back of hers.

She felt the strain of his erection digging into the groove of her ass. Almost involuntarily her hips tilted backward, seeking the more insistent

press of his cock. KD groaned and moved to grab her flesh, parting her cheeks as he edged the tip of his length inside her pussy. With a moan of desire not quite fulfilled, Kelsey pressed her ass backward, seeking a deeper entry.

"Shit," KD swore, and pushed halfway in. Her muscles clenched around his shaft, grabbing at him and trying to pull him in further.

"KD, please. I want to feel you inside me. I need your cock."

"*Fuck!*" He sank in all the way, the angle and depth of his penetration making Kelsey gasp in shock and delight. When he began to pump his shaft repeatedly, she found and matched his rhythm, thrusting her ass back with each plunge of his cock.

"Oh, Christ. Kelsey, help me." He stopped moving, his breath coming in hard puffs. "Touch yourself for me. I need you to come, too."

Bracing herself on the bed with one elbow, Kelsey reached between her legs and found her clit, swollen and still damp from KD's tongue. As she began massaging the needy flesh with her hand, KD resumed his cadence. The twin sensations of her hand and his thundering cock driving with measured insistence had her leaping toward the apex.

"Jesus, I'm gonna blow."

"Yes, KD. I'm coming!"

Her shriek mingled with his hoarse groan as his hips jerked, his cock pulsing as he spilled himself inside her.

He fell onto his hands behind her, the light bump against her back enough to unbalance Kelsey. She dropped to the bed and let out a startled giggle. She felt shaky and boneless, completely and utterly drunk.

Love drunk?

Sex drunk. Good...no, *fantastic* sex drunk.

"Oh, Christ." KD landed on top of her, immediately rolling to his side and taking her with him, her back to his front.

"Ditto," Kelsey said, her breathing still as erratic as her heartbeat. Nothing in her life had ever felt so good, so utterly wild. So right.

Oh dear, definitely love drunk. Silly, reckless girl—you've fallen for him.

"You might as well give in, sugar." KD pulled her to snuggle more tightly against him. "And let me love you. 'Cause no way in hell am I ever going to let you go."

* * *

Kelsey woke with a smile on her face, one thought filling her mind, *KD McKinley loves me.*

A bird twittered in the tree outside her bedroom window, the soft amber light of morning turning the room to gold. She was alone in the bed, but somehow that fact didn't concern her. Wherever KD had had to go, she knew he would be back.

KD McKinley loves me.

Kelsey rolled over to the side KD had slept on, hugging his pillow to her cheek and inhaling the unique woodsy, natural scent that was KD.

Eventually, reality intruded. Kelsey recalled it was a workday and forced herself to glance at the bedside clock. Seven-thirty and she would probably be late to the office if she didn't get her butt out of bed right away. She wandered in a rebelliously unhurried fashion to the bathroom. It was her business for goodness sake. No one could fire her.

The leisurely, warm shower cleared her head and provided the resolve to put on a pot of coffee. She sat in the kitchen in her robe, her feet propped up on the opposite chair, and drank the brew gratefully.

I love KD McKinley.

"I love KD McKinley."

The words seemed to echo in the kitchen. Her lips turned upward before doubts could stop them. Darn the man. He'd gone and made her fall in love. She was head over heels, crazy about him and she had no idea where that reality was going to take her.

What exactly did love mean to a man like KD? Commitment? Family? Marriage?

With a surprising lack of equivocation, Kelsey knew she wanted to spend the rest of her life with KD. But quite possibly he didn't feel the same way.

But marriage to KD. It was a tempting, tempting dream...

With a start Kelsey sat bolt upright. How could she possibly have forgotten all about Stefan's proposal? Kelsey knew she would have to return his ring—the ring!—as soon as possible. To hang on to it any longer wouldn't be right, even though she'd only kept the damn thing at Stefan's insistence.

Pulling the small velvet case from her shoulder bag, Kelsey couldn't resist taking another look at the sparkling trio of diamonds set in their shiny band of gold. Would she ever receive anything like it from KD? Did it really matter if she had him anyway?

In the same way that the urge to try on outlandish hats in department stores was irresistible, Kelsey couldn't help but slip the gold ring on. Admiring the way it graced her hand, she imagined what it might be like to have KD slip it on her finger.

Kelsey laughed at her foolishness, feeling her cheeks heat. She was fourteen years old again and fantasizing about her handsome prince. Any minute now she was going to start doodling her name in all its married variations—*Mrs. KD McKinley. Mrs. Kelsey Simmons-McKinley. Kelsey McKinley.*

With a rueful groan, Kelsey went to pull the ring off. It was a snug fit, however, and after a few attempts she realized it was quite securely lodged beneath her knuckle.

The sound of footfalls in the hallway seemed like her imagination at first. But KD's drawled "Hey, sugar", and his sudden presence in the kitchen were as real as the ring on her finger. If he saw the ring... Well, nothing good could come from that.

In a flurry of panic, Kelsey stood, knocking the chair beside her over as she did. KD moved forward to right it and Kelsey took the opportunity

to stuff the velvet box back in her bag and surreptitiously make one last futile attempt at tugging off the ring. When it wouldn't budge, she was forced to turn and face KD and link her hands behind her back by way of concealment.

"Didn't mean to scare you, gorgeous." KD smiled down in that sexy-as-sin way he had, making Kelsey's already racing heart leap a few hurdles, too. If this kept up, she might actually faint.

"You just surprised me. I thought you'd left."

"I went to get breakfast." He held up a brown paper bag with the logo of Holly Hill's bakery emblazoned on it. "I was going to cook you breakfast in bed but..." His expression turned rueful. "I'm not much of a cook."

"You were going to make me breakfast?"

"Yeah."

Had a man ever, once, wanted to make her breakfast in bed? In all her experience, she couldn't remember a single similar incident. "Oh, KD. That's so sweet." She threw her arms around him, kissing him for all she was worth.

What did it matter if he didn't propose, if he *never* wanted to get married? A man who made love the way he did, who made her laugh and brought her breakfast... It didn't get better than that.

Kelsey realized she didn't need for everything to be picture perfect. It was the heart that counted. And her heart already had everything it needed.

"Wow." KD drew back. He rubbed his hands over her back, looking into her eyes with a bemused expression. "I've never been called sweet before."

"Get used to it, tough guy."

His lips hitched upward. "I'd like to get used to you."

"What do you have in mind?"

He pulled her hand from around his neck and placed a kiss to her palm. "I've been thinking..."

His voice trailed off, his eyes locking on her hand. Too late, she remembered the ring.

Taking a step back, KD held her left hand by her fingertips, as though he couldn't bare the thought of touching the offending piece of jewelry. His eyes, now shuttered and cold where they had been filled with love and warmth a second ago, returned to her face. His voice was lethally soft. "What the hell is this?"

Chapter Twelve

KD stared hard into the eyes of the only woman he had ever loved and willed there to be a logical explanation. Prayed that she would refute his first, acutely painful suspicion, because it was just too horrible to comprehend.

But she didn't refute anything. She stared, apparently dumbfounded, while KD read the guilt in her eyes and drew his own inescapable conclusions.

"It's a—it's a ring," she finally supplied unnecessarily. "But it's not what you think."

"What? It's not an engagement ring?"

She swallowed and admitted. "Yes, it's an engagement ring. But I was just—"

"From Stefan, right?" KD demanded hotly, the blood coursing through his head and apparently rendering him half-witted. He needn't ask who the wretched ring was from or what she was doing wearing it for that matter. It was all too obvious. He had always been no more than an affair to her, not good enough to be considered for any greater purpose. The runner-up in a race he'd never run before.

"KD, listen to me." Her voice sounded high-pitched and panicked. "Stefan gave me the ring yesterday, but I said—"

"Yesterday?" KD stopped her, his tone incredulous despite his attempts to keep his emotions under control. "When the hell did he have a chance to talk to you yesterday?"

"At the pub. But—"

"After I left? Before you came back here and made love to me. Am I getting this right?"

Tears were streaming down her face now, her expression frantic. Given the way things were turning out, his instinct to reach out and wipe those tears away infuriated him. "Kelsey, I made love to you last night. It wasn't just sex. I held you while you slept and I told you I loved you *dammit*. Did any of that mean anything to you? Am I just some kind of joke to you?"

"No! KD, you have to listen," she shot at him, vehement enough to arrest his attention. "Stefan asked me to marry him yesterday, but I said no, I swear it. He made me take the ring anyway, in case I changed my mind. But I won't. I can't. Because of you. How could you think I would marry him after last night?"

KD laughed and it caused pain to slice through his chest. He looked down at the hand he was still holding, the hand of the woman he loved that bore another man's ring and felt all his fledgling hopes crashing into the ground. "I think the ring kind of tells its own tale, sugar."

The pet name made his throat hurt. He'd thought she was his sugar, sweet as cherry pie and all his. But she wasn't. Never would be. How could he have thought a working class carpenter would satisfy a woman who was bound and determined to have it all? "You might have said no last night, but you sure must be having second thoughts if you're sitting here cooing over his ring."

"I wasn't cooing. Oh, KD." She sighed, a flush reddening her cheeks. "I was just being stupid, thinking about us. I don't know if you'll understand."

"Oh, I understand alright. I understand everything."

He spat the words, felt the restriction in his throat cinching tighter. He had to get out of here before he did something stupid, something he hadn't done since he was a kid. Something like cry.

Turning on his heel, he strode from the room, ignoring the sound of Kelsey calling his name, and climbed blindly into his truck. With a screech of tires, he hurtled away from the house, toward the sunrise.

* * *

Her head pounding and her eyelids as gritty as new sandpaper from the effect of this morning's hopeless crying jag, Kelsey sat at her desk and put her head in her hands, willing the phone not to ring for ten minutes while she collected herself. She just needed some time to figure out what to do next.

After KD had stormed out, after she had sobbed in self-pity and frustration, Kelsey finally managed to pull herself together enough to remove the obstinate ring with soap, drag on the first skirt and blouse she pulled out of her wardrobe, and drive resolutely to Stefan's office.

Though not yet nine, he was there, as she knew he would be. Stefan was a workaholic, a trait she had admired in him once. Now she felt sorry for him, pouring his convictions into something that would never bring him true happiness. She had done some of that herself, but had searched for something more meaningful in Stefan, a man she'd thought a kindred spirit. That quest had proven fruitless. Instead, happiness had come from somewhere she'd never expected.

Swinging open the door of his office and ignoring his startled expression, Kelsey placed the velvet ring box in the center of his desk. "I can't marry you, Stefan. I'm in love with KD McKinley."

By the time she left five minutes later, she was one diamond ring lighter and certain that Stefan harbored no remaining hopes for a future between them.

That matter laid permanently to rest, Kelsey had driven to her own office and called Gabby, spilling out the whole sorry tale. Her friend had insisted that the misunderstanding could be sorted out and that KD and she could patch things up, but Kelsey had her doubts. She kept remembering the look in KD's eyes when he had seen the ring, the hurt and confusion that had been evident before anger clouded his expression. He had been wounded deeply by the conclusions he had made when she was too dumbfounded to provide an immediate

explanation, and she wasn't sure he would listen to anything she had to say now.

Why, oh why, had she put on that stupid ring? What had seemed like a harmless gag might have destroyed her best chance at happiness.

She called KD's mobile phone, hoping to make him listen, but it was switched off. Determinedly she dove into paperwork, spending the morning doing mindless tasks she could have passed on to Donna. Instead, she sent her assistant on an early lunch break, telling her to switch the sign on the door to closed.

She must have succeeded in losing herself in the monotony of filing and defragging her computer because the bell on the office door announced Donna's return sooner than she'd expected.

The girl stuck her marine black hair around the partition. "Hey, boss. I brought you a club sandwich from the pub."

"Thanks." Kelsey tried to smile as she took the steam-stained brown paper bag. "I'm not really hungry, though."

"Oh, well." Shrugging, Donna turned to leave, then swiftly turned back. "You and Laura's son, the hot one who's been in here a couple of times. You're on together, right?"

She barked a laugh. "Is that what people are saying?" At her assistant's chagrined look, Kelsey waved a reassuring hand. "It doesn't matter. It's true. At least it was. He's not really talking to me at the moment." Would he ever talk to her again? Kelsey had to find a way to make him. "Why do you bring that up?"

Obviously dying to spill the latest gossip, Donna came in to take a seat on the corner of Kelsey's desk. But she looked at Kelsey with some trepidation. Kelsey eyed her through her lashes. "What is it, Donna?"

"Well, someone's going to tell you soon enough, I suppose. Just please don't freak out."

Kelsey crossed a finger over her chest. She didn't think anything could possibly "freak her out" at this point. "I promise."

"Okay. KD McKinley gave Mr. Henley a bloody nose."

“What?”

Donna was indignant at Kelsey’s clamoring disbelief. “You said you wouldn’t freak out.”

Barely holding on to patience, Kelsey stood and leaned over the desk, glaring at her assistant menacingly. “Donna, tell me what happened before I get it in my head to fire you.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“You *do not* want to try me out today. Spill it.”

“Okay, but don’t shoot the messenger, okay? Greg and I were having lunch at The Central—did I tell you I’m seeing Greg Danvers now? He’s really kind of sweet in a way—”

“Donna.”

“Okay, okay. Greg and I were at the pub having lunch and we were just leaving when Mr. McKinley walked in as Mr. Henley was walking out. We were right behind Mr. Henley so we heard everything. They didn’t say anything for a moment, either of them, and I thought, wow, this is intense. Anyway, finally Mr. Henley sticks out his hand, like he wanted to shake. And he said, ‘I guess there comes a time when you have to admit that a good man has bested you’ or something like that. He always talks like he’s got something stuck up his—”

“I’m aware of how Mr. Henley, I mean Stefan, talks. I did date him for six months, if you’ll remember.”

“Yeah, I remember. So what’s it like having two good-looking guys fighting over you?”

“Not as much fun as it sounds.” Kelsey eyed the younger woman in a way that had her immediately continuing with her story.

“Well, Mr. McKinley really didn’t like what Mr. Henley said. He didn’t shake his hand and he said, ‘Kelsey isn’t some carnival prize to be won and lost.’ Mr. Henley seemed surprised. He said of course you weren’t a carnival prize, but that he was just trying to let Mr. McKinley know that he thought the best man had won.”

“Oh, no,” Kelsey groaned, fearing she was beginning to get the picture of events loud and clear. KD thought that Stefan had “won” her. The unwitting “carnival prize”, she thought with a mental wince. He must have thought Stefan was rubbing his face in it.

“Oh, yes. That was when Mr. McKinley said, well he started swearing. He called Mr. Henley an arrogant, insensitive so and so and then he just swung. Mr. Henley hit the deck and his nose was like, bloody. Everyone gasped and just stared, and Mr. McKinley looked like he wanted to go another round until Johnno came and pushed him back.”

Kelsey looked at Donna with dread. “Not *the* Johnno? Constable Matt Johnson the police officer?”

Donna’s nod confirmed her worst fears. “One and the same. Johnno told Mr. McKinley to go away and cool down, but Mr. Henley started ranting on that he was a menace to society and should be locked away. So that’s what happened.”

“What do you mean?” Kelsey asked, incredulous. “Johnno *locked him away?*”

“Mr. Henley—I think he was a bit embarrassed about being slugged in the public bar for all the world to see—wanted to press charges for assault and Johnno said, alright, and took Mr. McKinley to the watchhouse.”

“Do you mean to tell me KD is in *jail?*”

“Well, in the lockup at the police station anyway, until someone can post bail, I guess.”

“My God, Donna, why didn’t you tell me this straight away?” Kelsey demanded, pulling her handbag from the bottom drawer of her desk.

“That would have ruined the chronology of the story. Hey, where are you going?”

“To the police station,” Kelsey called, halfway out the door.

* * *

KD paced his cell, back and forth, forth and back, absently flexing his right fist as he moved. Henley had deserved that swing, but KD really wished he hadn't done it. Not least because now he was stuck in a gray cube of a room with three walls and a row of impenetrable bars, nothing but a narrow cot for comfort and too much damn time to think.

He regretted giving in to immature anger, like a child lashing out because he didn't get what he wanted. All along he'd known the idea of him and Kelsey together was a long shot. Hell, you only had to take one look to know she was all class, smart and stylish and successful. And who the hell was he? A bum, that's who. Just like his father.

No, not like his father. KD gave himself that much. He had really wanted to make Kelsey happy and would have done anything to that end. He had meant it when he said he would never leave her if he got her pregnant. More than that, he had started secretly fantasizing about doing just that. And about staying in Holly Hill and raising the kids that had been borne from their love for each other.

But that had been an illusion. She didn't love him though, God knows, he loved her. Loved her through his disappointment and the pain that still gripped at his chest. Loved her despite her choosing another man. KD wondered if he would ever stop. Would he have to see her and Henley together? Suffer through tales of their impending nuptials as they spread like wildfire through town?

No, he couldn't stand it. Like a coward, he was going to leave Holly Hill. The thought of seeing Kelsey on any kind of regular basis and not being able to touch her, to hold her, kiss her and make love to her, was simply unbearable. He was definitely going to shoot through, just as soon as he could get out of this cell.

As KD moved to the bars to call out to the constable in what would probably be a vain attempt to cajole an early release, he heard a commotion coming from the outer room. The constable was trying to calm someone down and when he heard the other person's voice rising higher and higher he realized it belonged to Kelsey.

Snatches of conversation filtered through. “Miss Simmons, if you’d just calm down—”

“Calm down? How can I calm down when the man I love is locked up in there?”

The man I love?

She continued, “What do you mean it’s not enough? Hell, take my credit cards, take everything.” KD heard the sound of assorted items being spilled on the constable’s desk. He could imagine her upending the contents of that oversized handbag-slash-briefcase. “Just let him out, will you? I’ll vouch for him.”

“I think it’s probably wise that Mr. McKinley cools down...rather wait for the boss to get back...hear what he has to say about all this.”

Kelsey pushed out a growl of frustration, a lash of temper. After that her voice softened and KD couldn’t make out what she was saying.

KD’s lips twitched, but he dared not hope Kelsey’s hysterics meant as much as he wished them to. Maybe she wanted in to berate him for hitting her precious Stefan.

She’d called him the man she loved.

KD pushed himself away from the bars in disgust, telling himself to rein in his love-struck hopes. The last time he’d seen her, she was wearing Stefan’s ring.

Given what he knew of her steely determination, it was not altogether surprising that Kelsey eventually gained entrance to the back of the police station, the area that housed the two small cells used for temporary containment of lawbreakers. That’s what he was now, a lawbreaker. An assault charge was going to look great on his resume.

And make him just that little bit less worthy of a woman like Kelsey.

Her hair was a mess, she hadn’t bothered to clip it back, and wayward strands hung across her face before she swept them back with an impatient move of her hand. She hadn’t put on any makeup to conceal the puffy redness of her eyes. KD remembered she’d been crying, too, the last time he’d seen her. Something else seemed off about her appearance that KD couldn’t quite put his finger on. He was too busy

fighting his elation at seeing her. She saw the way he'd looked at her clothes. "See what you've done? I was too upset to coordinate my outfit this morning."

KD figured out what had been bugging him. Her navy and white blouse clashed horribly with her yellow skirt and shiny black shoes. Kelsey Simmons, the queen of color coordination, looked like she'd dressed with both eyes closed.

A moment later her accusatory tone registered.

"What *I've* done to *you*?"

"Yes, what *you've* done. You left without giving me a chance to say what I wanted this morning. You won't talk to me, but you sure have the time and energy to go around hitting people because you're mad at me."

"I knew it. You just wanted to come in here and harangue me. I don't want to hear about how I hurt you're precious fiancé."

"I don't care that you hit Stefan, he'll live," she surprised him by saying. "And I'll get him to drop the charges as soon as I clear up the misunderstanding for him and you both."

"Misunderstanding?"

"Yes. The one where Stefan thinks I'm in love with you, but you seem to think I'm in love with Stefan. I'm not by the way—in love with Stefan that is. Neither am I going to marry him. I dropped by his office to tell him so—*again*—this morning, a few hours before you dropped him at the pub."

KD thought this over for a few moments, his recollection of the past hour's events changing shape in his mind. "So, when Stefan said that I had to acknowledge the best man won..."

"He was referring to you, you numbskull. He thinks you and I are going to live happily ever after."

Do you? KD almost asked, but stopped himself by recalling how he'd felt when he had seen that damn ring on her finger. She must still have second thoughts about turning down Stefan's proposal, even after the night they had spent together, if she had been tempted to try on his ring.

And to think he might actually owe the guy an apology. It was almost enough to make KD hit him again. "Okay, so misunderstanding number one is cleared up, Kels. You are not in love with Stefan and you're not going to marry him."

"Because I'm in love with you."

KD stopped pacing to look at her. Her eyes were soft, hazel brown and full of sincerity. His hopeful heart believed her, but he refused to let it take over. "If that's really true, Kelsey, tell me why you were wearing his ring when you thought I wasn't going to find out this morning?"

Sheepishly, she bit her lip and lowered her head. It was all KD needed to see. Resolutely, he turned his back on her so she wouldn't see his utter despair and forced a numb calm into his voice. "For God's sake, Kelsey, stop torturing me and get out of here."

In a moment he heard the staccato tapping of her heels on the cement floor, each retreating footfall stabbing him in the heart. She was leaving. It was the way it had to be. He couldn't accept an uncertain love from her. Greedily, he had to have it all.

But a moment later, KD was startled out of his brooding depression by the tapping of her heels returning, followed swiftly by a rattling of keys and the sound of the constable's protests. "Hey, Miss Simmons, you can't go in there!"

"The hell I can't. Until you let him out, I'm going in and I'd like to see you stop me."

Within seconds Kelsey was in the cell with him and had tossed the keys to freedom back to the young policeman. Eventually Johnno comprehended the pointlessness of reasoning with Kelsey and walked away, shaking his head and muttering about his superior coming back and whipping his butt.

Astonished, KD couldn't find any words. Kelsey surveyed his face, her fists on her hips, before she took a step toward him. "I should have said this last night when you tried to tell me what an unworthy heel you were, but you *are* a good man, KD McKinley." A whisper of a smile graced her

lips and tugged at his heart. “You’re stubborn and fat-headed, too quick to draw conclusions, not to mention a little rough around the edges—”

“Is this how you define ‘good’?”

“But I happen to like the rough edges,” she continued, ignoring his derisive inquiry. “I happen to think you’re a diamond in the rough I never want to polish. You care about people. You’re honest about what you want. You’ve taught me to be honest with myself—demanded it. You’re what I’ve needed all along. I wish I’d seen it this clearly straight away, but that’s my failing, not yours. You’re the only one who turns me inside out, who makes me so mad and so happy at the same time that I don’t know whether to hit you or kiss you.”

She moved toward him while KD’s feet planted roots, keeping him anchored. Hell, where could he go? He was locked in here with her. Not altogether an unappealing prospect, but he cautioned himself to protect his battered heart. It couldn’t take another blow now, not when it was softening like ice cream in the hot sun with every word she spoke, every move she made.

Reaching up, she traced a line over his jaw with her fingertips, the light touch making his pulse jump. “I’m going to tell you why I tried on Stefan’s ring, but to use my assistant’s phraseology, I don’t want you to freak out.” She assessed his unyielding expression with evident foreboding. Heaving a sigh, she plunged ahead, not quite looking him in the eye any longer. “I was pretending the ring was from you, imagining what it might have been like had you been the one to propose, not Stefan. Trying the idea on for size, so to speak.”

KD didn’t breathe. “And?”

Her next words came out in a rush, each one scrambling to catch up to the one in front of it. She held on to his shirt and looked up beseechingly. “And I know it’s way too soon to be having those kinds of thoughts and that the very idea has probably got you ready to run for the hills. But I’m not picking out china patterns or bridal bouquets. Yet I can’t promise that I’ll never want to. You have a right to know what you’d be getting yourself into, if you’d just let me love you like I want to.”

She took another fast, shallow breath. "I love you, KD McKinley, and I already know I want to spend the rest of my life with you. If you don't feel that way, too, it's okay. I don't expect that much right now. But this, this making plans and setting goals and trying to create the future, it's what I do. When I see something I want, I just try and grab it and hold on to it if I can. And you, you're something that I want to grab on to and hold for as long as you'll put up with me. I know I'm crazy and I'm rushing things with all this talk of proposals, but I promise I can wait forever if I have to. We'll live together if you want. Just please don't take your love back."

Reverently, KD dared to touch her face. It finally dawned on him that she meant it. She meant every last word and she actually thought her ardor would scare him off. Well, maybe the old KD would have headed for the nearest road out of town, but not now. Now his heart lifted and, without planning to, he felt himself lifting Kelsey into his arms and spinning her around until she squealed with delight and he plonked her feet back on the floor.

KD said, "Take it back? You're crazy if you think I ever could. Ah, sugar. I love you, too. I love you so much I can't see straight." And then he kissed her so hard and so full, pouring all he felt into it.

* * *

Constable Matt Johnson found them locked in an embrace, hands all over the place, lips glued together, Kelsey's blouse pulled loose from her skirt, KD's hair even more mussed than when he'd been brought in. Johno cleared his throat conspicuously. "Excuse me, Mr. McKinley, but you're free to go. Someone's posted your bail."

To the constable's growing bafflement, KD waved him off and went right on kissing that cute-as-a-button Simmons woman, completely ignoring him. Eventually he left them alone and went out to face the woman waiting at the front counter.

"Well, where are they?" She patted the newborn she held with automatic, soothing strokes.

“They’re not coming out, Mrs. Murray. They’re...busy.”

Gabby just raised her eyebrows until he clarified with a faint blush. “They’re kissing.”

Her face broke out into a smile. “Well, that’s great, isn’t it? Why don’t you leave them there until they want to come out and I’ll mosey on back home and wait for the post-conjugal visit report. Thanks, Johnno.”

At a loss, Constable Johnson sank heavily into the nearest chair. He had only been a policeman for two months. He really wished his superior would get back and help him out.

In the cell, KD finally pulled back far enough from Kelsey’s delectable mouth to muse, “What do you suppose would happen if that cop walked back in here and found us in the throes of passion?”

“He’d arrest us for public indecency.” Kelsey kissed him long and sweet, then smiled. “So we’d have to stay here all night.”

“You like that idea, huh? I think you have quite the kinky streak in you, Miss Simmons.”

Kelsey arched a seductive brow, bent, KD was sure, on torturing him. “What’s the matter. You wanna spank me?”

KD let out a feral growl. “Since I don’t really think a prison cell is the most romantic location, would you consider shutting up shop for the afternoon and playing hooky with me?”

“Just what did you have in mind?”

He dipped his head and kissed her, using his tongue to indicate what he wanted to do with the rest of her. When he pulled back, her eyes were cloudy with desire, making KD feel damn good. He really was a match for her, in every way that counted. He was going to enjoy matching her every day from now on.

“What I have in mind has to be done in the privacy of our own home.”

“*Our* home?”

“Yeah. Remember when you said we could live together? I want to start that arrangement as soon as possible. Because I can’t bear the

thought of being without you for a single second longer than I have to. If that's really alright with you."

She smiled the prettiest smile he had ever seen. It wrapped itself around him like a blanket and KD knew for sure that his hopeless self was hers for keeps. "That's just fine with me."

His heart skipped a couple of beats before he said the rest. But God, he had to. It had taken him a while to fall, but he'd fallen hard. And he wanted to make sure he kept this woman close to his side in the most time-honored and indisputable way possible. He cleared his throat, feeling sweaty-palmed and filled with nerves. "There is a catch."

Uh-oh, thought Kelsey. She didn't want anything to stand in the way of her starting her future with KD, now that they finally seemed to be on the same page. She tried for levity. "I have to live with Bill Sturgess's ghost?"

"I'll still fix up old Bill's place, but I'd rather we live in yours, to be on the safe side." His grin seemed forced, and the grave look in his eyes made her pulse pound harder. "I'd like to make it ours. And I...ah I want..."

"Goodness, KD." She let out a nervous laugh. "You're scaring me."

"Sorry. I haven't exactly rehearsed this. Maybe this isn't the time or the place."

"KD! Haven't we wasted enough time? If there's a problem, I want to sort it out, right—"

"I want you to start picking out bridal bouquets."

It took a moment for Kelsey to register the meaning of his blurted words. When she did the pounding of her heart got so fast she could barely even distinguish between each beat anymore. "KD, I don't want you to do anything you don't want to do. If you're not ready—"

He rested a finger against her lips. "Oh, I'm ready, alright. I've come to thinkin' that all this time, it wasn't that I didn't want someone to love who would love me back, but that a part of me must have known I had to wait for you. You're the only woman for me, Kelsey Simmons. So, please, put me out of my misery and say you'll marry me."

Kelsey melted. KD needed no rehearsal to have that effect on her. Need shone from his eyes, need and sincerity and love. She recognized it like an old friend, even though she'd never really had it before. No one had loved her the way KD did.

"Oh, KD," she whispered, tears filling her eyes.

"God, I hope they're happy tears."

"Yes." Kelsey did a little dance in her shoes. "Yes, they are and yes, I will. Of course, I'll marry you, Kirkland Dexter McKinley. In fact," she said softly, letting all she felt shine from her eyes, "I'd be honored."

Epilogue

Held up with spaghetti-thin straps, the dress dipped low in the back, exposing a liberal V of honey-hued skin. It draped sensuously over her hips and swished around her ankles as she danced with her brand spanking new husband, her head resting on his shoulder, her lips placed mere millimeters from the strong column of his throat.

Rebelliously white—her love for KD had given her a fresh start, after all—Kelsey had had the dress made for her so it suited her usually hard-to-fit five-foot-three-inch frame perfectly. It was simple, classic, just like the arrangement of flowers in her hair, the swept-up style.

In fact, everything about the day had gone perfectly. Even her mother, who often referred to Holly Hill as “that nondescript backwater you insist on living in” and wouldn’t ordinarily be seen dead in a place like The Central, seemed to have a good time at the reception. She had refrained from fighting with Kelsey’s father and his latest thirty-two-year-old girlfriend. Stefan had the good grace to accept KD’s apology for hitting him and Kelsey’s invitation to the wedding. He even brought a date. Rhonda Bilson, from the famous Rhonda’s, was a lot of fun and Kelsey hoped Stefan would allow her to show him how to live a little.

KD’s mother and Frank danced beside them, laughing together like newlyweds themselves. Gabby and Paul chatted with the other couples at their table while Thomas and Tash played a rousing game of tip and run with the other children who’d come. Dexter, now just over nine months old, was sitting in a high chair, gleefully stuffing a handful of chocolate wedding cake into his mouth.

Despite KD’s grouching that he wanted to get married sooner rather than later, Kelsey had taken nine months to plan her dream spring

wedding in the country. Simple and classic, she'd told him, took more time and effort than a man could ever realize, and she only planned to have one wedding day. Besides, Kelsey had wanted to savor being KD's fiancée.

And now she couldn't wait to start the new chapter of her life as his wife.

"You're not falling asleep there, are you?"

KD's words rumbled against her ear. "No. But I think I'm dreaming." She let out a long, contented sigh. "This day has been so perfect, KD. Thanks for waiting."

"Anything to make you happy, sugar. Even though the wait nearly killed me."

Lifting her head from his chest, Kelsey looked up. She asked the question she'd wanted the answer to for months. "Why have you been in such a hurry? We've practically been living as a married couple anyway."

She was intrigued by the way his expression turned rueful. "I'll tell you, if you promise not to give me what for."

"You didn't seriously think I would change my mind about marrying you, did you?"

He shook her gently in his arms. "Promise."

Kelsey rolled her eyes. "Alright, I promise."

His arm tightened around her while the hand resting on her hip flexed. "I had an overwhelming, primitive drive to let everyone know you were mine. And this ring"—KD pulled their linked hands between their bodies and fingered the plain gold band—"old-fashioned or not, lets every guy in town, hell, in the world, know you're *mine*."

"You territorial brute." Kelsey's eyes narrowed, but her annoyance was only a pretense. She'd known what KD was like when she'd fallen head over heels for him. This independent, modern woman kind of liked the idea of belonging to him.

After all, it went both ways. He belonged to *her*, as well.

“Remember, you promised,” KD warned, a smile on his lips. “You also promised to love me and honor me and obey me—”

“I did *not* say obey.”

“Ah, that’s right. So how am I going to get you to blow this party and come home with me?” His arms tightened around her. “I want to make love to my new wife.”

Kelsey’s breath whooshed out of her. “All you had to do was ask.”

As the matron-of-honor, Gabby helped Kelsey round up all the single ladies for the traditional tossing of the bouquet. Despite an obvious effort to avoid it, Rhonda Bilson caught it and Kelsey sent Stefan a wry wink that made him flush. Everyone lined up to say their farewells as the band played “Say a Little Prayer” by Aretha Franklin. Finally, the newlyweds slipped out into the warm night.

When they pulled up in the driveway of the house that had brought them together, KD held Kelsey’s wrist to prevent her from opening the passenger door. “Just stay put, will you?” He got out of the car and jogged around to her side.

Opening the car door, he pulled her out and lifted her into his arms. “You wouldn’t let me hire you a limo or something else better than this old truck, so the least you can do is let me carry you over the threshold.”

Kelsey laughed as he swept her up the stairs. “I like your old truck. As I recall, we’ve shared some good times in the back seat.”

“That was your fault. If you weren’t so damned irresistible...”

“If you didn’t have such an active imagination in the first place, I wouldn’t have gotten the idea to seduce you at the lookout. It was your fantasy, after all.”

“Hmm. And now it will be forever linked to the memory of us scrambling to get our clothes back on when Matt Johnson came looking for unruly teenagers.”

Kelsey giggled. “Poor Johnno. He has such trouble looking me in the eye.”

Opening the front door, KD stepped into the hall. Leaving the lights off, he whispered, "Welcome home, Mrs. McKinley."

"I really love the way that sounds, Mr. McKinley." Kelsey sighed and sought his lips. They were in the master bedroom before he set her on her feet. A shaft of moonlight came through the French doors and draped over the bed. Their bed, Kelsey thought, glad KD had convinced her not to sell the place for a profit. It hadn't taken much convincing. She would forever associate the house on Greenleaf Street with the wonderful, exhilarating weeks she had spent falling in love with the man who had lovingly refurbished it.

She was glad, too, that she had decided to spend her wedding night here, rather than in a posh hotel on the coast. Tomorrow they would fly to the Whitsunday Islands for a romantic week of swimming, sleeping and making love. But tonight she had wanted to come home.

She walked to the French doors and opened them as KD went about lighting a series of candles scattered around the room. There were flowers, too. The heat from the candles made the heady scent of gardenias and jasmine bloom in the air.

"You went to all this trouble, for me?" Kelsey asked in awe as she looked around the beautifully decorated room. It was the most romantic thing she had ever seen.

"Nothing's too much trouble for you. Besides." He lifted his hands to frame her face. "You look so beautiful in the candlelight."

She whispered his name a moment before he dipped his head. It was a long, slow and deliciously thorough kiss that had heat rising from the pit of her stomach, reaching out to bring fever to her skin, her senses. She had made love with this man countless times, but this time was different, almost reverent. This time he was her husband and it felt like the start of some wonderful adventure.

With a laziness she knew so well and had given up trying to accelerate, KD drew the straps of her dress down her arms. KD relinquished her mouth so he could look her over in the soft light,

murmuring words of praise as he slowly drew her breasts from her strapless lace bra and cupped them in his hands.

Kelsey clutched his jacket for support as he molded her flesh, caressed the swollen peaks. She held on while he traced circles around her nipples with his soft, wet tongue.

When at last he lifted his head they were both breathing hard. KD shucked his jacket, the action showing the impatience he held an iron control over. Reaching forward with hands shaking with need, Kelsey released the buttons on his crisp, white shirt, parting the fabric and sliding her touch over his chest.

With deliberate slowness they finished undressing each other so they stood together naked in the ambient light. When Kelsey slid her hand down his midsection, toward the juncture of his thighs, KD encircled her wrist with his fingers to stay her progress. "I need to talk to you about something."

"Now?" Kelsey asked, arching a brow and using her other hand to trace the flat circle of his nipple.

KD groaned and lowered her to the bed, angling his body out of her reach and pinning her eyes with the seriousness in his. "It's important."

At his expression Kelsey went still. "What is it?"

He twirled her hair around his finger. "You've made no secret of the fact you're ready to start a family whenever I am." He took a deep, shuddering breath. "Well, I'm ready."

"You mean...now?"

His smile was rueful. "I've been ready for a while. Probably ever since Dexter was born. You're going to call me old-fashioned, but I wanted to wait until we were married—do things right. And I know you said we didn't need to get each other a wedding present, but I wanted to give you this."

"Oh, KD." Kelsey reached up to stroke the familiar and cherished planes of his face, the strong line of his jaw. "You are the most beautiful man."

"Aw, shucks. So, is that a yes?"

“Oh, definitely.” Curling her fingers around his neck, Kelsey pulled him down for an emphatic kiss. She lifted her leg and slid her calf around his lower back, drawing him to her.

She was wet and waiting and he slid inside her with ease. Their sighs mingled at the long-awaited contact, the perfect rapture of being joined in the most intimate manner possible. The silken rod of his manhood lay seated within her, no latex barrier between them.

“Oh, God,” KD whispered into her hair, his voice ragged and broken. “God, sugar, you’re so perfect.”

“You are. Please, make love to me.”

“Yes,” he agreed, his eyes trained on hers as he moved. The rhythm had become familiar, but no less enthralling. He knew just how to touch her breasts as he rocked his hips. He laid tender kisses over her face, along her throat as her back arched. Kelsey’s breathing grew erratic as she rose toward climax. But she wanted KD with her.

“KD, sweetheart, I need to feel you come inside me.”

Her words dragged a guttural sound from his throat. He slid his hands beneath her buttocks, achieving a deeper entry, a new angle that made Kelsey moan. He commanded, “You first.”

In time the pace of his thrusts quickened and Kelsey couldn’t hold on any longer. She cried out and grasped KD’s steel hard backside as she came, waves of delicious sensation washing over her. She was still in the ecstatic grip of a long, undulating orgasm when KD groaned and sank deeply, his hips jerking as he spilled himself, hot and fluid, into her.

They lay together for long moments, KD supporting his weight on his elbows as he placed tender, exquisite kisses across her face.

In all her life Kelsey had never dreamed she could feel so loved.

When her breathing relaxed, she gazed dreamily up at her new husband. He was more perfect than any man she could have hoped for. “I wouldn’t have thought it possible, but you are getting better at this.”

“We are,” he corrected, kissing her temple.

“You really want to do this? The pitter-patter of little feet and everything?”

“I do. The thought of you pregnant with my child...it does something to me. Makes me love you more, before it’s even happened.”

Kelsey sighed and traced her fingernails along his spine. “I love it when you get mushy, McKinley. I might be the only one who knows how soft you are inside that hard-as-nails exterior. I like that feeling.”

“Speaking of hard-as-nails...” He grinned, rotating his hips. “Give me about a minute and a half and I’m going to have another go at making our firstborn.”

Kelsey chuckled. But a second later her eyes widened as she felt him stirring to life. “Oh,” she breathed. KD’s rapacity still managed to surprise her. “This is *quite* a wedding present. But, KD, I didn’t get you anything.”

“Yeah, you did.” He smiled into his wife’s face. “You’ve given me everything.”

About the Author

Sami wrote her first romantic tales before she'd ever read a romance. In high school she penned stories about all her friends falling in love with fictitious exotic exchange students or reformable bad boys while she should have been listening to the teacher. Some time later (after somehow managing to get through school) she discovered romance novels and wondered how such magical things could have existed without her ever knowing about them.

She spent years writing in an on-again, off-again fashion—writing had become the irresistible rogue boyfriend who wouldn't hand back his house key. Through numerous jobs, marriage, university, more jobs and toddler taming, writing has always been there. Sami is thrilled to find herself published with Samhain and spends her life juggling other responsibilities with the aim of maximising her writing time. It seems an impossible task some days so every page is worth a victory dance.

To learn more about Sami Lee, please visit www.samilee.com or send an email to Sami at sami.lee7@yahoo.com.au.

Look for these titles by Sami Lee

Coming Soon:

Fijian Fling

Honey is not far from the sting.

A Taste of Honey

© 2007 Lynette Rees

Fran Santini has a secret she keeps from her family. During the day, she works as a waitress, but at night, she is a honey trapper for the Peace of Mind Agency, working for women who suspect their partners are cheating.

Travis O'Connell is minding his own business, enjoying a pint of Guinness at his local pub, when he is accosted by Fran who believes he is her intended target. After all, he has a goatee just as his "wife" described.

Fran, a hopeless honey trapper, fails to realize she has set up the wrong guy. What's more, when the penny finally drops, she is forced into a compromising situation, begging the question: can Fran's job stay a secret for much longer?

At the risk of incurring the wrath of Fran's brother, Antonio, Travis finds himself attracted to sultry Fran Santini. Will the secret draw the couple together or drive them apart?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *A Taste of Honey*:

Franine entered the steam-filled kitchen via the back door.

Big brother, Antonio, stood at the hob stirring a large pan of spaghetti sauce. He looked a little stressed, the way he concentrated on the task in hand. Normally, he carried it out automatically. He looked up, his face relaxing when he saw her.

"Hi, Sis, what happened to you?"

One day he was going to find out what else she did for a living, one day they might all find out—but not at this moment.

"Just a bit delayed in the rush hour traffic." It was a half-truth. Would anyone forgive her or even pat her on the back if they knew the whole truth? She very much doubted it. "What's going on?" she asked to change the subject.

"Looks like Dad's interviewing for a new head chef. I told him I'd be up for the job, but he won't have it. Why does he have to bring a stranger into the family business, Sis?" For a moment, Antonio sounded sad.

"I suppose it's because he fears you might leave some day soon..."

"I won't. I promise. Those wanderlust days are behind me. I just want to find me a nice girl to settle down with."

"Where's that coffee?" Mamma stood by the serving hatch. "Don't tell me you haven't made it, Toni. Not when your father specifically asked you to."

Antonio shook his head and carried on stirring.

Mamma threw up her arms in despair. "*Mamma mia*, how come I raised a boy like you who won't even listen to his own papa?"

"It's okay, Mamma." Fran had to save the situation and rescue Antonio yet again from his bad behaviour. She picked up a white order slip the waitress must have left for her brother. "He asked me to do it. I won't be long."

"They want brandy in it, *cara mia*."

"Okay." Fran shot her brother her best scathing glance and gave him a dig in the ribs for good measure. "For heaven's sake. Grow up. Will you get over it? You don't have the experience for head chef."

"Maybe not. But I bet I know more about Italian cooking than that Irish bloke sitting out there."

"You got something against the Irish?" she asked, filling up the two coffee mugs from the silver Gaggia machine.

"Not at all. Not if they aren't after the same job as myself. I've been waiting for years for Dad to put me in that position, yet he never does."

"Perhaps, before you take on that sort of responsibility, Antonio, you're going to have to prove yourself. Oh and by the way, I like Irish

people.” She thought back to the Irish bloke in the pub, poor man. She would make a conscious effort to be nice to this one should he get the job. She knew Papa went very much by his instincts and they never proved him wrong. The last chef had been great, but he had to leave suddenly and go back to Scotland when his father had taken ill.

She opened a bottle of Five Star brandy and poured a tot into each cup, placed them on a tray with a plate of raffia biscuits and pushed open the swing door that led into the restaurant.

Humming quietly, she made her way to the alcove where her father sat with the interviewee. Her father was in full animation, gesticulating wildly with his hands. He appeared to be getting on well with the man, whoever he was. Fran could only just make out the back of him, smartly dressed and leaning forward across the table, hanging onto her father’s every word.

“I’ve brought the coffees.” She placed the tray on the table, and was just about to introduce herself to the prospective new chef when she froze in horror. It was him, the man from the pub last night. He was obviously just as horrified. His eyes widened and his mouth fell open as if to say something, but he closed it again.

The moment was broken as her father said, “Fran, I’d like you to meet the new head chef, Travis O’Connell. Mr. O’Connell, this is my daughter, Francine.”

Shifting her gaze from the floor, Fran looked into the man’s eyes, silently sending him a message. If her father should ever find out what her other job was...

Travis searched the woman’s face. What was she trying to tell him? She was pleading with him not to mention anything about last night, he guessed. This was going to be a great way to have his revenge on a lunatic woman. He was about to say, “Mr. Santini, I am afraid I can no longer work here. I cannot work with a woman who tried to set me up, who walked into a pub and caused trouble for me last night.” But

instead, he smiled, all the while keeping his eyes fixed on hers. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Santini. I look forward to working with you."

The woman in front of him gulped. He had her over a barrel now and, oh, how he would love to *have her* over a barrel. She owed him big time and she knew it.

"Likewise, Mr. O'Connell. If there's anything else I can do for you, please let me know."

"I'm sure I'll think of something," he muttered under his breath, grinning as he watched her walk away in a daze, almost bumping into another table. He had rattled her cage just as she had rattled his last night.

Did you ever want to live a different life? Or actually have a life?

Ellie's Dream

© 2007 Margaret Wilson

The last thing Ellie Newman expected to see was her husband wrapped in the arms of a blonde. Talk about a wake-up call.

With her son almost grown, her job a bore and a husband whose hobbies don't include her, she is ready for a change.

Out of the blue, Ellie gets a chance to live another life when she goes to New York City for the summer to escape her problems. She gets a job of sorts, pet-sitting for her friend's cousin.

She loves New York. The parks, the food, the museums, the clubs all beckon. The only annoyance is Seth, the beast who unexpectedly shares the apartment.

Seth wants her to leave. Women are trouble and he needs to focus on his music. But she is hard to ignore, especially after they discover a mutual love of jazz. Ellie is up for a fling. After all, who can resist such a bad boy?

Ellie's Dream is about finding your heart, finding your passion and letting go.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Ellie's Dream*:

Seth and Marshall pushed their way through the crowd to the edge of the dance floor. They looked around for Ellie and Jamie. Marshall spotted them and pointed them out to Seth. Their bright red heads made them stand out in the crowd. As the couples moved, Seth caught glimpses of Ellie's milky white thighs playing peek-a-boo with that ridiculous excuse for a dress. Then he noticed Jamie's hands firmly gripped her sweet little bottom. And worse, Ellie hung on to his ass for dear life. Their hips moved together like a well-oiled machine.

"I had no idea Ellie danced so well," Marshall shouted in Seth's ear. "They look amazing together."

Just then the song ended and Jamie dipped Ellie back, her long white arm arched over her head as one shapely leg wrapped itself around Jamie's hip. Jamie ran his lips down Ellie's neck, over her chest and stopped at her waist. Seth's hands clenched. Jamie righted Ellie and caressed the leg still wrapped around his hip.

"What's the matter?" Marshall shook Seth's arm. "You look like you're ready to explode."

"It's hot in here," Seth said through clenched teeth. Jesus, Jamie still had his hand on Ellie's ass. Seth wanted to punch him out, gay or not. He was hot and hard. All he wanted to do was throw Ellie over his shoulder and get her out of here. Get her alone, rip that dress off and see what lay underneath. He shook his head to clear it and took a deep breath.

As they returned to the table, Ellie saw Marshall at the edge of the dance floor. She pointed him out to Jamie. "I think he came to see you." Then she noticed Seth behind Marshall. "Do you think they're checking up on us?"

"Looks like it. Seth seems quite smitten." Jamie steered her toward the two men. "This could be our lucky night."

"Maybe for you. I've been talking you up to Marshall." Ellie clutched Jamie's arm. "He really likes you."

"He doesn't even know me," Jamie shot back.

Ellie whispered in his ear. "He could get to know you."

"What's up?" Ellie asked. They stopped in front of Marshall and Seth.

"We wanted to get out of the apartment, get a drink." Marshall held up a bottle of water.

"I love Latin music," Seth added.

"But it's not live," Ellie protested. She pointed to the DJ. "I thought you'd prefer live music?"

“Did you see us dance?” Jamie put his arm around Ellie. “Ellie is a terrific partner.” He placed his hands on her hips. “She really moves these.”

Ellie wiggled her hips. “I need to find the ladies room. Get me some water, Jamie?”

“Sure, I’ll meet you back here.” Jamie kissed Ellie’s cheek.

When Ellie left the ladies room a few minutes later, Seth was standing outside the door with a bottle of water in his hand.

“Thanks.” Ellie took the water. “Where is everybody?”

“They seemed to have a lot to say to each other, so I left them alone.” Seth pointed to a dark corner where Ellie could barely see her friends. They were huddled together, heads close.

“It looks like I’ve been dumped,” Ellie said with a smile.

They made their way to the edge of the dance floor. Ellie sipped her water and looked around. The club was getting very crowded. A tall man with dark hair appeared at Ellie’s side and asked her to dance.

“My wife is taking a break right now.” Seth drew Ellie to his side. “Thanks for asking.”

The man held up his hands and moved away.

“Wife,” Ellie sputtered. She shook off Seth’s arm. “I don’t need a chaperone.”

“He’s a creep and that dress of yours is bound to give him the wrong idea.” Seth drew her close again. “It’s giving me a lot of ideas.” His fingers brushed her thighs.

“It’s the perfect dress for salsa.” Ellie pushed his hands away.

“So let’s dance.” Seth held out his arms.

“You can dance?” Ellie looked at him uncertainly.

“I was raised by a gay Hispanic musician who hung out with drag queens.” He looked her up and down. “You may not be able to keep up with me.”

“I bet I can.” Ellie put her empty bottle on a table and grabbed his hands. “Ready?”

Dancing with Seth was very different than dancing with Jamie or even Sergio. It was sexual, very physical, with Seth completely in command. After a minor test of wills, Ellie gave in and let Seth take charge. His body was strong and fluid and he stared into her eyes as they moved to the frenetic beat. Ellie had the time of her life. After two energetic mambos, the DJ slowed the tempo down to a samba. Seth pulled Ellie close.

“Maybe we should sit this one out,” Ellie whispered.

“Not a chance. This is the most sensual music there is.” He dipped Ellie.

Ellie sighed and let Seth take over again. She remembered the dance classes she and Patti took together because their husbands were too busy. She tried to show Charlie the steps but he never seemed able to spare the time. She wanted to call Patti and describe the club and how much fun she was having.

She was startled out of her daydream when Seth kissed her neck, sending a shiver right down to her toes. She pushed away from him.

“You have to stop this.” Ellie fought to catch her breath. “I like you, but we can’t be lovers. I’m married.”

Without a word, he led her off the dance floor to a dark corner. He pressed her against the wall and braced his hands on either side of her.

“If you were my wife, I would come after you wherever you tried to hide. I’d take you home and do whatever it took to make you want to stay.” He lowered his eyes and looked at her body. “And I’d take you dancing so other men could see how lucky I was, but then I’d have to take you home early because I’d need to make love to you.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “But that’s just me.” He started to back off.

“One more thing.” He lowered his mouth and kissed her deeply, passionately, using his lips and tongue to excite her. He broke away leaving Ellie’s head spinning. “I’d kiss you like that every day, so it’s clear where you belong.” With that he grabbed her hand and marched her over to the table where Jamie and Marshall sat.

“See that Ellie gets home safely,” Seth said to the two men.

SAMHAIN PUBLISHING, LTD.

It's all about the story...

Action/Adventure

Fantasy

Historical

Horror

Mainstream

Mystery/Suspense

Non-Fiction

Paranormal

Red Hots!

Romance

Science Fiction

Western

Young Adult

www.samhainpublishing.com