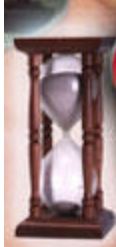


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



Time of Her Life

Part 4 of the Time Series



*Treva
Harte*

TIME OF HER LIFE

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TIME OF HER LIFE

Treva Harte

CHAPTER ONE

"So where is he?"

"He?"

"He, it...whatever." Sally grabbed the railing as they stepped up toward the porch. The stairs were still a bit unsteady.

"I thought you came to look at my house..." Realization dawned. Annie had wondered why her co-workers had pushed so hard to come. Sally had never been one to admire old architecture before now.

"We did. Of course Lindsey also said your construction worker was absolutely delicious," Sally replied.

Lindsey licked her lips suggestively.

Please let Kevin not be around. Why, oh why, had she bothered to let them stop in? She hadn't wanted to show off the house before it was renovated in the first place. If these female lechers started on the man working on her house, she would be hideously embarrassed.

Besides, he *was* absolutely delicious and she had no intention of showing him off for others to grab. She had her own private, unspoken fantasies of Kevin being her personal boy toy. But all she did was look, just a little, when he was busy. And he had his shirt off. And his muscles rippled. And his back was turned to her so she could admire his rear.

In real life she and he were always completely professional toward each other. She couldn't guarantee Sally and Lindsey's good behavior.

"He's probably off somewhere else." Annie tried to sound dismissive. "He did say something about getting some hardware when I spoke to him this morning."

"I'd like to get at his hardware," Lindsey murmured.

"Listen, you know, right now the hall isn't too safe." Annie kept her hand on the front door. "Kevin said he needed to do some shoring up before he started anything else. Things might get just a little too unsafe if we try walking inside. Maybe we should just leave —"

"His name's Kevin?" Sally was instantly on the alert. "That's what you call him?"

"Daniel Kevin Turner. Mr. Turner." Annie abruptly changed the subject. "You know, the faculty meeting is coming up in less than hour. I plan to be there, so we better scoot."

"I think she doesn't want us to see him, Lindsey." Sally nudged her friend. "He must be something if Doctor-I-Can't-Be-Bothered-With-Men Armstrong wants to keep him hidden away from everyone else."

"Oh, he is," Lindsey assured her. "When I dropped her off a few days ago and saw him carrying those pieces of lumber in, all sweaty—oh, my God! He looks better than any of our so-called men in the English Department. No, I take that back. He looks better than all of them put together."

"We really need to go now."

"Hello, Dr. Armstrong," Kevin said behind her. "Here to check up on progress?"

Annie knew he'd heard something. She hadn't been Dr. Armstrong to him for weeks now. How could you be formal when the two of you crouched down together in a filthy crawlspace or checked out faulty plumbing?

"Yes. So far, so good, Mr. Turner."

The two women next to her were mercifully silent. Maybe they'd been struck dumb by his masculine beauty. He had a shirt on, but it was a T-shirt with some rips in the seams. They could get quite a decent look at his chest. If decent was the term to use. Suddenly Annie saw another tiny rip in the inseam of his jeans. She swallowed hard and wondered if the others had noticed. Of course they'd notice. She was just lucky they hadn't leaped on him and tried to make the rip a little bigger.

She grabbed the keys from her purse and nodded to him. "We really are leaving now, though. Call me about the details on that flooring, okay?"

"Sure, boss." Kevin sounded much too agreeable.

"Wait a minute, Annie." Sally refused to budge.

Annie had to give her points for persistence. Maybe that came from being an English professor. The whole publish or perish syndrome got to you—you just kept working away at whatever idea got into your head, no matter what. Sally certainly wasn't giving up on her idea of meeting Kevin. Mr. Turner, Annie silently amended. Sally was never going to get beyond a *hello, Mr. Turner* if Annie could help it.

But maybe she couldn't. Lindsey now stepped forward and gave her best smile. She was known for her smile among the faculty and students at the English Department at the university. She was known for other abilities, too, all of which Annie was recalling with far too much clarity.

"I saw you earlier, but didn't have a chance to introduce myself." She put her hand on Kevin's arm. Left it there. "I'm Lindsey Carver. I work at the university—but I'm in the creative writing end of the English Department. I don't think I could handle teaching all that 19th century Victorian stuff like Annie."

Annie blinked. In one moment Lindsey had made herself sound a little bit like a creative writing bimbo and made Annie sound—sound Victorian. Not that Annie wanted to be a bimbo. But when had this turned into some kind of competition where creative writing made you fun and Victorian literature didn't? Annie kept herself from

glaring with huge effort. Of course Lindsey, who was actually tenured and had more academic credentials than almost anyone in the department, was also the one who was smiling into Kevin's eyes and looking like some sexually available creative writing nymphet. If she were Kevin, she'd think Lindsey was a lot more fun.

"We really *must* be going now," Annie said, between her teeth.

The other two women looked at her. Lindsey reluctantly gave up her clutch on Kevin's arm.

"I really hope you can give us the tour of the place soon." Sally used her sweetest Southern drawl. "Annie has just been raving about your work."

Annie, who knew she had been very close-mouthed about everything to do with the house, up to and especially including her workman, clamped her jaws tightly, and went for the stairs, almost putting her foot through one of the floorboards as she stepped.

"I'll get to work on the porch soon, Dr. Armstrong," Kevin assured her.

As she nearly pushed the other two women into her ancient Saab, she saw Kevin prop himself up against the front door threshold to watch them leave. She swallowed.

His sun streaked blondish hair came to his shoulders, glinting in the sunlight, and his pants had slipped down just a bit on his hips. If he could have done anything else to look like a sexy poster boy she didn't know what it would have been.

She was angry with everyone now, including Kevin and herself. Especially herself. Anger was counterproductive, it made her vulnerable, and she hated feeling that way.

It didn't help that he waved and the other two women waved back enthusiastically. Anger flared up again, hot and burning. Annie put her foot on the accelerator.

Kevin allowed himself one big smile only after he went back into the house. A grin in front of the three of them would have been a big mistake. Not only would it give two of them ideas he had no particular intention of fulfilling, it would have driven Annie through the roof—or maybe, in this case, through the floor.

He'd never seen Annie quite so upset before. She hid it pretty well behind her New England accent and calm manner, but she had been as riled as he had ever seen her. She hadn't been that upset when he told her the termites had gotten into a good bit of the flooring and woodwork.

He wondered why. He'd heard the gist of the conversation before he stepped inside, but it wasn't as if it was Annie's problem. Her buddies had decided she had a good-looking guy working at her house. That didn't hurt his ego and it wasn't like she had said anything to embarrass herself. Annie never did.

Maybe she figured the other women were being rude and she didn't want to contribute to their conversation. Annie wasn't rude. As he went back to the truck to get the floor jacks, he decided that had to be it. It just wasn't the kind of conversation Annie would find appropriate. She was big on doing the right thing. The amazing thing was

that she always did. Kevin, who hardly ever knew what the right thing was, could appreciate that.

She worked hard at everything else, so she probably worked equally hard at her job. He tried to imagine her in front of a class, discussing literature. He remembered what she'd said the day they were in what Annie decreed would become the library. He had watched her face light up as she talked about the built-in shelving she wanted for her books.

"I have some big, fat ones, since I particularly enjoy Victorian novels. You know how long they are. It's a wonder the Victorians used to read them at all, much less read them out loud for entertainment."

"Yeah?" Kevin asked.

"Oh yes, very often families would read books aloud in the evening for their entertainment. Although they didn't just read books. Dickens, for example, would write his novels in magazines in a series of installments. That's why his chapters often ended the way they did. People would have to wait for the next installment to come out. Did you ever hear the story of how the people in America demanded, as the ships from Great Britain came in, what happened to Little Nell? They were that anxious to know."

"No." Kevin tried not to sound befuddled. "Uh, who was Little Nell?"

"A very sentimental Dickens child heroine who took forever to die." Annie began to pace, probably the way she did in a classroom. "It was a little like soap operas today. People were absolutely desperate to know what the characters were going to do, and things like her death got dragged out, chapter after chapter."

"No kidding. That's kinda cruel of the guy who wrote the story."

"Dickens really is an interesting author. He wrote all these somewhat contrived happy endings but the stuff that always gets me is when he writes about bleakness and despair. You just know he believed in that and he didn't quite believe in the happily-ever-after parts. That makes sense. His own life was shaped more by bleakness than happiness."

"Are you teaching Dickens now?" Kevin asked, cautiously. He'd heard about *A Christmas Carol* of course, but he wasn't entirely sure he could hold up his end of the conversation here. The last time he'd thought about the story was when he watched the Christmas cartoons. Annie talked about writers and the characters they wrote about as if they were her friends.

It also didn't hurt that Annie was leaning forward, so close that her long ash blonde hair was almost brushing his arm as she spoke. He could feel his body stiffen every time a lock of hair got close.

"No. Charlotte Bronte." Annie's face softened again. "She's one of my favorites. Did you read *Jane Eyre*? There's so much passion throughout the novel and yet the ending is so — uncertain."

"I don't remember much about Jane. I'm not sure I read the book."

"Well, it probably isn't your cup of tea. Some men find the novel interesting but others don't. After all, it's a book about a young girl who is plain and awkward and unloved, who fights her way from nothing and ends up with everything she wants, including the hero. But the ending is—well, I never know how to take the ending. Either Jane is important, because her hero is crippled and will need her forever, or she has turned into just another wife who has to do everything for her husband because he is dependent on her." Annie looked honestly perplexed and worried about these imaginary people.

Kevin thought about his sisters and their marriages. About ex-girlfriends and their stories about divorce. Then he shrugged. "That's the way a lot of marriages are. From the outside, other people might think you're either the center of that marriage's universe or the spouse's doormat, but no one really knows. Sometimes it's the one who seems weak who holds the marriage together. Sometimes the strong one is only strong because he's scared things will fall apart if he doesn't act that way. The only ones who actually know what is going on are on the inside of that marriage, trying to make it work. Maybe you don't even know then."

"That's very interesting," Annie said. "I'll have to think about that in the context of the novel. Thank you for that insight."

"You're welcome." He waited for her to tell him the punch line. She couldn't mean she actually thought his comment made any sense.

"And thank you for being so patient." She looked a little embarrassed. "I'm afraid I often start talking about literature even when it really isn't an appropriate time. I realize a lot of people find such talk boring."

Kevin blinked. There was no punch line because that hadn't been a joke. Annie Armstrong was sincerely thanking him for making an interesting statement about a novel he had never read. Then she'd apologized for talking about something she knew and loved instead of making him feel stupid.

He decided he'd make sure the built-in bookshelves were built extra strong for the big, fat novels she loved. He also, half-ashamed, bought an audiotope of *Jane Eyre*. He started listening to it in the truck while he ran errands. He'd never done that before.

Now he was hooked. He wanted to hear about poor old Jane and her start as an orphan. Annie had said it might not be his cup of tea but she'd been wrong. Why wouldn't he like it? He understood quite a bit about Jane.

Hell, he was an orphan, even if his parents hadn't died until his late teens. He knew what it was like to feel rejected and punished unfairly. He was getting fond of old Jane and how she kept fighting back.

He was getting fond of Annie, too.

There was something about her earnest look when she discussed things she found interesting. He liked her New England accent. He liked her sweetness. He also very much liked her legs, whether she wore leggings, the way she usually did when they wandered around the house and discussed the work being done, or whether she had a

short skirt and black tights on, the way she had this afternoon on her way to a faculty meeting.

He had really liked that skirt. He bet the guys at the faculty meeting liked it too. The bastards.

He gave a snort of laughter as he squatted down to measure out the boards before sawing them. Annie would probably hurt herself laughing – no, she was too polite – but she would be completely amazed to hear her handyman thought she was really sexy. He understood. He knew Annie Armstrong outclassed him. In fact, he was so far below her it would never even occur to her that he might think anything about her as a woman, rather than an employer.

Who wouldn't like long blonde hair and a classy accent and soft skin and...

His laughter stopped. He shoved his hair back, away from his eyes, and scowled. Was that why she felt so uncomfortable when those women had started coming on to him? Because she couldn't imagine why they might be interested? He was reasonably good-looking and he could show women a good time if they were interested. Plenty of women came on to him – beautiful women, rich women, even smart women.

Of course they weren't Annie. She was all of that and more.

"Oh damn, Turner," Kevin said aloud. "Don't even start thinking like that about her. It's hopeless."

She'd either laugh or run away if he ever hinted he was interested in a relationship beyond that of an employee.

But, then again, with the main beams needing to be shored up and some new flooring to be put in, he would be around for quite a while. Annie wanted floorboards that were authentic to the time period of the house, which meant he'd probably have to search other old houses. She might get used to him.

He smiled again as he thought of his last glimpse of her. No matter how classy Annie Armstrong was, she did look cute when she was flustered and annoyed. And she'd noticed him. She'd looked at him just as hard as the other women, if not as blatantly.

It would be wrong of him to make her more flustered and annoyed, wouldn't it? To throw her off her polite calm and make her notice him again? But he did have sisters. If anyone knew how to get to a female, it was a man who grew up with three sisters.

CHAPTER TWO

Annie's feet hurt. Her head hurt. In fact, almost everything in her body hurt. Faculty meetings were never her favorite thing but this one had been a real strain. First, she'd seen Lindsey and Sally in the back, whispering and giggling. Second, she was trying to decide if she should call and apologize to Kevin and, if so, what she should say. Since she felt this bad about what had happened, she probably should, but she cringed as she imagined the conversation.

Kevin, I'm sorry I brought those two idiots to the house. I had no idea they would act like that around you. Not that you aren't used to having women act like idiots around you, I'm sure. Not that you don't know how to handle situations like that.

Annie turned the Saab onto the Ivy exit just past Charlottesville and turned up one of the many winding lanes. In just a minute or two she'd get to the red brick Georgian-style home her family owned. It wasn't a real Georgian but for a 1940's reproduction it looked authentic and impressive enough. Grandfather hadn't cared for old homes with their quirky inconveniences, though he didn't mind copies of older homes.

But Grandmother had loved old homes. It was Grandma who, after she was widowed, had given the family house to Mother and Father. Then she'd bought herself her 1920's home near downtown Charlottesville. She'd have gotten something older except that she liked the convenience of her Charlottesville home.

Annie had always loved Grandma and, apparently, she had inherited her taste in houses. Annie had fallen in love with Grandma's home from the time she was five, when Annie had spent several weeks with her grandmother while the rest of the family vacationed in London. Annie hadn't missed her family at all. Grandma, with the stories she told and the treasures she had in her house, more than made up for the lack of a trip abroad.

Annie parked the car by the front door instead of the garage in the back. Her mother wouldn't have liked that, but her mother wasn't there. Still mentally debating the Kevin issue, Annie opened the front door.

It was quiet. Since she was the only one staying in the place—really the only one who cared to stay in the area since Grandma died—that was no surprise. Truthfully, Annie didn't know why her parents hung onto the house, although it was convenient for her to have somewhere to live while her house was being worked on.

Annie carefully hung up her sweater. There wasn't much clutter around. Annie wasn't much of a clutterer and, besides, once again, her mother wouldn't care for it.

Annie walked over to the telephone, still wondering whether she should call, when she saw the blinking light on the message machine. She punched the button.

"I wanted to check in on you since I haven't heard from you recently." Her mother's recorded voice was clear and precise. "I hope that means you are so busy working on some publishable article that you haven't had time to call. Since you're coming up for tenure, all the articles you have to show will be very important. You haven't done much in the last year or two, child."

"I've been busy!" Annie said out loud and then caught herself, biting at her lower lip.

Well, she had been. The teaching load was larger than she'd ever had and the move back to Charlottesville took time and then the renovations had started...

"And if you haven't been working on something, all the excuses in the world won't help your position at the English Department, dearest," her mother continued, just as if she'd heard Annie. Annie wouldn't put it past her mother. "Your father and I have some pull in academic circles but we can only pull you so far. You simply must apply yourself, child. Be decisive. Oh, yes. We'll be spending spring break in Greece. Your father has some research to do there. He sends his love, of course. 'Bye."

"Yeah, I'm sure he remembered to send his love." Annie shrugged off the familiar hurt and then hastily dialed Kevin's phone number before she could come up with more excuses not to do that as well. She'd be decisive about something today if it killed her.

Except that when Kevin said, "Hello?" she had nothing to say.

"Hi." Brilliant. Just brilliant.

"Hey, Annie. What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I just called—um—I called to tell you how sorry I am that I disturbed you this afternoon."

"Hey, you're the boss." Kevin's voice was amused. "When you pay the bills, you can stop by whenever you want. I'm pretty sure that's the rule."

"I didn't mean that." Annie took a deep breath. "I mean I shouldn't have brought my visitors with me. Their behavior was wrong. I should have never allowed it."

"You're not responsible for them. They look plenty old enough to know how to behave."

"Yes, they are," Annie agreed. "I just wish they had. Anyhow, it will be spring break in a few more days and I guess I should warn you that I'll probably come over—alone—a bit more often since I have the time. Is there some unskilled labor I can do to help? Scrape old wallpaper? Pull old nails?"

And not spend every waking minute trying to research and write and do what my mother told me to do.

"Well, to be honest, I may be gone for a few days," Kevin admitted.

"Oh."

"I just got a call from my sister in New Mexico. It looks like I need to hustle myself over there as quickly as I can."

"Oh, no! Bad news?"

"Really good news. The kid has decided to marry a good buddy of mine. They haven't known each other long and...well, them getting married right now is a surprise. But it's a good surprise. The best surprise I've had in a while. Don't worry. I don't plan to be there long."

"I've heard New Mexico is pretty." Annie tried not to sound desolate as she thought about how she'd be at work. Just as Mother had ordered. "Well, let me know what I can be trusted to do on my own and I'll do it while you are gone."

"You should take a break yourself," Kevin suggested. "Go to the beach, visit your family, you know—do something."

"Well, my family won't be in the country and I don't think I'd be welcome to tag along on one of Dad's research vacations." Annie glanced ruefully at her fair skin. "I sunburn too badly to go to the beach."

"Why not come with me then?"

"What?"

"You're right. New Mexico is pretty. No, that isn't the word. It's rugged. It's beautiful. Everyone should see it at least once. And there isn't a beach anywhere around."

"How could I go to a family wedding? Without an invitation? I don't even know anyone."

"You know me," Kevin pointed out. "There wasn't time for any invitations to be sent out anyhow. My sisters would have no problem with it. They'd probably be grateful you were there to help keep me out of trouble. I can check with Molly if you're really worried."

"I couldn't... I really need to work on an article I've been toying with... I..."

"Work on it there. C'mon, Annie. It will be fun to show you around the ranch."

"A real ranch?"

"With horses. Do you ride?"

"I haven't for years but I used to love it when I had the time."

Why should her mother still tell her what to do? And wasn't Dr. Karen Dwyer-Armstrong going on vacation herself? Yes, she was and without asking if her only remaining child had any interest in coming along. Her mother hadn't even bothered to find out if she was happy, or having any fun.

"You'll have a great time then," Kevin continued. "Shall I get a ticket for you too? Annie, I'm not trying to come on to you. This is just a vacation. Yes?"

"All right. Yes. If your sister really wouldn't mind, it'd be perfect. Please get me a ticket and let me how much I owe you for it," Annie heard herself saying.

Even while she asked herself why she was being so impulsive and crazy, another part of her thought smugly about what Lindsey and Sally would say if she told them. They would have accepted an invitation from Kevin—any invitation—in a minute.

But they hadn't received one. She had. She wouldn't tell anyone, of course. But it was a good feeling. Boring, plain Annie Armstrong was going on vacation with this gorgeous man. Platonically, of course. But since no one knew about her trip, no one else had to know it was platonic. She could pretend she was going to have an affair with Kevin Turner. Better yet, she could pretend she did things like this all the time.

Ah yes, Sally and Lindsey, yet another beautiful man has asked me to go to someplace I've never been before and so, of course, off I'll go!

And off I'll go. Right.

Annie swallowed her Dramamine tablets and smiled as warmly as she could at Kevin. She now remembered the first good reason she didn't go flying off on vacations at the wink of a man's eye. She suffered from motion sickness.

She remembered her mother saying countless times, "Antigone, you must try to overcome this weakness. You will spoil everyone's trip this way." Her father had always just looked uncomfortable and moved away. Annie never had overcome the weakness but at least now she took pills for motion sickness.

She'd been crazy to do this. Kevin was crazy, too, for dragging an encumbrance like her on what could be a wonderful vacation for him. She'd agreed to go because she was crazy. Why had he ever agreed?

And why would she know why he did anything? He was her handyman, for heaven's sake. He'd come highly recommended by several friends of hers when she had mentioned she needed work done on her Grandmother's old house. They'd told her he would probably be cheaper than a contractor, which she'd thought she needed at first, and that he specialized in working to restore old homes. So far he'd lived up to her friends' recommendations. But that was no reason to fly to New Mexico with him.

She was crazy *and* an idiot.

Sitting next to Annie in the plane, Kevin surveyed her serene face. Who would have thought someone who looked so at home in a plane had motion sickness? He might not have believed it if he hadn't seen her take those tablets.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Absolutely," she replied calmly. "I've been flying in planes since I was an infant. My parents did a lot of traveling when I was younger. Actually they still do, I suppose. How are you? These coach seats don't give you much room and you're a tall man. Are you comfortable?"

"Comfortable enough," Kevin lied through his teeth.

He hadn't thought. Annie was probably used to going first-class. When he bought the tickets he'd never even thought about asking her if she wanted fly anything but coach—not until now, when it was much too late. She was too polite to say anything about it. She was tall for a woman, too. Hell, she was probably as uncomfortable as he was.

He was an idiot. Why had he invited her anyhow?

She gave him another hesitant smile before her hands gripped the armrests as if they were the only things that would keep the plane safe. That was when he realized she was terrified, despite that serene manner. He put one hand over hers. She was obviously afraid enough to let him do it without a protest. Damn. Her thin fingers curled tightly around his. Yeah, he did remember why he'd invited her. He'd always promised he would never lie to himself.

So, no lie, he wanted Dr. Annie. Oh yeah. Something about her got him going.

As the plane began to taxi down the runway he pondered that thought. What was it about her? She never wore makeup. She ought to. With her pale skin, she'd be a knockout with makeup. She had pretty skin, though. Soft, sweet skin. Her hair was always down to her shoulders, brushed neatly and then forgotten. It was beautiful hair, too, a striking ash blonde that shouldn't be ignored the way Annie ignored it. She was thin, almost bony. But she had long, long dancer's legs. He really did like long legs. He looked at her hands, relaxing now, with his grip to steady her.

She seemed to have no idea her slim body was sexy. Kevin liked her gentleness and her infrequent smiles—she had a killer smile when she used it—and her courage to do things like fly in a plane without complaint. She opened her eyes just then, looked at him solemnly and then gripped his hand a little tighter.

He really, really liked the way she looked at him. Like he mattered a lot to her. And her hand gripped his as if she trusted him to take care of any problems she had.

He let his breath out in a long, almost soundless sigh. All right, he hadn't invited her just to get to know her better or because she looked like she needed a vacation. He had invited her in hopes that she just might go to bed with him. But if her opinion of him mattered, how well should he get to know her? More importantly, how well should he let her get to know *him*? He was bound to disappoint her if he opened up.

Damn, she was about to meet his family. He might have no choice in how much she learned about him. His family would never try to hurt him but they weren't exactly quiet, either.

"Kevin, thank you for taking us to the airport," Annie said then. Her voice was still calm. She tried to smile at him. She couldn't quite manage that, though she tried hard. "It was a long drive to Dulles from Charlottesville."

"Did you think I was going to let you manage on your own when I had to go anyhow?" Kevin looked at her. Sometimes she was so polite he couldn't believe her. She seemed serious.

"I usually do manage alone when I travel," Annie responded. "It was nice of you."

"You're welcome."

"Kevin?"

"Yes?"

"I saw you had a tape of *Jane Eyre* in the truck," Annie ventured. "Have you listened to it at all?"

Damn him for being sloppy. He should know better by now but he never learned. Kevin swallowed and hoped he wasn't blushing.

"Yeah, I did. I thought about what you said about Victorians reading books aloud, so I thought I would give an audio tape a try." Kevin kept his voice very casual.

"Did you like it?"

"Quite a bit," Kevin admitted. "I'm glad you told me about the book. I haven't reached the end yet, but I'm rooting for Jane."

"Good." Annie's smile was no longer tentative but warm and happy. "I'm so glad I got you interested."

"You know who I don't like in the book?" Kevin began to talk fast, trying to keep that smile on her face and her thoughts off the rapid ascent they were making.

"There are a lot of awful characters."

"Yeah, but I really don't like that teacher of Jane's at the beginning," Kevin said. "She seemed like she could help Jane and then she took off. Stupid teacher, making a kid believe she could help and then leaving. The poor kid ended up with no one again."

"I suppose she got used to it." Annie's face lost its warm expression. "It certainly kept happening to her."

"Mmmm." Kevin tried to think of something else to bring the smile back to her face. She certainly did take her literature seriously.

"Tell me about your sister and who I'll meet at the wedding." Annie came up with a topic of her own. "I bought her a silver photograph frame for a wedding present. That's usually suitable. Don't you think?"

"She'll love it." Kevin was touched Annie had thought to bring a gift to someone she didn't know. But he shouldn't have been surprised. Of course she'd bring a gift for the bride and groom. She probably intended to send some kind of gift or write a thank you to Molly when she got back, too. Annie knew how to do that kind of stuff. He never wrote thank yous.

"So, tell me about the people I'm going to meet in a few hours," Annie prompted.

"Well, there's Molly, of course. She's marrying one of my army buddies, Jared Boyd. J.B. The ranch belongs to...to her in trust for her daughter and, um, my brother-in-law." Kevin tried to think of a way to explain his family. He hadn't been able to explain it well to J.B. but Annie was used to long, complicated Victorian novels. Yeah, Annie was pretty smart. Maybe it would make sense. "Listen, my family is a little...unusual."

"Oh?" Annie folded her hands as if she was preparing to listen to a lecture.

"Yeah, well. There is Jen, my older sister. She's married to Jack Logan."

"I've heard of a Jack and Jennifer Logan. He's in politics, isn't he? Those are common names, of course. It probably isn't the same two people."

"Actually, it probably is. Jack's a legislator. Jen writes a column for the newspaper..."

"Then she *is* the one I was thinking of!" Annie exclaimed, interrupting him. "I love her columns!"

"Great. Be sure to tell her, okay? Anyhow, I probably should let you know, just to make sure you understand if it comes up in conversation, Jen has two children. One of them is Jack's kid. The other is Victor's."

"Victor?"

"Well, yeah. Victor is married to another sister of mine, Cecilia. It's not what you're thinking," he said hastily at her dubious look.

"I—I'm not sure what to think."

"Victor and Jen were involved a long time ago and there was an accident. Everyone thought Vic was dead and... Well, to keep it simple, let's just say Jen and Jack fell in love and got married several years ago. Victor turned out not to be dead after all and eventually he married Cecilia."

"My. And everyone gets along?"

"Quite well now, actually. Vic and Cecilia spend a lot of time living next door to Jack and Jen, as it so happens. When Cecilia isn't singing or in Virginia, they go to the ranch in New Mexico. Victor is partners with Molly, my other sister, on the ranch."

"I guess your family must be close."

"Well, there is a reason for that partnership, too. Victor's dad really cared about Molly and her daughter."

"I see."

"Probably not, but our family isn't as crazy as it all sounds. Or maybe they are. Well, you can see for yourself when you meet them." Kevin grinned at the look on her face.

"Do you have any more siblings?"

"You don't think that's enough? No, all I have are three sisters—Jen, Cecilia and Molly. That's more than any man should have. I have nieces and nephews, too, but you can try to sort them out later. I've probably given you enough to think about for now."

He could tell she wasn't thinking about being trapped in a plane at the moment. She had a rather dazed look on her face as she tried to absorb the implications of what he had told her. Kevin didn't have the heart to tell her that he had kept the family history really, really simple.

"Hey, here comes some food," he told her. "Would you like something?"

"I rarely eat on planes unless I can't help it," Annie replied. "My stomach gets too nervous. But why don't you take my tray? You could probably eat two or three of those things and still use more."

Kevin nibbled at the sandwiches and pushed an apple slice over to her as she flipped open a large book. Absently, she picked up the apple and nibbled as she read. Encouraged, he nudged a sandwich half over to her and she began to eat that, too. She ate a good bit before she looked over at him, startled.

"I had lunch after all!"

"You could use some lunch, Annie," Kevin said. "It didn't hurt, did it?"

"No, I suppose it didn't." Annie looked at him over her reading glasses. "Even though it was sneaky of you...thanks."

He grinned. She needed taking care of. Fortunately she was so unused to it, he could sneak a little pampering in without her realizing. He could tell she was more relaxed already—her tight grip on the seat had loosened up. He turned on his tape headset and began to listen to music. Maybe he could get her relaxed enough to take a nap. She looked like she could use one. That might be as close as he would get to sleeping with her for now. But it was a good start.

"Your family is insane." The red-haired man who met them at the airport gave them the news without blinking. "The whole ranch is a zoo. It's total chaos. Grown women are losing it."

"Has J.B. lost his cool yet?" Kevin asked.

"No. What does it take for the man to crack? He has a gunshot wound and a bash to the head—he's the one who demanded this whole circus which we pretend is a wedding, did you know that?—and he hasn't even raised a sweat."

"That's J.B." Kevin nodded.

Annie hadn't had time to absorb the implications of all that before Kevin continued, "By the way, Jack, this is my boss and guest for the weekend, Annie Armstrong. Annie, this is my brother-in-law, Jack Logan."

"Ms. Armstrong." Jack held out his hand with practiced ease.

"How do you do, Mr. Logan? I've read about your career in the news."

His smile turned from practiced to genuine. "Wow, Kev, this one is definitely a cut above your usual. She reads the news."

"Hey!" Kevin sounded amused but there was definite warning in his tone. "She's Dr. Armstrong to you."

"Not a medical doctor," Annie said hastily. "I have my Ph.D. in English Literature."

"My wife will want to meet you." Jack looked even more interested. "She got her Master's in English before her parents died. She's missed having really good discussions on literature. Yes, Kevin, this one is definitely several cuts above—"

Kevin interrupted his brother-in-law hastily. "I know lawyers and politicians aren't supposed to know when to shut up but—shut up, Jack."

"We have to stop on the way to the ranch." Jack switched subjects easily. "We're picking up tuxedos for you, Vic and J.B.'s brother."

"Tuxedos? I've never worn a tuxedo in my life!"

"That's pretty much what Vic said. Don't worry, little boy. Big brother Jack has been in more of these suits than any five or six ordinary men combined. I'll hold your hand for you. I'll even teach you to tie a bowtie. Fortunately Vic is pretty much my size so that's all right. J.B.'s brother is a mountain, but we'll do what we can to figure out the size."

Jack hustled them along. Kevin looked helplessly at Annie.

She was usually disoriented and a little sick after air travel and her Dramamine, but she had to stifle a giggle. Nothing was turning out the way she had expected on this vacation. So far that was a good thing.

In the truck, with the three of them crammed in the cab like close friends, Jack informed them that there was going a bridal shower and a bachelor party that night.

"Have pity, man!" Kevin begged. "We just got in."

"Someone decided it would be a good idea and since tomorrow is the wedding, tonight is it." Jack wasn't sympathetic. "Someone else got beer and booze for the men's party. We're playing poker. I have no idea what the women will be doing. Probably something much worse."

"Is J.B. all right with the booze?" Kevin asked.

"He asked for plenty of coffee," Jack replied as he stared at a set of written instructions. "Okay, we turn here."

"J.B. is a teetotaler?" Annie asked.

"Jesus, I hope so," Kevin answered fervently.

Annie puzzled over that odd reply before realization hit. She'd probably be going to the women's party. "I don't have a shower present!"

"There are some shops here where you could pick up something." Jack swung the truck into a parking spot right in front of a tuxedo and bridal wear store. "I hope we won't take long—Kevin, it'll be even shorter if you don't struggle—but there should be enough time for you to buy something."

Annie looked hopelessly at the drugstore, barbershop—and then a store that sold kitchenware. She turned eagerly to Kevin.

"Does your sister like cooking?"

"Other people's," Kevin replied over his shoulder as he was dragged toward the tuxedo shop. "About the only thing she can do in the kitchen is eat and make coffee. But she's a real coffee snob—grinds the beans and everything..." And then he was gone.

She thought about following them. Maybe she'd see Kevin out of his pants and being fitted for a tux. She'd imagined, plenty of times, what he looked like naked. When she saw that little gap in his jeans at the small of his back, she imagined slipping her hand underneath to see if he had underpants on...

Whoo.

Annie took a deep breath. She had a job to do. A present to find. It looked like it was that kitchen shop or nothing. She ran in. Almost everything she could think of was inappropriate. No champagne flutes if the groom disapproved of alcohol. No cute little kitchen gadgets if the bride never used them. Then she saw a small silver sugar and creamer set. She seized on it with relief. Something to use with coffee!

Annie hurried outside to find the men standing in front of the tuxedo rental shop. Kevin announced that he was going to get a haircut to go with the tux. While he went into the barbershop, Annie went into the drugstore for a card and gift wrap.

The day was full of new experiences. She'd never tried to wrap a hastily bought present in a truck; the opportunity had never presented itself. Not only did she have to wrap it but she also had to try to avoid male elbows on both sides and to ignore bitter male complaints and insults about the tuxedo fitting process. It was very undignified and makeshift. But very fun.

"How does it look?" Annie asked, after carefully putting the card in place.

Kevin reached out an arm to steady her as they jolted over a bump.

"Perfect, Annie," he said. "You know, you're really a good girl."

"What does that mean?"

"You always want things to be perfect."

She was older than he was. She ought to be angry with him for calling her a good girl. It was patronizing. But he sounded so sweet when he said it. And she really liked his hair cut short.

She smiled at him. He smiled back. For a minute she didn't want to look back down again when she should. Suddenly the amount of air in the truck seemed to disappear. Kevin was so handsome, so male... As they stared at each other, Kevin's smile stopped. She wanted to...she almost... She swallowed and quickly looked ahead.

What had he seen in her eyes? If it was just a fraction of the need she felt from looking at him she was in trouble.

She didn't really see anything until Kevin announced, "Here we are."

"Welcome to chaos." Jack opened the truck door. "Good luck to all of you. Hope we meet again this weekend."

"Take a deep breath, Annie." Kevin reached over to help her down. "Here we go."

"It can't be that bad." Annie laughed at the two of them.

"It's worse," the two men said in unison.

CHAPTER THREE

Looking back, Annie wasn't sure she could ever describe all the events of the weekend. They jumped out at her and, just when she thought she had it all pinned down, something else would occur to her. As she slumped into the plane seat next to Kevin for the trip home, she was aware she had drunk far too much champagne and coffee and had far too little sleep. Her whole body was a strange mix of humming tenseness and excitement from caffeine combined with limp exhaustion from too much fun and too little sleep.

"Well," Kevin said, at last. "What do you think of my family?"

That wasn't the question she'd expected.

"They're wonderful," Annie replied. "How can anyone keep up with them?"

"We're not always like this," Kevin assured her. "Just on special occasions."

"I've never been around a large family before." Annie yawned. "It was fun. But I need to sleep now."

And, without Dramamine or trying to get herself into a relaxed state, she fell asleep. The weekend events jumbled up even more as she dreamed and dozed...

She should have expected that Kevin would have beautiful sisters but each one was more attractive than the next. Jennifer was beautiful in a completely natural way and made her feel immediately at home. The second sister—who turned out to be Cecilia Turner Ruiz, the singer—was screamingly, outrageously sexy and she played it up to the hilt. She was kind, too, just a different type of kind.

Annie still couldn't get over what had happened when she walked innocently down the hall from the bathroom to get to the wedding. Cecilia stuck her head out the door and glared at her.

"Come in here!" she ordered.

Annie obeyed wordlessly.

Molly was there, dressed in what looked like a Merry Widow and thigh-high stockings with garters. She was muttering to herself. Jennifer was combing out Molly's long, honey-colored hair. Annie realized she had been summoned into the bride's dressing room and she paused at the threshold. It seemed so intimate. She wasn't a member of the family. Cecilia couldn't have meant—

"Come here!" Cecilia hissed.

"Yes?" Annie ventured toward her.

"I wanted to tell you before but I didn't have time. Now is as good a time as any. You have to do something with your face!"

"Excuse me?" Annie choked.

Cecilia grabbed her wrist and planted her in front of the mirror.

"Darling, what you are wearing on your face is all wrong." Cecilia held Annie's face with her hand. "It would be so easy to change this."

Annie darted a glance at the other two women in the room, looking for assistance.

"Humor her," Molly told her. "You're just practice for when she starts on me. She's turned into a madwoman."

"Unfortunately I don't have makeup for someone with skin as fair as yours," Cecilia muttered and began rooting through drawers of the bureau. "Molly, you're the closest match and I know I gave you some makeup a while ago. I also know you probably never used it—ah hah!"

Holding up the makeup kit, Cecilia first scrubbed Annie's face as if she were three years old and then applied new make up.

"See, you need just a little, *little* color," Cecilia instructed. "Are you watching? You need to get some of this shade. Remember, too much looks garish. Too little and you look dead. Ah, perfect!"

Annie looked at herself in the mirror and blinked. She looked—well, not perfect but pretty. Prettier than she could ever remember being before.

"Now we just put your hair up in a French twist..." Cecilia twisted. "And you're ready. Simple, right?"

"I—I—yes, I guess," Annie stuttered in reply.

"Simple and understated works for you. Just not too understated. Remember that," Cecilia lectured. "Now, scoot. We have to get Molly ready. Be sure Kevin gets a good look. He'll keel over when he sees you. He already looks at you like you're—you're—"

"The Queen of England? A young, sexy Queen of England, I mean," Molly suggested.

"A centerfold model?" Jennifer offered.

"A mix of sex goddess and saint," Cecilia decided. "This should push him right over the edge. Now shoo. It's Molly's turn... Stop squirming, Molly."

Edge of what? Annie wanted to ask but was afraid of what the answer would be. Besides, she was already late for her ride. She stood up.

"Thank you." She gave them the safest response. "Thanks very, very much."

"Pity me," Molly called as Annie left. "Now that you see what they've done to you, just imagine what they have planned for me!"

Sex goddess or saint? She'd never been compared to either before. She'd been called a Goody Two Shoes once or twice, but that wasn't even close. Just the idea that Kevin might be fascinated made her...it made her quiver. Like the silly fainting heroines in

bad Victorian novels. Well, Kevin made her quiver just by *being*. The longer she was around him the more aware of him she became. She was afraid she was going to make a fool of herself. But she was so out of her depth with the whole Turner family! Worst of all, she was enjoying herself too much to worry about what would happen next.

Whatever edge Kevin was supposed to go over, Annie didn't notice him doing it when he saw her at the church. His eyes narrowed when he spotted her and he definitely moved a little faster to reach her side. But as he escorted her up the aisle, he didn't say anything. Annie felt a little deflated. She really did think she looked rather attractive.

Then, suddenly, before she left him to go sit, he lifted her hand, turned it over and kissed her on the wrist.

"There'll be dancing at the reception," he said. "Save all the dances for me."

Annie sat in the pew, stunned, as he left to escort more people. No one had ever said that to her before. But then, she had never before heard anyone say half the things almost every member of Kevin's family had said to her that weekend.

The reception was a real, old-fashioned Methodist church reception. Had someone told her about it beforehand, Annie would have thought she wouldn't like it. But she'd have been wrong.

It wasn't the kind of music Annie was used to for wedding receptions. There were polkas and Texas two steps and – well, Annie couldn't remember all the names of the dances, much less all the steps. If it seemed a little odd to have the bridal party dancing in tuxes and formal gowns to "The Cotton-eyed Joe," no one else seemed to notice it. Annie also noticed quite a bit of men stepping outside. She suspected most of the locals knew about how to get around the teetotaling receptions required by the church. Certainly a lot of the men looked a little more flushed than they would have from just dancing.

Jared couldn't dance because of his leg. Molly stayed with him most of the time and when she wasn't there, one of her sisters sat it out with the groom. He still looked battered from his previous experiences, which no one seemed to want to explain fully to Annie, but anyone could tell he was happy.

And Kevin danced with her. Annie would have refused, ordinarily, but everything was different with the Turners. Somehow Annie Armstrong found herself dancing up a storm.

Even more surprisingly, before the end of the evening she found herself outside, without quite figuring out how Kevin had managed it, away from the rest of the dancers. Music still drifted out through the open door.

"This wedding will be the talk of the county for a while," Kevin told her, a smile in his voice.

"Why?"

"Because there was dancing. With a live band, no less. And it's going on all night. There will be plenty of folks in there who are listening to the music and tapping their feet at least, who will be gossiping about it tomorrow." Kevin laughed and loosened his black tie. "They'll be wondering why the minister allowed it and talking about who stepped outside to drink and who else stepped outside to flirt."

They were outside.

"Surely not...do you really think so?"

"Surely yes, Dr. Armstrong. I learned a good bit about the area while I was out here helping Molly a few months back." Kevin put his arm lightly around her and glided her into a two-step. "But the folks around here like Molly. They respect J.B. The gossip will just be something for the neighbors to do, mostly. There's no harm in it."

"Of course there isn't any harm in dancing," Annie agreed. "I find it hard to believe that people would still feel that way in this day and age."

"And you're from New England? Don't you know dancing leads to men holding women?" Annie became conscious of his arms around her. "Not only holding them but maybe even kissing them..."

And then he brushed her lightly across the lips. Annie leaned forward just a little – and he wasn't there. She blinked at him. It had happened so quickly she wasn't quite certain the kiss had happened at all. She decided Kevin's grin was too mischievous to have just fantasized it.

He could do better than a quick airbrush on her lips.

"Do it again." Was that her voice, thick and husky with longing? "More. Deeper."

His grin was gone. The look on his face made her quiver inside all over again.

"Anytime, baby." His mouth was suddenly on hers, hot and fierce, forcing her lips open.

But he didn't have to force anything. She opened them willingly, wanting exactly what she'd said. Oh, God. This was Kevin. Kevin, who was biting her lower lip now, Kevin who was letting his hands run from her collar bone down...

"Please!" She whimpered. Desire, strong and needy, swamped her. She pressed herself against him.

God, he wanted her, too. She could feel his cock, hard against those soft dress pants. She squirmed against him, trying to get closer. She reached down, trying to fumble with his pants, desperate to get more.

The door behind them clicked open. Kevin backed away. Annie opened her eyes, blinked at him.

What had she done? Lord, she must look a mess. Tendrils slipped from her French knot. She pushed the top of her dress higher. Her lips stung from their kiss.

What had she done?

Before she could say anything, he swooped in once more and danced her back into the church's reception hall. They hadn't mentioned the...the incident again. Annie

wasn't quite sure what she wanted to say. She was sure she didn't want to hear what Kevin would tell her. He'd flirted. That was all. She forced things to become a little more intense. But there was no harm. Surely not. He probably hadn't even thought about it again. Women probably did that to him all the time. She ought to be ashamed of herself. She *was* ashamed of herself. She ought to be glad Kevin hadn't mentioned it again.

Still, she had to wonder, just a little, if she and Kevin were the subject of any of that gossip he talked about. She couldn't recall when she had last been gossiped about because she had been flirting with a handsome man. Maybe never. Something hot and rebellious in her couldn't help hoping, just a little, there would be some. It was about time people wondered about her sex life. It was about time she *wanted* a sex life. Kevin made her want, all right. He made her want like she never had before. Then again, how many men as attractive as he had actually paid attention to her?

None. He was the first. She couldn't imagine a real man better suited for a woman's fantasy. Was it any wonder most of the evening after that was a blur?

The next thing she remembered was somehow getting into a heated discussion with Jen about *Jane Eyre*, of all things.

"...but then why would Rochester, who goes so aggressively after Jane through most of the book suddenly turn all passive and weak?" Jen glared at Annie as if Rochester was one of Annie's relatives. "Sure, he becomes blind and sure he feels bad about Jane, but why doesn't he do something?"

"Well, he does look for Jane. He looked for her for months."

"Oh, please! If Jack disappeared..." Jen faltered a minute as if she was remembering something and then resumed her argument with vigor. "Well, I wouldn't give up looking for someone I loved until I was sure there was no hope. Not after a few months. What's wrong with the man? Other than being a man, of course."

Annie was starting to enjoy herself. "Maybe once Jane shows up, he wants to make her do the work for a change. He's tired of being the one who does all the chasing. Actually, I remember talking to Kevin about it... Hey, Kevin!"

In her eagerness to continue the argument, she forgot her manners. She actually reached out and grabbed Kevin's elbow as he walked by. He steadied his wedding punch as he turned.

"Why don't you think Rochester looked for Jane a little harder after she disappears?"

"He's ashamed," Kevin replied, promptly. "He knows he can't do or be what she deserves. He wanted to show off before and she was pretty impressed. What does he have to impress her with now?"

"But she likes not having him show off! She likes being able to do something for him!" Jen protested.

Was Kevin looking at her with a spark in his eyes? Her own sparks flared up inside. If he wanted to drag her off and kiss her outside in the dark one more time, she wouldn't mind.

"So? *He* doesn't like it. Jen, don't drag me into one of those literary arguments of yours. I'm sure you and Annie can do fine without me."

He left. Left without her. She'd bored him the way she usually did with people. Annie swallowed. Turned back to Kevin's sister.

Annie paused at the stunned look on Jen's face.

"Dr. Armstrong, you must be one hell of a teacher," Jen told her. "I can't believe you got my little brother to actually think about a book, let alone discuss it."

"I think you underestimate Kevin." Annie felt compelled to defend Kevin against something she didn't quite understand. Why couldn't Kevin contribute to a literary discussion if he chose to?

"Maybe I have. I probably have. But I still think you're one hell of a teacher. I'll have to come audit one of your classes someday."

"That would be delightful." Annie hoped Jen would. "I'd look forward to hearing your views about the ending of the novel. In fact, I think I may start working on an article about it. You've given me some good insights."

"Well, then, I'll look forward to hearing about your article." Jen seemed equally sincere. "I don't know if I'll agree with it, but I'll look forward to it."

* * * * *

"Annie? Are you awake?"

"Yes." She sat up straight in the bed. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing. I'll go away if you want."

"Kevin? What are you doing here?"

"I thought we should finish our kiss." He looked different in the moonlight, the shadows half-hiding his face. More mysterious. More dangerous. Sexier. All of those things and he was in her room, just the two of them. "Finish it the way I want to."

"I thought you weren't interested." Annie managed to get the words past the sudden dryness in her throat. "I thought I'd made you run."

"Run?" He shook his head and came a step closer to her bed. "I wanted to pick you up and take you...here. But I didn't want to scare you. You scare so easily, sweet Antigone."

"Did I act scared before?" Annie pulled back the covers, letting him see her in her thin cotton nightgown. She wouldn't allow herself to be scared. Not if this was really going to happen. "I asked for more then. I want more now."

"Then show me." He slid onto the bed, his body heavy and imposing, hot and strong against hers. She could feel the heat of his skin against her gown. Desire made her weak, made her breath catch, made prickles dance up and down her skin.

She twined her arms around his neck. "Take my gown off. Please."

"Please?" He whispered it against her ear, the words making her shiver as he breathed it against her earlobe. "You're always so damned polite, Annie. Will you be polite if I make you scream and cry when you come?"

"I don't scream. Or cry."

"You mean you haven't yet." His hand slid under the opening at her neck. With a quick twist, he jerked the opening apart.

Annie heard the rip of material and gasped.

"Are you afraid, Annie? I've wanted you. Here." His mouth slid, wet and hungry, against her breast. Teased her nipple. His hand slid down her waist, between her legs. She opened her legs further, inviting him to touch. "And here. Everywhere."

"No. No, I'm not afraid." She struggled, managed to slip her hands over his beautiful skin, to skim over the muscled hardness of his chest. Of his stomach. To cup his cock and feel his pulsing need in her own hands. "I want you, too."

"Tell me. You're so quiet, Annie. Tell me what you want."

"You. Kissing my breasts and nipples—oh yes, just like that—all wet and rasping. Touching my...touching my clitoris. You can feel how much I want that."

"Because you're all swollen and wet and you're pressing into my hand? Is that how I tell?"

"Don't laugh."

"I can't help it, Annie. I've wanted you so badly, I can't believe I got the nerve to finally tell you. To finally feel you." His finger slid up inside her, testing how wet she was. Annie squirmed; thrust her hips up.

"Feel more of me." Was this her? Prim Antigone? "Get inside me. Not just your finger even though that feels...so good. Quick. I'm burning up."

"Just a minute, love. Let me build those flames a little first." His tongue slid against that hungry clit of hers.

Oh God. She did scream then. A strangled moan of a scream. She was going to come, she was going to...

His tongue danced against her, his fingers playing against her thighs, tickling up further inside. She bucked against that mouth, twisted against the onslaught of fire, of delight, of freedom.

Coiling tension started in her feet, spread out through her body. He didn't care. He kept on with his wet, sweet torture. Her legs began to shake with tension. Her hands twisted hard into his hair, demanding closer, fiercer contact.

"Please. Oh, please. Oh, please."

He pulled her legs up over his shoulders and bent down. One finger, then two slid up hard and high inside her, pressing. Oh Lord, she needed that. Needed him. Needed...

"You do like this, don't you?" He whispered it against her pussy and she wiggled. "All that primness—it's not an act, not exactly. But you're more than that. More than even you know."

"Kevin, I'm dying here. Do something. Do anything!"

"Oh, I will. Everything. Now that we both know. I'm going to make you forget everything when we finally fuck. Aren't I?"

She was strangling with want.

"Yes. Whatever you want... Just fuck me."

His cock thrust, hard, inside her, burning a path that was too fierce to resist. She didn't want to resist.

She felt pieces of her scatter in happy abandon, throwing themselves against the dark, fiercely released brightness shattering the blackness.

"Agggh."

"I knew you'd scream when you came," he whispered against her ear. "I'm going to make you do it again and again. That's what you want from me, isn't it? I've seen you watching me. Watching my ass. Watching my cock."

Annie's face grew hot. He'd seen her. He knew. He knew all about her fantasies. But he wasn't angry. Or if he was, it didn't matter. He was still hard, still moving inside her.

"You want a stud, don't you? Someone who will fuck you blind. Someone who doesn't pay attention to your hesitations and blushes. Don't you?" His voice had thickened, grown as harsh as his movements inside her. He wasn't gentle or hesitant now, the way he'd been at first. Oh God, he'd figured her out. Knew every shameful sex secret she'd never told. Never done. Everything she wanted to do with him, even if he had to make her do it.

"Oh, God, *please*." She should be embarrassed. She should make him stop. But he was right. She'd finally found her sex toy—one with a mind and lusts of his own. A sex toy who would toy with her. "Yes. Please. Keep fucking me. I want to scream and come again. I want to scream and come until I don't have a voice left. Please, Kevin."

"I'll make you forget to be polite, too."

"Annie? Are you awake?"

Noooooo. It had been a dream. Just a sex dream. They'd never—but then why was she twined up against Kevin's body, breathing hard?

"Are you awake?"

She wanted to say yes, but then decided she'd rather snuggle against Kevin's comfortable shoulder, keep her eyes shut and pretend to be sleeping. She'd never had a more enjoyable plane trip. Even if half the enjoyment had been an illusion.

She tried to sort her thoughts out even while she enjoyed the feel and scent of a masculine presence. She was still half involved in their dream sex, unwilling to drag herself into reality again. She wanted to keep Kevin's smell lingering near her, to have his arms around her, to let herself be wet and needy and wanting. To imagine him taking care of all that wet, needy want.

Where was the thoughtful, rational Annie? She had to get her back before she reached home. She had to think about something other than sex. Sex and Kevin. In real life she couldn't embarrass herself the way she'd been willing to do in her fantasies.

The trip. She'd think about her trip. She clutched at the idea desperately.

Nothing had been like what she'd expected. She hadn't felt out of place. She'd *enjoyed* people. Had wanted to be around the group. In some ways she had enjoyed watching the group because it was almost like watching a play. She had never been really a part of a large, rowdy family and it was a fascinating thing to observe. But they didn't let her just stand back and look. They'd dragged her into the middle of everything.

Like basketball. She'd never played basketball in her life. She'd never even considered the game before. But basketball was a vital part of Kevin's family. Someone set up a hoop during the weekend and everyone in the family seemed to play constantly. The only one who refused was Molly's fiancé, who was still on crutches. He was also several inches shorter than most of the other very tall men there, but something in Jared Boyd's attitude told Annie that would never stop him.

Everyone else played. Even Victor, who walked with a limp.

That was why Annie had found herself with her back pressed tightly against Kevin, learning how to shoot.

"Very slick, Kevin!" Victor called. "I used to make moves on your sister that way when I was in high school."

"I'm just helping end Annie's ignorance," Kevin called back.

"About how you make passes?"

"Only basketball passes, buddy!"

Hmmm. Annie had wondered if Kevin's hands needed to be on her quite that often. She thought she was getting to be fairly adequate at the game. Then again, she'd liked having Kevin's hands on her...

Annie finally opened her eyes and saw that Kevin was propped up against the window of the plane, his eyes half-opened while he looked at her. Oh Lord, what was he thinking? Surely not what she was trying not to think about...

"I'm very envious of you, you know," she told him. She must have been more tired than she thought to let that slip. Maybe she was still half-dreaming and she hadn't said it at all.

"Me?"

"You seem to have everything important. A great family, charm, good looks. I don't have any of that."

"No family?"

"Just my mother and father. I had an older brother, but he died."

"Well, if you want me to be honest, I've been spending a lot of time envying you." Kevin leaned forward and tapped her forehead lightly. "I envy you that incredibly sharp brain of yours."

Annie made a face. She didn't want a gorgeous man to tell her that he wanted her brain, for heaven's sake. Especially not after...what they weren't going to talk about, ever. Then she saw that look again on Kevin's face. She'd seen it on other members of his family, too.

Annie would have felt self-conscious at the odd expression that crossed the person's face, except they would look at Kevin, not at her, and then glance away. It was as if they felt sorry for...Kevin? Jen had looked the same way when they talked about Kevin contributing to a literary discussion. And Jen loved her brother. Anyone could see that. Annie thought about that harder.

Maybe Kevin wasn't kidding. Maybe he did think he was stupid. Annie knew what it was like to be thought an underachiever. By the time her brother Will was her age he'd received tenure at University of Chicago and had published several books. Annie knew nothing she could ever do would come close.

The members of Kevin's family were definitely overachievers. They all had college degrees and several of them had achieved a good bit of fame. They'd married people who'd achieved things, too. Jack would stand out in any group and Cecilia had told Annie that Victor had won a Pulitzer Prize. And whatever it was that J.B. did, Annie was sure he was good at it. J.B. just came across that way.

That left Kevin. Kevin, her very talented, reliable handyman. He had been in the army but she hadn't heard anything about college. He hadn't won awards or been in the newspapers. Oh, heaven. Of course.

Other people must have been comparing what he did and what she did. "Your brain is just fine all on its own, Kevin."

He looked away from her and muttered, "Yeah. Well, I do what I can with it. Sorry. I was just getting a little down. You know, Annie, I was named after my father but no one ever calls me Dan. I always figured people thought I didn't deserve to be named after him. He was a great guy. A really smart newspaper columnist. I could never do what he could."

"Kevin! I hired you because you are the best at what you do." Annie willed him to look at her. He glanced up at her, looked away, and then looked back. "Not everyone is good at academics. I am, but that's about all I can do. You can repair old homes and shoot basketballs and dance so beautifully you made even me look good. There are a million things you do well that I don't. I'm hopeless outside the classroom. I envy you that, too. Kevin, I mean it. Or would you like me to call you Dan?"

He looked at her at last and, mercifully, the strained look was off of his face. She hadn't even had to add that he could make her turn into jelly with just a glance. That he was every woman's wet dream.

"Thanks, Annie. We can stick with Kevin. I'm pretty much used to it now. After all, that's what people have called me for thirty years now."

Thirty. Annie's heart sank again. She was much too old for him. All that flirting by Kevin and all those compliments and suggestive comments his family made really meant nothing. She was ridiculous to even briefly think she fit in with him and with his family. That it could mean anything more.

Damn. Now she was feeling the same way she had at the start of the vacation. What had she been thinking of to go with him? And, worse yet, how was she ever going to explain to her mother that she hadn't done a thing with her article for almost the whole spring break?

She didn't even notice Kevin watching her and losing his smile.

She was starting to realize he was right. He wasn't in her league. His family was in her league. She'd fit in with them beautifully once she got over being shy. The problem was he wasn't like the rest of the family. She might have enjoyed dancing with him and once or twice he thought she was interested but... No, he was flattering himself that she had ever taken him seriously at all. It was probably best there'd been no privacy or time to try to make a move on her. He'd gotten too serious for a half a second and she'd spooked. He'd seen her eying him ever since their kiss, looking all worried and nervous...and sexy...the way only Annie could.

Maybe the whole vacation had been a mistake. Still, he decided to give it another try. Something in him just had to. "You still have some days off. What are you planning to do with them after, say, five o'clock or so?"

"Research, I suppose. I have some essays to finish grading, too. Do you need some help with the house?"

"I thought you might like to go out." Kevin offered the idea up as casually as he could. He hadn't been this nervous when he asked his first girl out on a date. Come to think of it, on his first date the girl had asked him.

"Me?" Annie stared at him.

"Yeah. You sound like you don't go out much." Kevin shrugged. "I thought I might show you some Charlottesville sights you haven't seen."

God, she wanted him to show her sights. That dream of hers would make her ache for days. He was being nice, offering her a simple fun night out and she wanted to jump him. The conflict inside her was making her even more tongue-tied than usual.

"I expect to be pretty b-b-" Annie heard her old stammer coming back and mentally shook herself. She had worked to outgrow that stammer years ago. "Occupied this week."

"Oh. Occupied." His smile was gone.

She was an idiot. She was going to annoy or bore him. But the ache in her made her blurt out, "I do have my evenings free."

He didn't say anything. She'd already made him want to forget the whole thing. Annie could feel tears actually begin to sting her eyes. She wanted—she wanted whatever she could get of him. To just be near him.

She'd never been in lust before. Not like this. It was horrible. Wonderful.

His lips curved slightly.

"I expect to be occupied during this week, too," Kevin confided in her. "I've got a pretty strict boss, you know, and I have a lot to catch up on. But maybe you can come with me and shoot pool tomorrow night?"

"Um..."

"Now let me guess. You don't know how to shoot pool."

His smile was back and it made her smile, too. She nodded her head, wordlessly.

"You didn't know how to play basketball, either, remember?" he said. "Let me further your education, professor. Everyone needs to know how to play pool."

"Oh absolutely," she agreed. "I don't know how I've managed to stay ignorant all these years."

Mistake or not, her vacation wasn't over yet. She might as well enjoy it.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Hey, Annie!"

She looked up, startled. Kevin had never come to her office at the university. Not in all the weeks she'd known him, not even since they'd started going out two weeks ago. But here he was, striding into her tiny office, looking puzzled. He held out the piece of paper she'd scribbled her note on.

"Kevin?"

"I got the message you wrote but I couldn't make any sense of it. So I figured I'd swing by to ask what was going on."

Annie was a little hurt. Maybe she had written a rather long message, but she prided herself on making herself clear on paper. Perhaps the message itself was the problem, not the messenger.

"Jennifer called the house while I was there and asked if you could come up for the weekend." Annie recited the message back to him. "Cecilia and Victor are gone, too. There was some scheduling mix-up. All of the children need to be baby-sat and she can't find anyone else on such short notice."

"Oh. Well then, why don't we both go up to northern Virginia and make it a wild weekend? We can compare some real traffic jams to the puny ones we get around here."

"Kevin, you must be joking!" Annie laughed. She stopped laughing when she saw his face. "I never did babysitting even when I was a teenager. I've never been around children. I couldn't possibly spend a whole weekend taking care of children I don't even know."

"But Jen wouldn't call unless she really needed the help," Kevin coaxed. "I hate to let her down when she needs someone. She told me she and Jack have some political banquet at the other end of the state. If you come, we can go sightseeing afterward. I'll take you anywhere you want."

"Kevin, I'm not good with children. I don't even like being around children." Annie tried to sound firm.

"That's what you said about whitewater rafting and see how well you did," Kevin reminded her.

"I almost fell into the water!" Annie exclaimed. "I practically capsized you!"

"That's just because I was laughing so hard." Kevin struggled to keep a straight face. "My fault. And it wasn't dangerous. I was careful to take the beginner's way. I just didn't plan on you swamping the raft."

"The other people in the raft were ready to kill us both. And I was soaking wet for the whole ride home since I didn't have any change of clothes." Annie ignored his efforts to divert her. "You should've warned me I might need extra clothing."

"But you liked it." Kevin acted as if she hadn't said a word. "You told me you did, right after you got done with your giggling fit."

"I didn't giggle, exactly." Annie bit her lip and looked up at him through her lashes.

Kevin settled himself on her desk and just barely kept himself from leering at her. But damn, he liked it when she tried to look sly. She looked cute. "You chortled then."

"I might have laughed. A little bit."

"I thought you were going to p—"

"If I was, it was only because we weren't near a bathroom," she interrupted hastily. "I like being near toilet facilities." Annie's voice was prim but her eyes laughed.

"You liked whitewater rafting."

"All right. I liked it more than I thought I would when we started."

He'd enjoyed watching her carefully put suntan lotion all over her shoulders and arms before they started in the raft. He knew she hadn't done it to be provocative; that pale skin of hers must really burn. But he had really, really wanted to offer to help her. Especially when she had hastily swiped at her chest. He would have taken a lot of care with that particular area. And with her legs. And...

"You were a very good sport about getting wet." Kevin tried his most charming tone. He had also enjoyed wet T-shirt look. It was probably lucky it had been unusually hot for a day in May or she would have insisted on wearing his sweatshirt. "You'll like babysitting, too. The kids are great. It will just be one night. C'mon, Annie."

She gave in. She knew she would. After all she had given in about playing pool, about going out to dance at a local bar, about the rafting. She had never been good at any of those things but she'd done them. After all that, why not forget about her lifelong reluctance to be near small children? When she had been a small child, more used to adults than children her own age, her classmates had bewildered and confused her with their immaturity and flashes of cruelty. She hadn't had to deal with children on her own since then but she doubted she'd be much better at coping. Still, Kevin had asked her to. Somehow she wasn't able to tell him no.

Why hadn't Kevin suggested anything other than water sports, bar hopping and babysitting? She had seen him looking at her legs more than once. She must have something that made him interested in her! Maybe not enough. Kevin probably got plenty of sex elsewhere. At any rate, he certainly didn't need her to fulfill any sexual needs. She saw how women looked at him, even when she was standing right next to him.

Sex would complicate things enormously. Especially when he found out that she was no good at it. If they actually did have sex, he'd move on to someone else immediately with perhaps a pitying pat on her back as a good-bye. She was the one who would never be able to recover after failing.

In the meantime, Kevin was waiting for her answer.

"When do we leave?"

"I'll drop you off at the house to pick up some stuff. If we hurry we can make it before it gets too late. You don't want to deal with rush hour traffic."

"Right now? Oh, why should I expect you to do anything else?" Annie looked heavenward. "You're Mr. Spur of the Moment."

"C'mon, Annie. It'll be fine. Really."

Annie wanted to ignore the flashing message light as she rushed into the family house but just couldn't. She punched the button as she dragged down her overnight travel bag and began to throw clothes in.

"Annie, you haven't been home three nights in a row," her mother's voice informed her. "I hope that means you've been busy with your research. I'd hoped to tell you this in person but I haven't time. I plan to fly down within the next week or two to see you. I'm thinking of hosting a party at the house. I know sometimes getting tenure requires a little social lubrication. I'll discuss my plans when you call me back."

Annie resisted a lifetime of obedience by not picking up the phone. Instead she swallowed, snapped the top of the suitcase shut and hurried down the stairs. Kevin was waiting for her and she refused to ruin her trip by answering her mother's summons. There would be enough trouble for her to handle next week if her mother did fly down.

She locked the front door and ran. Kevin opened the truck door.

"Hey, you look way too unhappy," he told her. "Don't you believe me when I tell you it'll be a good trip? Do I ever let you have anything but fun when we go somewhere?"

"It will be fun." Annie tried to sound like she believed it. "We'll have nothing but fun."

"That's right." Kevin suddenly gave her the lightest of kisses.

Annie blinked at him stupidly. Why?

"You're such a good girl," he told her. "Even when you don't believe me, you go along with the plan. Trust me. Have I let you down yet?"

"Not yet," she admitted. She was really starting to dislike being called a good girl.

"Then let's go."

* * * * *

"Shhh."

"Kevin! Vicky is sleeping close by. I should go back in with her."

"That's why I said shhh. Don't talk."

They heard the girl moved restlessly in her bedroom next door. Annie kept her mouth shut. Quiet. They needed to be quiet. If one of the kids woke up, how would she explain Uncle Kevin with her in the hall, his hands sliding up under her nightie, his thumbs familiarly against her nipples? As if he'd done this a million times before. Of course, if it hadn't been a million, it had been close. He'd touched her so many times.

After the whitewater rafting, after the truck rides into the country. Her favorite had been after the pool game when he'd stretched her out over the table, her rear up and exposed...

"Wiggle that pretty ass for me, Annie," he whispered. "I love to watch it. Love to pretend you're underneath me."

"You could be." She gasped, as his hands played against her pussy, teasing but not satisfying. "Why aren't you?"

His little finger slid up inside her, just a millimeter. Her vaginal walls clutched at him, desperate for release. He chuckled.

"Because these are my rules." He whispered it against her ear. "If you couldn't hit that shot, I got to call the shots tonight. Remember?"

She wiggled again in response.

Smack!

Annie jumped. She almost turned her head.

"Bad girl. Trying to distract me." His hand splayed out wide against her warm butt. "Do you want to play...like this?"

Did she have to say it out loud? She couldn't. The small pain taunted her. Teased her with promises...She wiggled again. Heard Kevin laugh.

Smack! His hand came down again and she whimpered. A good whimper. She didn't know how often he spanked her that evening. Hard smacks. Teasing ones. All she knew was that she discovered a whole new range of sexual delight. Her whole body had throbbed with pain and then pleasure.

No one had ever told her that she would get wet from having a man spank her in a pool hall. She wondered if he'd do that someday when it wasn't after hours, when a patron might wander in and see them...

Of course he would if he wanted. He didn't ask her. He just took. Took exactly what they both wanted. Took her.

She was dripping when Kevin finally pulled his pants down to enter her from behind, her body stretched out against the table, her legs trembling with desire. When he put his hand over her mouth to muffle her cries as he thrust inside.

She screamed against his hand over and over. The screams and her own excitement made him rough. She wanted him to be rough and greedy and insatiable that night. She was barely able to walk when he was done. She loved every ache...

But that was then. They were in bed with children in the house tonight. He couldn't do anything like that this time. Even if she begged for it.

Annie licked her lips. She'd learned to love silently begging for more from Kevin. He knew so many things...so many, many things.

His mouth was on hers. This time would be quick. Quick and quiet and – his cock slid into her, down a now familiar path. Familiar but exciting. Quiet, fast, sweaty. She arched up, trying not to make a sound. His hands clamped down on hers as their bodies slid together, moving fiercely against the hallway wall.

"I can't not have you, baby." He whispered it, gasping, in her ear. "Can't do...without you. Not for even one night."

She bit into his shoulder at the words, forcing herself to swallow a scream of delight. Feeling the ripple, then crash of release in her body. Grinding herself against his shudders. They were so close, so intertwined, they barely rattled the wall as they climaxed together.

So good, so good, so quiet, so good...

Annie opened her eyes, breathing hard, her body limp and still quivering from her climax. She reached out to an empty space.

Next to her, Vicky shifted again. "Mommy?"

"It's okay, Vicky."

Vicky had been talking in her sleep. But Annie had been—she'd been orgasming in hers. Having yet another fantasy about the man who was fast asleep in the room next door.

Damn it. Annie smacked her pillow the way she'd imagined Kevin... *Damn it.* It was getting to the point that she couldn't sleep at all without imagining the two of them going at it.

If only it were the truth. If only he pretended to not touch her during the day so he could fuck her senseless at night. The way she kept dreaming he would.

She was about ready to beg for real. God, wouldn't that be humiliating?

"Kevin, bless you for watching the kids."

Kevin opened one eye. "Cee Cee, your children are demons. Jen's children are demons." He hunched over the early morning coffee while cartoons blared from the other room.

"Well, that's true," Cecilia allowed. "So aren't you glad I'm here to relieve you of your duty? A little gratitude seems to be in order."

"Why are you here?" Kevin thought to ask. "Jen and Jack are due in some time this afternoon. You aren't."

"I did some schedule juggling. It looks like we'll get the bank loan for the ranch whether I'm around or not." Cecilia shrugged. "And I have to fly up to New York pretty soon for a recording session. Again. So I thought I'd check home. I missed the kids."

"You missed the kids? You're insane," Kevin yawned. "They never sleep, they never stop yelling."

"They were probably just excited about seeing their Uncle Kevin and having all the cousins sleeping over at the same house."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever." Kevin's head snapped up as Cecilia picked up her suitcase. "Hey, don't put that in your room right now. Poor Annie is finally getting some rest after we soothed homesick kiddies, separated fighting boys and got drinks of water for everyone through what seemed like the whole night."

"Annie is here?" Cecilia raised one eyebrow. "With you? In the bedroom?"

"I stayed with the boys in their room," Kevin told her. "What a mistake."

"I agree." Cecilia's tone was most definitely sarcastic. "Why didn't you stay with Annie?"

"We're not like that." Kevin was exasperated. "I've told you that before."

"Well, why aren't you like that?" Cecilia seemed equally exasperated. "She's sweet, she's pretty, she certainly is smart and for some reason she really seems to admire you. This has been going on for weeks. What is the problem? Someone with looks and money *and* a Ph.D. just isn't good enough for you?"

"I'm not good enough for her." Kevin's words shot out of his mouth before he thought about them. Then he stopped himself and drank some cold coffee hastily. "I mean, she's having a hard time right now. She'd actually started to loosen up, show she had a sense of humor and then she shut down again. I don't know why but I can tell she's unhappy. She doesn't need me to make things worse."

Cecilia's eyes narrowed on him but she said nothing. He didn't either. She didn't need to know that he was hard every morning from his very specific, detailed fantasies about Annie. In his dreams where they did things Annie would blush at just the mention of in real life...

Annie came downstairs, her hair still wet from a shower. She smiled at Cecilia and poured herself coffee. And Kevin got hard again, just looking at her being a little mussed, still a little ruffled from sleep.

"I usually drink tea," she remarked aloud. "But anything with caffeine will do this morning."

"I'm sorry the kids gave you a hard time," Cecilia told her.

"Oh no," Annie replied politely and then a half smile crossed her face. "It was fun. Right, Kevin? Actually Vicky settled down around midnight. I believe Johnny and Danny took a little longer. I heard someone jumping off a bunk bed around two in the morning." She paused, then couldn't resist taking another poke. "Right, Kevin?"

He groaned in surrender and mutely held out the coffee cup. She took pity and freshened his cup then added milk.

"Well, Annie, you're dressed and ready to go," Cecilia said. "The kids will probably veg in front of the TV for the rest of the morning if they've been up all night. Let me just tell them hello before we go shopping. It won't take too long. I know exactly what you need."

"Shopping?" Annie burnt her mouth on coffee and sucked in a breath of air to cool the spot.

"Hey!" Kevin yelped as the implication of his sister's words hit. "You're going to leave me alone with the kids?"

"You bet." Cecilia was both unsympathetic and in a hurry. "I've been dying to take Annie on a clothes binge since I first saw her. You should feel honored, Annie. I'm not just anyone's personal shopper. I like your basic style, don't get me wrong. Classic is classic. But you're in crying need of a little jazzing up on the accessories. Classic does *not* have to be boring."

"Hey!" Annie echoed Kevin's indignation.

Kevin pondered what it might mean to have his sister do female bonding with Annie in a shopping mall. His smile broadened. His sister was up to something. She liked Annie, so whatever it was, it was probably a good thing for him. He hoped. "Cecilia, stop by the lingerie department. Promise?"

Annie looked a little stunned. Kevin knew she'd seen what Cecilia had given Molly in the way of lingerie at the bridal shower. Then Annie looked thoughtful. Kevin began to feel better, despite the lack of sleep.

Dr. Annie was definitely considering the idea.

Annie's feet hurt. Her head hurt. Her arms had gone beyond hurt from the many bags she carried. And they'd only been in the mall for about three-fourths of an hour. Annie had never enjoyed malls or shopping very much. But she had to admit Cecilia knew exactly what she wanted and where to find it. Then again, from what Annie knew of Cecilia, that was no surprise.

Cecilia had stopped at the cosmetics department and cheerfully told Annie exactly what to buy. She'd paused at the shoe department and in less than five minutes made Annie buy high-heeled shoes. Annie preferred sensible pumps with just a hint of a heel

when she had to wear formal shoes, but she found herself mesmerized into purchasing shoes that would add five inches to her height. Then came the lingerie department. Annie tried to prepare herself to balk. She'd never be able to carry off the kind of underwear Cecilia favored.

Cecilia looked at Annie with narrowed eyes. "I can't decide," she said slowly. "It hampers me."

"What does?" Annie wondered what could possibly hamper Cecilia short of manacles. Hmm. Perhaps manacles would only encourage her.

"Him being my brother," Cecilia told her, absently, still staring. "I can't tell if it should be black or white underwear. Maybe even blush. Oh, for heaven's sake, we'll get them all and you can experiment. I'm sure that will be fun for both of you."

"You're picking underwear for me based on what your brother might like?" Annie really had to put her foot down. Her newly high-heeled foot. However, the possibilities Cecilia opened couldn't be ignored.

"Well, he asked me to." Cecilia seemed to think that was reason enough.

"Cecilia, it isn't as if he has ever seen my underwear." Annie thought it was important to point that out. Then she wondered if she had made the point she was trying to. "He hasn't seen me out of my underwear either, in case you're wondering."

Only in my dreams.

"Well, why not?"

Annie opened her mouth and shut it. How was she supposed to answer that? This was Kevin's sister, for heaven's sake.

"I suspect he sort of likes the innocent look. After all you look pretty innocent. But I could also see the importance of the element of surprise if you wear black. I bet he wouldn't suspect it." Cecilia tapped her foot. "That could be fun."

"Umm, Cecilia?"

Cecilia looked at her inquiringly. Annie wasn't sure just what to say.

"Why are you doing this?" Annie finally asked. "I've never had anyone's sister give me advice on what underwear their brother would like to see me in."

"Well, I certainly haven't ever done this for Kevin before." Cecilia turned to the racks and began to ruthlessly go through the bras. "But then again, I haven't thought any of his other girlfriends were worth advising. Come to think of it, most of them wouldn't need advice on lingerie. Maybe other things, like brains or couth, but not lingerie."

"Ah, I don't really want to know—"

"Besides, Annie, I like you. If you don't use this on Kevin—I mean, if he's stupid enough to miss an opportunity like this when he knows what I'm doing and asked me to do it—well, then some normal guy will really appreciate it."

"I daresay."

"I don't suppose Kevin told you that he modeled underwear when he was younger, did he?"

"No!" Annie couldn't help herself. She was intrigued.

"He wouldn't. Well, technically, I suppose he was modeling swimsuits, but believe me, it might just as well have been underwear. That was back when he left school for a while. Instead of washing dishes and flipping burgers, like a normal high-school dropout, he started doing that. Our parents weren't exactly thrilled when they heard. But it made him good money."

"I don't see Kevin as a model. Not that he isn't handsome enough."

"He really wasn't a bad one. Of course the rest of the family has conveniently forgotten that he was the one who got me my job modeling lingerie. My parents were even less thrilled with me. I got into all kinds of trouble. I was eighteen, though. Practically. Well, anyhow, Kevin's modeling somehow got lost in the shuffle. But he is good at disappearing when he thinks he needs to."

Annie let herself think about Kevin posing in very brief swim trunks.

"Ohh, good. I like that smile. You know, I bet I could dig up some of those old ads. He'd be tremendously embarrassed if I showed them off, of course. That's exactly why I kept them. I was just waiting for the right time to display them again. Anyhow, I'm glad you got that look on your face. I was starting to wonder. He is good-looking, isn't he?"

"Cecilia, this is a very strange conversation."

"Not if you refuse to converse. Then again, I'm persistent. Isn't he good-looking? Even though he is my brother, I can see it."

Annie laughed and gave up. Cecilia looked so expectant as she waited for Annie's answer that it would be a shame not to reply. Annie couldn't imagine what would happen if Cecilia was disappointed.

"Yes, Cecilia. I think he's a very good-looking man. Almost any woman would agree with that."

Cecilia was silent for a moment but Annie knew that must be a temporary condition. She braced herself for the next topic, but even after her best effort to be prepared, she was staggered by the next question.

"Listen, Annie, you aren't a virgin, are you?"

"No! Cecilia, I'm six years older than Kevin. And, believe it or not, I've had men interested in me before. I've been interested in men before." She wanted to add she'd had lots of men interested in her but decided to stick to the truth. She had a feeling Cecilia would know if she lied.

Cecilia didn't have to know she'd never been as interested as she was with Kevin. About the dreams that made her toss and turn at night.

"Well, that's a relief. There really is something sweet and innocent about you, so I couldn't be absolutely sure," Cecilia said, cheerfully. "I'd hate to have to go into my

birds and bees lecture. I haven't practiced it enough yet since my kids are a little young."

"Don't trouble yourself. Please."

"Now you're mad. Annie, listen to me. I'm not sure what's going on in Kevin's little male brain, but it's obvious that he is interested. That's great. I like you. Jen likes you. Molly does, too. If, for some reason, the guy needs a little extra incentive, I'll be happy to help with the proper intimate apparel."

"Really, you don't have to."

"Kevin mentioned some big party you're having soon. Wouldn't it be nice to have a great new look? Having proper underwear helps your confidence. Trust me on this."

"I—I—" Annie gave up. Kevin might never see her purchases, but having more confidence at the dreaded party couldn't hurt. Maybe she wouldn't argue with Cecilia. Very much. "Do we really need to get three pairs? And —and a push-up bra?"

"Absolutely. By the way, we're stopping by at the dress department on the way out. I saw something there that I think would really suit you. You have such an interesting skin tone. I think a blue-green color would suit you beautifully. It would go with your eyes. It always helps to match your eyes."

"My eyes. Right."

"Listen, Annie, you like Kevin, don't you? I mean, everyone likes Kevin. And you don't seem to mind going out with him, right?"

Annie wasn't sure if she should laugh or cry. Kevin and his whole family weren't like any family she had ever met before. Still, even when they were being outrageous, she couldn't help enjoying them all.

"I like Kevin, yes," she said. "Very much."

"Well, then, don't argue!" Cecilia plunked Annie and the purchases in front of the cashier and waited for Annie to pay for them. "I figure we have about fifteen minutes to go before we have to get back and relieve Kevin from the little monsters. I wish we had time to stop and work on a new hairstyle but I guess yours will do."

"I'm relieved."

"You know, I'm really glad you're interested in Kevin. Really, really glad."

Annie stared at the younger woman with sudden insight. How much of what Cecilia had said and done had been calculated to make Annie talk and how much of it was just Cecilia doing what Cecilia usually did?

Then Annie shrugged and obeyed Cecilia, secretly wondering what Kevin would think if he saw her in... Well, she could fantasize, after all. Her fantasy life kept getting better and better lately.

* * * * *

Annie watched with interest as Kevin carefully jacked up the supports another half notch. She wasn't sure which was more interesting: seeing the floor slowly raised or watching Kevin work with his shirt off. She had never imagined you could raise a floor. She had never thought about it at all. She had imagined Kevin with his shirt off, however.

"This takes longer than I thought," Annie commented. As long as he kept his shirt off, she didn't mind.

"It's gotta be done this way," Kevin grunted.

"I know. You explained that if you do this too fast, all the plaster in the walls will crack. I still had no idea... How long will it take?" Annie asked.

"A few more weeks. Minimum. Don't worry. There is still plenty more for me to do here besides jack this sucker up." Kevin paused to mop his face with the shirt he had thrown to the floor. It was hot in the basement.

Annie listened to the soft sounds of the radio in the background. There was some sports event going on. Annie frowned thoughtfully. She didn't play sports but she realized that men found them important and enjoyed talking about them. She was pretty sure Kevin was listening to a baseball game. She had never actually seen a game of baseball, but she understood the basic idea.

She wondered if she could think of an intelligent question to ask about baseball. If it *was* baseball. She decided she couldn't and was about to stand up and reluctantly leave when she heard a small noise.

"What is *that*?" she gasped.

"I meant to tell you about that before. I think you have mice." Kevin looked much too unconcerned after making that announcement.

"I don't want mice!" Annie was firm. Well, as firm as she could be, since she wanted to scramble up the stairs away from the little mousy noises.

"I'll set out some traps. Poison would work, too, but you'll get dead mice all over. Maybe even behind the walls."

"Ewww." Annie couldn't help but say it. Then she felt the need to explain. "It's just that—well, I've never lived with mice before."

"It can be taken care of," Kevin said, reassuringly. "Would you like me to get you a cat?"

A pet. She had longed for a pet when she was small. Any kind of pet would have done. But Will had allergies and her mother didn't care for the mess and her father didn't want to hear her carefully reasoned pleas about the subject.

But Will had given her a stuffed toy that Christmas. A very realistic looking little kitten. It was the only gift Annie could really remember her brother getting her. Annie had slept with it on her pillow for years. She still had it stored away with her childhood treasures along with Grandma's belongings.

"I don't know much about cats," Annie confessed, unable to actually say no but doubtful whether it was a good idea.

"What's to know? I'm more of a dog person myself, but cats are easy. Feed 'em, pet 'em if they let you and you've got yourself a pet." Kevin looked at her. "You'd like one, wouldn't you?"

"Well...if it kept away mice..."

Kevin thought about telling her what a cat would do with a mouse it caught, especially if the cat liked its owner and wanted to give that owner a present. Then he decided against it. He could see Annie really wanted a cat and he didn't want to spoil her innocent desire.

"I could go to the pound for you. Or you could come, too, and pick one out. The thing is, you have to be really firm when you go to the pound. I always figured I would take home five or six animals that needed homes if I went for myself."

"Five or six..." Annie imagined looking at pathetic little animal eyes behind cage doors. "You go for me. You seem to know more about this than I do."

"You'll learn." Kevin smiled at her. "I imagine you'll read up on cat care right away."

"I suppose I will."

Annie had told her parents she would be a good pet owner. She'd pleaded. But she'd never really thought about the responsibility that came when one had to take care of another living creature. Maybe she shouldn't—

She heard the mousy sounds again.

Of course she could do it.

"I think I'll just go on up and work on removing wallpaper."

"You sure you want to give it a try?"

She didn't know why he thought she couldn't handle a simple chore. "I'm sure I don't want to stay down here."

* * * * *

The following day Annie looked ruefully at her jeans. They'd been new before she decided to try stripping the wallpaper herself. She pulled the T-shirt away from where it was sticking to her skin. Whatever people paid to have wallpaper stripped off was probably worth it. She'd had no idea when she started all this how filthy she could get from what seemed like a simple enough task. She also had had no idea that someone—or several someones—had thought putting up one layer of wallpaper over another would be a good idea.

But if she was busy, she couldn't have time to call her mother or wonder what her mother had planned. She was getting good at keeping much too busy to ponder her mother and her activities.

She briefly thought about taking a quick break and having one of the sodas that Kevin kept in the ice chest while he worked. She spit out something that tasted like a lump of glue. It probably was a lump of glue. She wondered how old the glue was. She wondered what people had put in wallpaper glue back in the 1920's when the house had been built and first wallpapered.

As she climbed down the ladder, she took a quick look at her work so far. Not too bad. She might be sweaty and dirty, but she was getting better and faster at this. The front room was almost done.

"Antigone?"

Annie almost fell off the last rung of the ladder. "Mother? When did you arrive? You didn't tell me."

"It hardly seemed worth the effort to inform you, dear, when you refused to answer any calls I made. I decided that perhaps I should push up my visit and find out what was going on." Her mother carefully picked her way through the strips of wallpaper at her feet.

"Oh." Annie knew better than to offer any opening when her mother was in one of those moods. She already felt herself beginning to pick her words in defense.

"I see you're taking up house renovation." Her mother glanced at the room. "I suppose it could prove to be a useful fallback occupation if you fail to get tenure."

"I'm just working at some things that don't require much experience." Annie knew her explanations wouldn't satisfy her mother, but she made her best attempt. "I've hired a competent handyman to make sure everything is going to be safe before I move in."

"I fail to see how competent he can be if you must do his work." Her mother sniffed disdainfully. "And where is he? Is he one of those workmen who leaves the job for weeks at a time and only shows up when he feels like it?"

"No. Actually Ke—Mr. Turner has been living here to speed the work up," Annie explained. "He was willing to take a smaller fee if he could use this as a place to stay."

"So he lives here?" Her mother looked even less impressed. "Hmmm."

"But he isn't here right now." Annie secretly thanked heaven for it. "He went to pick up some things at the hardware store."

"I see. Well, as attractive as all this looks, I think I must be going. I'm planning for our small party. I need to know the name of a competent caterer and some musicians." Her mother tapped one nail against her purse, looking thoughtful.

"I don't know any just offhand."

"I didn't expect you to, dear. I talked to a few people at the English Department about it." Her mother's tone dismissed her and any possibility of Annie being of help. "I trust you'll be back at the house for dinner tonight. We can talk about our plans then."

"You seem to have everything taken care of without talking to me," Annie muttered.

Her mother's face softened a moment. "Dearest, this party could be influential for you. I'll take care of it since I know how to plan these things and you don't. We want it to be done right, don't we?"

Annie couldn't resist that gentleness. Mutely she nodded. Her mother seemed to really be doing this because she cared. Maybe it would be all right after all. Maybe she was being foolish to resist her mother's help. Her mother was smart—the smartest woman Annie had ever met.

"Thanks, Mother," Annie said, at last. "I do appreciate your thoughtfulness."

"Of course, dear. That's why I'm here."

That afternoon, Annie picked her way through the piles of wood that Kevin had scrounged up from a demolished Culpeper farmhouse to replace her floorboards. The Culpeper trip had been yet another weekend expedition. Right now Kevin was fitting some new windowsills to replace the old, rotting ones. Her house was really starting to take shape. Annie swallowed, willing away the lingering nausea from her mother's visit earlier that day.

She should be glad. Her grandmother's inheritance was almost exhausted. Annie couldn't think of a better way to spend it than fixing up the house her grandmother had lived in and loved for so long.

On the other hand, Kevin would be on to another job. He hadn't said what he would be doing next, but he had a long line of projects to pick from. It might not even be anywhere in the area. She'd never see him again.

But maybe they shouldn't see each other. She was more interested than she'd ever expected to be in Kevin Turner. And he still hadn't indicated any real interest in return. It was a waste of time. Heaven knows, now that her mother was here, she couldn't waste any time.

"Hello, Kevin." She couldn't help the rush of longing inside as she said the words.

"Hey." He glanced up, then looked away.

Annie watched him, nervously chewing on her lower lip. His refusal to look at her might be a very bad sign. Then again she seemed to be reading ominous warnings into everything now. Mother had a way of making her do that.

"Anything new to report?" she asked.

"The floor is about ready to start. I've replaced the railings on the stairs. Oh yeah. Your mother stopped by for a bit yesterday afternoon," he told her.

"Mother came here? She saw you?"

Her stomach knotted. What had she heard about him? Annie knew that after her mother had arrived, she'd gone to the English Department, before she'd stopped by to say hello to her own daughter. Mother picked up gossip. She found it useful. She must have heard that Annie had been seen going out with a man. And now she heard Mother had been to see Kevin. *Yesterday*. Her mother must have heard something, because she'd not said one word to Annie about any departmental gossip and not a peep about talking to Kevin. Her silence was a very, very bad sign.

"Yeah. She wanted to see what had been done on the place so far. She said she was impressed. We had a little talk." Kevin seemed unconcerned.

"You had a little talk," Annie repeated. The back of her neck began to prickle. Something was up.

"You know, your mother looks a lot like you." Kevin put down the hammer. "She's beautiful. It must be very reassuring to think genetics will work for you when you get older. That's what Cecilia tells me, anyhow."

Annie wanted to laugh. She knew her mother was beautiful. Annie had never thought that she had resembled her mother in any way at all. Her mother had similar coloring, of course. They were almost the same size. In fact Annie sometimes wore her mother's clothing, when her mother told her what she had wasn't suitable. They were close enough in height to look each other straight in the eye, although Annie rarely did. But her mother was beautiful and she...

Annie shook her head. Why was her mother beautiful and Annie not if they had such similar features? Whatever magic her mother possessed though, Annie was sure she didn't have it.

"Mother likes young men," she said, at last. "I mean – she likes flirting with them."

"Really." Kevin raised an eyebrow. "I hadn't noticed. She invited me to come to some party she's having this Saturday. She said she wanted to hear more about the renovations on the house."

"This Saturday?" Annie felt a quick clutch at her stomach. "Kevin, did you say yes?"

"She made it hard to say no. It didn't sound like that big a deal."

"Kevin, it *is* a big deal. I don't know what she is up to, but it's a big deal. Did she tell you the party was black tie?"

"Nope."

"Did she mention that most of the English faculty and anyone else my mother knows at the university – and she knows plenty of people – are going to be there?"

"She didn't mention it."

"Do you have a suit that you could wear for the occasion?"

"Not right offhand."

"Call and tell her you can't go. I think she expects you to wander in and be dressed wrong and seem out of place. I think she wants to humiliate you and me both."

"Why would she do that?" Kevin looked curiously at her. But he didn't argue with her or call her crazy. Maybe he had figured out more about her mother than most people did at first glance.

"Why? Because she plots things. Because she knows we've been having fun together and she thinks I should be home, working on articles and trying to get tenure. Because—because that is just the sort of thing she would do." Annie fought back tears. "Kevin, she's not a very nice person sometimes. Just tell her you can't show up."

"Poor Annie." He reached out to very gently wipe away a tear that had escaped.

"Please don't let her try to make a fool of you." Annie tried not to sound desperate.

"Babe, plenty of people have tried to make a fool of me. I'm getting pretty good at showing them they can't. In fact, I like proving to them that they can't," Kevin told her. "I'll handle this."

"You aren't going to go, are you?" Annie briefly thought about begging. "You just said you don't have a suit."

"I said I don't have one now." Kevin rubbed his forehead for a moment and then straightened up. "Annie, don't worry. Listen, you can keep your distance from me at the party. If I do make a fool of myself, that'll be all right. I know I'm on my own for this."

"I don't want you to show up but if you do, of course you aren't on your own." Annie began to get annoyed. "I'll be there. In fact, I'll be at your elbow the whole time. Just listen and do what I say."

She had never been able to outwit her mother before but she wasn't going to just let her hurt Kevin. He didn't deserve it—even if for some reason he saw this as a challenge to take up rather than a warning to retreat.

"Yes, ma'am," Kevin said. "You know, this party sounds like it'll be a lot more interesting than I thought it would be when I first got invited."

"No, it won't be," Annie replied, flatly. "I hate these stupid affairs."

"Then why go?"

"Because it's smart to invite members of the faculty to a social function. And because my mother expects me to." Annie shrugged helplessly.

"Annie, aren't you a little old to always do what your mother expects you to?" Kevin's voice was very gentle.

It stung anyhow. She was thirty-five and she'd never disobeyed her mother in anything of importance. She had never made her mother happy, either. She really had tried to please her, but if she hadn't in all this time, she probably never would.

"She won't be here very long." Annie sighed. "She never is. I can put up with it until then."

"All right." Kevin took her hand and his callused finger gently smoothed her palm for a moment. "You hang onto that thought. And I'll be at the party. Maybe we can make it fun. Don't I always make it fun?"

"Babysitting." Annie gave him the one word and looked at him.

He looked very sober. Maybe just a little too sober to be believed. Sometimes it was hard to tell with Kevin.

"The kids had fun. You had fun, too, once Cecilia showed up."

"I guess I did. A little," Annie allowed, grudgingly. "But I don't think I was meant to be around little children."

"Are you going to wear some of the stuff to this party that you and Cecilia picked out?" he asked, innocently.

Lingerie. Annie bit her lip to keep from smiling. "Maybe."

"Then I gotta come to the party." He gave her his most earnest look.

Maybe it wouldn't be as bad as she feared, Annie tried to encourage herself. She'd warned Kevin. At least he wouldn't come dressed the wrong way and start off on an embarrassing note. Maybe they could avoid her mother and her plots. Dancing with Kevin was fun at the wedding. All right, it was more than fun. It was arousing, too. They could dance at the party. The music at this party would be slower and more romantic than the last time they'd danced. They could have fun. Sexy fun.

Annie shook her head. She couldn't imagine herself seductively flirting at any time, much less under Mother's eyes. It was a nice fantasy but much too far outside of reality to even pretend it could happen.

Who was she kidding? Annie's stomach knotted again. It was going to be a disaster. If Kevin insisted on coming, the best she could hope for was that she might shield him from the worst of whatever her mother had planned. Somehow. She didn't want him hurt.

* * * * *

"Kevin! Why are you here?"

He stood in her office the way he had once before, but he didn't look worried this time. His grin was cocky. Confident.

"You *are* here, aren't you?" She paused. Was this real? He looked so good. Dreamworthy good.

"Damn straight. You want me here, right?"

She didn't want him to take command this time. Not when she'd missed him so much. Without another word she jumped him—right on top of him. Kevin staggered back but held her steady.

"You want to wrestle?" He bent her back on the desk.

The books flew. One dug into her hip, another into her back. She panted and laughed as she tore at his fly. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered except finally unzipping – *ah!* He wasn't wearing briefs.

She petted the length of that shaft. She stroked. She loved every inch of his cock. In fact –

"My turn this time." She slithered away, pushed him back. He let himself fall back onto the desk, his eyes challenging her.

But this wasn't a challenge for her. This was just exactly what she wanted to do. Annie bent her head down. She wasn't very good at this, but she wanted to learn. She wanted to trace the large blue vein on his cock, to savor the softness of his cock's head, to suck his balls...

"Why Dr. Armstrong!" He tried to sound scandalized. "A student could come walking in any moment. What would they say?"

They'd envy me.

"I suspected...you had...an exhibitionist streak in you, Annie." His voice caught as she licked the little hole right at the center of his cock, lapping the drops of salty fluid that leaked out. "I think you want someone to watch."

He knew her too well. There was a part of her that wanted someone to see her kneeling in front of her desk, her head bent to worship the beautiful man in front of her. That part was getting wet at just the words, just the possibility.

"Suck harder, babe. Take more." She did her best to take everything, pressing the top of his cock head against the roof of her mouth, easing it down more. He was so big.

"Annie, touch yourself while you suck me."

She hesitated, lifting her head up from his cock.

"Why do you keep asking me to do...things?" she whispered. "I don't –"

"But you want to. That's why I ask. Because, way down deep under that prim exterior, Dr. Antigone Armstrong, you're wild. You're hot. You want to. Look over here." He shifted, turned her chin. She blinked. "Let's use that mirror behind your office door, Annie. Let me show you what you want."

My God. There she was, her hair tousled, her eyes snapping, looking back at a...a wild woman. A hot woman. A wild, hot woman kneeling between the knees of the most gorgeous male with the hardest cock she'd ever had her mouth or hands on.

"Nope. You don't get to touch me. Not until you touch yourself first."

"Tease!" She couldn't believe she would say that to anyone, much less Kevin.

"Yeah. Tease us both a little, baby."

They both watched as she pushed up her skirt. She watched his face as he realized she wasn't wearing panties. She could do this. She rested her fingers, hesitantly, against her mons.

"C'mon, Annie!" He leaned over, pushed her shirt up. Rested his thumbs against each nipple. "Mmm. Sheer bra. Very nice." He circled the areola temptingly, letting them both know her nipples were already stiff and aching.

"You ought to pierce them. That would be fun to play with, too."

Pierced? She'd never...maybe she would. Maybe she'd do everything she saw promised in Kevin's eyes. Her fingers slipped, wet and knowledgeable, against her clit. She whimpered, just a tiny bit.

"Look at yourself now. Look how you're getting me off, Annie. Just from how sexy you can be."

Her fingers pressed harder. She glanced over, saw her, thighs open, skirt up to her hips, rubbing herself—rubbing against Kevin. Her head tipped backward, suddenly too heavy to hold up. Kevin's cock was hard and full. Everything was centered at the core of her, where the heat was blazing, hotter—

"Dr. Armstrong?" There was a knock on the office door. "Dr. Armstrong, are you there?"

Oh. My. God. Her body exploded like a car bomb as the door opened.

"Dr. Armstrong, I didn't know you were here." The student looked at her. She knew she was flushed. "But I saw the light on so I hoped so."

Flushed, but clothed. Seated behind her desk, inwardly reeling from her daydream-induced climax.

"I lost track of time." Annie cleared her throat. Glanced at the clock. "I have about ten minutes for a question and then I have to run home. I have a party tonight."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Clara, I'm so glad you could make it." Annie used her most polite social voice for the occasion. Polite social voices almost always worked at parties, no matter how nervous you were. "Now let me show you where the drinks and food are. Do you have a wrap? I'll have someone take it if you want."

Karen Dwyer-Armstrong was holding court in the living room while Annie played hostess at the door. Her mother looked superb. Instead of making her look old, the silver in her hair sparkled. Her long black silk gown made a perfect contrast to her diamond necklace. Annie had never figured out if her mother had paid for plastic surgery or had just willed wrinkles not to appear on her face. Whatever the reason, her mother looked beautifully regal.

Annie had tried to compete tonight. She really had. She had worn the pale green-blue dress Cecilia said matched her eyes. She had put on the makeup Cecilia had insisted she buy. She even wore the bra Cecilia had picked out for her. But she still felt drab and dull. Her mother shone and glittered at parties. Annie suffered.

She wandered back toward the hall to greet more guests.

"Hey, Annie."

She turned. Who was she trying to fool? She had been hovering near the door trying to intercept Kevin. He had gotten in without her anyhow.

"You look really nice, Kevin."

Really, really nice. His suit was gorgeous. *He* was gorgeous.

"So do you, Dr. Armstrong."

To her surprise, he walked over to her and brushed his lips against hers. "Relax. This is a party."

She clutched his hands like she was going to drown. "Let me introduce you to everyone."

Annie took his arm and urged him toward the bar that was set up in the dining room. She'd decided earlier that she would steer him away from some of the worst snobs in the department and head him toward —

"Kevin! I can't believe you came," Lindsey called from across the room and then almost ran to him. "What a wonderful surprise!"

It was fate. There was nothing she could do. Annie saw Sally coming toward him from the other side of the room. Well, maybe if those two monopolized him it wouldn't be too bad. They wouldn't be trying to insult him at any rate.

"Antigone, my dear, I want to thank you and your mother for inviting us to such an elegant party." Dr. Grantly, the department dean, approached from her left to take her hand. Kevin stepped back.

"I must have you come and introduce me to your mother, Antigone," Mrs. Grantly urged as she came up on Annie's other side. "I've heard so much about her."

"She'll be tremendously pleased to meet you."

"Later." Kevin winked at her as they were swept away from each other's side.

As Annie led the couple to the other room she saw Lindsey place her hand on Kevin's arm. It was fate. Malevolent fate.

Twenty minutes later, with a glass of white wine firmly fixed in her hand, Annie moved among various knots of people, checking to see they were being fed and entertained. The band played softly in the background. When she looked in the living room she saw a crowd of men gathering around her mother. Her mother was in her element, smiling at the dean, trading jokes with one of the leading professors in her mother's area of expertise. No wonder Mother had become a leader in Jacobean drama. She was a mistress of it, herself.

When Annie wandered into the dining room she saw a gathering crowd of women circling Kevin. He was listening intently to one woman's chatter, offering to help another while she tried to choose one canapé over another. Both Kevin and her mother seemed to be entertaining the group effortlessly. Annie wasn't needed.

So Annie fled to the back porch and the comparative quiet. It was cooler out there, too, away from the crowds. An occasional smoker came out, nodding to her before lighting up.

Annie took deep breaths, letting the twists in her stomach ease. She could be happy just staying here for the rest of the evening, quiet and forgotten. It was peaceful outside. No gossip, no plotting —

Her breath caught. While she had been sulking, she'd forgotten her mother. She'd planned to be at Kevin's side all evening, even if all she did was make up one of his harem. Annie almost ran back inside.

Too late. Her nightmare was coming true. The King and Queen of the Party had met in the living room. Somehow Mother had managed to neatly shoo away all the well-wishers that hung around her. It was just Kevin and she, alone in a semi-isolated corner. Oh, Lord. Her mother was infinitely more cutting one on one.

Karen Dwyer-Armstrong looked haughtily at Kevin. Her sneer wasn't justified; Kevin looked more at home at this party than her daughter did.

Annie began to close in on them. Somehow she was going to come to the rescue.

"It was so nice of you to escort my daughter about town," her mother was saying when Annie got close enough to hear. "I can't imagine what you had to talk about. I love my girl, of course, but her conversational skills aren't always as sparkling as one might wish. And sometimes her sense of humor is a bit lacking."

For a moment Annie wanted to go right back out again. This was supposed to help her achieve tenure? But perhaps her mother was more intent on something else tonight.

"I like her. And she does have a sense of humor. She laughs at my jokes, anyhow." Kevin turned to leave.

"I hope so. I can see how she might have to develop a sense of humor about all this. After all, she is a well-educated, intelligent woman. You must have so little in common."

Her mother's voice was deliberately pitched just a little higher now. A few curious glances were starting to swing their way.

"I've developed some new tastes since meeting Annie." Kevin's face was bland, his eyes watchful.

"Do you ever discuss college experiences? Annie spent many years getting her degrees." Her mother sniffed haughtily. "She worked very hard for them."

Some people were now openly staring.

"No."

"I don't suppose you have any college experiences to discuss." Her mother turned away this time. "I trust you did get through high school."

Annie's breath sucked in. The people around them began to move away a little, starting to sense real tension and politely trying not to get involved, but their faces looked much too curious.

"I have my high school degree." Kevin's voice was calm. "I appreciate Annie's efforts to further my education."

"Mother, the caterers have a little problem that they need us to handle." Annie cut in, her voice also pitched loud enough so everyone could hear. "Please come with me."

The desperation on her part and surprise on her mother's gave Annie just enough leverage to hustle her out into the now quiet hall.

Annie didn't hesitate.

"Don't do this."

"I'm just explaining reality to Mr. Turner. I intend to talk to you after the party."

"No. What you're doing is being hateful to someone for no reason. Kevin and I are friends. You c-can't s-slap at someone for just being my friend." Annie forced herself to talk through the stammer.

"Your friend is a source of distraction for you. He's also a source of gossip. People are beginning to circulate ridiculous stories about you at your work because of him. He'll be gone from your life in a month or less. Is this friendship worth risking your tenure over?"

Her stomach hurt all over again. Annie stared at her parent, forcing herself to be calm. Forcing herself not to show the hurt.

"I'm your daughter, Mother. Why are you doing this to me?"

"Of course you're my daughter. That's why I'm helping you, child."

"No. No, you aren't. I don't think even you believe that. I want you to apologize to Kevin. If you don't, I'm leaving. I won't be back until you do."

Annie really thought she might throw up. On the other hand, watching the combination of annoyance and surprise on her mother's face was almost worth it. She rarely saw her mother show any real emotion toward her at all.

"There's nothing to apologize for, child. Now let's go back to the party. This time I want you to mingle."

"No."

Annie turned toward the living room. She wasn't sure if she was running or making a stand. Nothing in her mental rulebook included what you do before you abruptly leave your own party.

Finally, she decided to take the simplest route. She passed the women that had drifted back toward Kevin and took him by the hand. "Please excuse us."

And with that, Annie pulled Kevin out of the room, outside the house and down the steps. Only then did her legs start trembling. Kevin's arm helped hold her up.

"Let's get out of here," she managed to say calmly.

"Sure, Annie."

The parking attendant drove his truck up promptly. Before he got in, Kevin carefully took his jacket off, folded it, and set it carefully into the back of the cab.

"If this suit gets dirty Jack will shove both the jacket and my teeth down my throat," he told her. "I borrowed it from him last night."

He'd driven several hours round trip to get a proper suit for the party. Had he done it just for her? Surely not. He must have done it to show her mother that he could wear the right things. But maybe he'd also done it because he wanted to look right for her. She wanted to believe that. It would be one of the nicest things anyone had ever done for her.

That was when her calm broke. Tears slid down her cheeks.

"Well that was horrible." She sniffled.

Kevin smoothed her hair back.

"Hey, I liked the way you handled things. You were very classy."

"I was a mess." She searched for a tissue.

"I tried hard, Annie. I really did. I hope I didn't embarrass you. I realize I probably shouldn't have come at all. It's just—well, it's my problem. I hate for people to try to make me look stupid."

"No, Kevin. You didn't do anything wrong. And you weren't the one who was stupid." Annie wiped her eyes with the handkerchief Kevin handed to her. "Let's go to my home. I don't want to be here ever again."

They sped down the gravel driveway and away from the house.

"Listen, Annie," Kevin spoke at last. "I can take you to a hotel or you can borrow my sleeping bag. I can find someplace else for the evening."

"I don't think so." Annie's voice was tart. "There's no reason for you to be displaced just because my mother caused a scene. In fact..."

Go for broke, Annie. Pretend it's one of your dreams. Act the same way. Come on, Annie. Don't lose your only chance.

Her voice refused to work. Annie cleared it. Tried again. "In fact, if you wouldn't mind too much..."

"Mmmm?"

"Kevin, can I stay with you? I've never asked anyone that before. You don't have to. I'd understand if..." Her voice trailed off.

"When you say stay with me, could you define that?" Kevin asked, very carefully. "The staying part, I mean."

"In your bed. Or your sleeping bag. Whatever it is. With you." Annie's voice was very small.

I want you any way I can have you. That's what she ought to say. But reality and fantasy weren't the same.

Kevin forced himself to concentrate on the road for a long moment while he tried to figure out what to say. Just screaming *Yes! Finally! Let me just stop the car to jump you!* probably wasn't a really smooth move, especially after everything else that had happened tonight.

"Annie, you're upset. I'd absolutely love to have you stay with me in my sleeping bag or whatever." Kevin thought he could go for a little lightness, but to his horror, he heard his voice crack. "But I don't want you to wake up tomorrow feeling like you made a big mistake."

"It wouldn't be a mistake. It would be the very best thing I could imagine. It might be the only thing I do today that wasn't a mistake."

Kevin tried to figure out what her mood was. She didn't seem too upset any more. She was a little nervous, maybe, but he was a little nervous now, too. He parked the car in front of her house.

That was when she slid toward him and put her arms around him and kissed him.

Oh God. He was very sure of her mood then. Her tongue touched his, she twined herself against him and moved very slowly. Once, twice, three times as her tongue imitated her body's movement. Who would have thought little Dr. Annie knew how to do that?

He did. He'd hoped she could, thought about what it would be like if she would and now that she was...

"Slow down, darling."

"Why?" She looked faintly outraged. "Am I doing something wrong?"

He couldn't remember her actually drinking a lot during the party. He had caught a faint taste of wine on her tongue but she didn't seem drunk. Still, she wasn't herself. He liked this new self a lot but—

"You're doing everything very right if you want to have sex here in the truck." Kevin found some tenderness under the rush of need and he hung onto that remnant of sanity. "But I'd like to make it a little more than a quickie. And before we do that, we need to talk. *I* need to talk."

"Talk? We've talked for weeks."

"Yeah, but I haven't told you something important."

She tried to imagine what he hadn't told her. She'd met his family. She knew his favorite food was lasagna, his favorite sport was basketball and she'd already figured out he really liked to French kiss. What else did she need to know? This wasn't the way her dreams had worked, dammit! Kevin hadn't *talked*. Neither had she. They hadn't needed to.

Oh, God. He was engaged to someone else. That was why he hadn't put any more moves on her. He was married. He was gay—

"Um, your mother was right." He shifted uneasily in his seat. "Not about what she was trying to do to you. But she was right about me. I don't belong with you."

"Kevin, I don't want to hear this." A liberating rush of anger flooded her. "My mother is a snob. She holds people up to standards no human being could reach. You, on the other hand, are funny and smart—no, you are," she insisted when he shook his head. "You can hold your own in any conversation. You grew up in a nice middle-class home where you learned wonderful manners. You would never think of doing what my mother tried to do to both of us tonight."

"Annie, don't. Just let me finish."

The mixture of fear, anguish and hurt in his voice finally shut her up. She braced herself.

"Annie." She heard him gulp. "I can't read."

CHAPTER SIX

There was a long silence in the truck while Annie tried to figure out what he meant.

"I don't understand," Annie finally admitted. "How can that be? You graduated from high school, you entered the army..."

"I can read a little." Kevin gripped the steering wheel tightly, even though he'd already parked the truck and shut off the engine. "I sort of got through high school. I was held back a year in grade school but it didn't help. I was pretty good at sports, so I spent three years in high school playing every sport I could. Between tutoring and taking remedial courses I kept enough of a decent grade point average to stay on the teams. Usually. But I was the stereotypical dumb jock, Annie. The one who sat in the back of the class and took wood shop courses. By senior year I'd had enough. I quit."

"Quit? What did your family say?"

"My parents had done everything they could, including tutors and private school. Nothing worked, really. After a year of being a carpenter's apprentice I went back and busted my butt to get a G.E.D. That got me into the army. But there wasn't any future for a guy in the army who couldn't read very well. So I left there, too."

"But you aren't stupid, Kevin."

"No. I know that now. I learn things if I hear them or work on them with my hands. I'm pretty smart about people and what makes them tick. But I'm dyslexic."

"More and more is being learned about dyslexia all the time." Annie tried to remember what she knew about the problem. "Many famous people have dyslexia. Winston Churchill...um...lots," she finished lamely.

"I think they call it having a problem with visual memory now. But I've got it all—I can't recognize the letters; I reverse things when I write. I've spent my entire life just not getting it, and I just want to give up whenever I see a written page." He shrugged. "I have a real *big* visual memory problem."

Annie tried to imagine telling someone this. She'd never have been able to manage Kevin's dispassionate tone. It would probably be easier to strip naked in front of...

Oh. If they kept talking they'd never get to that.

"Kevin, what difference is this supposed to make?" Annie made her voice as calm as his. "I mean, this doesn't affect your sexual performance, does it?"

"I don't think so. No one has ever complained yet, anyhow." A smile crept into his voice.

"Well, I didn't ask you to read Shakespeare or Chaucer." Annie kept her tone brisk. "I asked you to sleep with me. If you'd like. Actually, maybe reading is a hindrance to sex. I've had some complaints about my—uh—performance before."

"I won't complain. Believe me. If you just put your hands on me I'll be ready to explode. But Annie, I wanted you to know before — well, because I feel pretty close to you and this seems like something you should tell a person you're close to."

"I have a few dark secrets of my own that I suppose I should tell you, too." Annie tried to smile even though it was dark enough he couldn't see her face. "But by the time we got through them all it would be morning and we'd never have gotten to the good part."

"It will be good, Annie. I promise."

"I know, I know. It'll be fun."

"Absolutely."

Kevin got out of the truck and opened the door for her. To her surprise, he picked her up and carried her to the front door.

"What brought that on?" Annie kissed his jaw. "Is one of your secret fantasies to be Rhett Butler?"

"Well, sexy as your dress is, it didn't look like something you could really hustle along in." Kevin opened the front door and stepped inside. "I'm starting to really feel a need to hurry. How about you?"

Yes. No. Yes.

"I don't think I want to hurry," Annie finally decided.

"No? Well, wait here then." Kevin put her down and she waited, disoriented, in the dark as he walked away.

She heard some fumbling in the upstairs bedroom. After what seemed like forever, she heard his footsteps returning. He picked her up again.

"Now where were we?" he wondered out loud as he carried her up the stairs. "Oh yes. Not hurrying. Here you go. We can be slow and romantic."

He opened the door. Annie gasped.

He had found candles and lit them. The sleeping bag was spread wide open and — somehow — a red rose lay in the middle of it.

"It was the best I could manage right now." Kevin raised her hands and kissed them. "Will it do?"

"Oh, yes. How did you get the rose?" Annie put her hands around his neck.

"I meant to give it to you this evening and I forgot to bring it," Kevin admitted. "I can be pretty absent-minded."

"But you remembered at the right time," Annie reassured him.

"Well then?" Kevin asked.

Well then. Annie unzipped the side zipper on her dress and let it fall in a shimmering puddle at her feet. She thought about unfastening the bra. Without that she would be revealed as the breast impostor she was, but there was no alternative. She could delay the inevitable a bit, though. She took off her high heels instead.

The silence made her look up. Kevin hadn't moved. She was almost completely naked and he was still in his shirt and pants. His *tie* was still on, for heaven's sake.

The nervousness she'd kept at bay whooshed back. This wasn't Kevin the marauder, the man of her fantasies. She had no idea what he was thinking or what he wanted. Even more slowly, Annie moved to slip off her stockings and garter belt, but Kevin gestured her to stop. She didn't have the courage to take her panties off.

She lay down on the sleeping bag and raised herself up onto her elbows. Kevin still hadn't moved. The candlelight flickered on his face and she couldn't tell what he was thinking. His face didn't look familiar in the half-dark. His hidden face was like her dreams, but not. She hadn't felt like a fool in her dreams.

Oh. Lord. She'd made another terrible mistake in a whole night of terrible mistakes. This wasn't going to work.

"Kevin, I'm—I'm scared."

"Of me?" Kevin sounded incredulous. "Why should you be afraid of me?"

Annie let out a little gust of half-hysterical laughter before she caught herself. Why should she be afraid of the most physically perfect guy she had ever met in her life? One who had women coming on to him constantly and knew exactly what to do about it?

A rush of common sense hit. No, there really wasn't anything to be afraid of from Kevin. He was sensitive to other people's feelings, he was kind and he did know exactly what to do with women. He wasn't the one she was afraid of here.

"It's me, not you. I'm—I don't think I'm up to your usual standards, Kevin. I—I'm awkward and I'm...um...I'm flat-chested and plain...andI'mnotverygoodatsex."

He crouched down next to her. She turned her head away. When his callused finger ran lightly across her collarbone, she jumped and looked back at him. He was smiling at her. He had a really nice smile. A really nice, reassuring smile.

"Hey, Annie," he whispered to her. "You know what?"

"What?"

"You're wrong."

"That's very nice of you but..."

"Naw. I'm not being nice. You're beautiful." Kevin took her cold hands and lifted them up to kiss them. "And I love your breasts..." he bent to rub his jaw very slightly against one of those breasts, so lightly that she didn't even jump with nerves and desire, "...and you already have me hard. I think we're going to be just fine with this sex thing. If you still want to give it a try. I know I do, Annie."

She loved the slight stubble on his face as he brushed it against her. She loved the feel of him. She wanted more. This couldn't be a dream. It was too good this time.

"I said I was awkward, too. You didn't say anything about that. Am I?" Annie tried to smile.

"Well, I don't know." Kevin drawled his words out just a little. "Think you can handle taking my clothes off?"

For just a minute she really thought she'd hyperventilate. She tried to lift up her hands but they were shaking. She looked back at him, a little helplessly, and shook her head.

"Well, then I guess I'll have to do it for you." Kevin stood up.

Oh God. This was like her dreams. Kevin was hard and more than ready and she — she was terrified she'd make the wrong move. Damn it. She never made the wrong move in her fantasies.

Kevin looked down at her. She was all huge eyes and shaking body. He debated whether he should just strip quickly and crawl into bed with her or take it slow. If he did this wrong, he was honestly afraid she'd bolt.

Slow. Slow was the smart way — she'd have time to get used to seeing him.

Hell, if he was going to do it slow, he might as well make it sexy.

Jee-sus. He took a deep breath. He'd never stripped for a woman in his life. Women stripped for him. They'd ripped his clothes off once in a while, too, but Annie wasn't ready for that.

He wanted to make her ready.

He took his tie off. Her gaze followed the tie as it dropped to the floor. Then she looked back at him. Just at him. He could feel his cock get just a little harder at the fascination in her eyes.

He began to unbutton his shirt, very slowly, his gaze holding hers. She swallowed hard as he finished unbuttoning and inched it off of his shoulders. He let the shirt slip down to the floor as he unbuckled his belt.

She swallowed again.

He unbuttoned the top button of his pants and she blinked. Oh, yeah. His pants were already uncomfortable. Kevin breathed out hard, through his nose. Control. He needed control.

He stopped, leaving the button undone. Smiling just a little, he took his watch off. She relaxed a bit. Did he want her relaxed? Maybe. Just for now. He decided to slow things down a little more. Talk to her.

"You know, Annie, some men love to have their nipples touched." Kevin's voice was a little huskier than he wanted it to be. "I'm one of them. Right now you can see they're really anxious for a little touching."

"I can't s-see that." Damn that stammer. "It's too dark."

Annie knew she was doing this wrong. She should be on top of him. He should be on top of her. At any rate she shouldn't be sitting like a lump, just staring.

She would have shut her eyes in despair but Kevin was closer now, sitting next to her. He placed her icy hands on his chest. It was a very broad, strong chest. A very broad, strong, *warm* chest.

"I think you need to look a little closer," he urged.

This wasn't a dream, was it? It felt so real. His skin. The hair on his chest. Her fingers touched his nipples and, amazingly, they stiffened. That was a good thing, right? Annie wanted to do something good for him. She gently stroked again and saw him shiver. Feeling bolder, she put her mouth against one and gently licked.

"Yeah, like that." His voice was a little shaky. "Just like that."

He didn't touch her. He let her use her mouth on his nipples, though. That was nice. She stroked his chest and, then, bolder yet, she slowly moved her hand down to the unbuttoned waistband of his pants. She felt his abdomen clench as she stroked the tiny exposed area. She smiled. She *was* doing the right thing. Thank God for imagination.

"Shall I—keep going?" Kevin asked with some difficulty.

The only thing better than touching Kevin was watching him get ready to touch her.

"Oh, yes." Annie leaned forward to watch this time.

He pulled his boots off and then his socks. He smiled at her again, a sly smile this time, and very slowly began to unzip his fly. Annie could feel her teeth clench with excitement. She wanted to scream at him to hurry but she couldn't. All she could do was just look. Stare. Gawk.

His aroused cock pushed at his briefs as he unzipped a slow quarter inch at a time. Annie bit her lower lip. He pulled down each pants leg. Then he stopped again. She could have screamed with frustration.

"Shall I finish now?" For one amazing moment he ran his finger over his briefs and paused for a moment at where the tip of his penis was. It was outlined boldly against the thin material, almost as clearly as if he was naked.

"Yes," Annie managed to get out, trying not to make it sound like an order. "Please."

"Please is definitely the magic word." Kevin pushed his briefs down with one smooth motion, leaving his body completely bare.

Oh yes. Oh yes. *Oh yesss*. Annie forgot her former hesitation. She couldn't help herself. She reached out to touch. After all, he had told her in everything but words that was what she should do.

His breath hissed out as she fondled and then traced a finger down to even more vulnerable parts of his body. His balls were tight and drawn up close to his body. Oh, please, he had to be ready. As ready as she was.

"Can I do the same for you?" he said, at last.

In response, Annie lay back. She couldn't believe she was doing this...or that he was. But she most definitely wasn't scared any more.

He opened the bra's clasp to expose her tiny breasts. She knew how small they were, but they were doing their very best to swell. Kevin's tongue helped the nipples reach as stiff a peak as was possible. He acted as if they were beautiful, worshipfully tracing each vein with his tongue. Maybe, for just now, they were.

Her panties were gone now, too. She wanted to touch his cock, trace every muscle on that body of his—at least until Annie lost all sense of coordination as he flicked his finger against her clit. Her hands fell to the bed as her body arched up.

"Kevin?"

"I'm here, Annie." He stroked again.

She pressed herself into those hands. There was no use trying not to. She couldn't control herself right now.

"Annie?" His voice was strained and she managed to open her eyes to see him kneeling over her.

"Yes?"

He took one deep breath in and out and then backed away a half inch. "Is this what you want? You've had a really bad evening and, much as I'd like to keep going, do you want to have sex now—with me? Just because you want it. Not because you're mad at your mom or feel like you ought to or—or because you're sorry for me."

"You're crazy!" Annie burst out and then reached out to pull his hips a little closer. The head of his cock brushed against her mons. Ohhh. "I really, really want to have sex with you. If *you* want to."

"Take a good look. You're close enough to tell whether I do or not."

She had to laugh. He certainly was. For a moment he turned, fumbling in the darkness. Then he was back, condom in place. She'd missed him, even for those few moments. Now. Finally. Her dreams were going to be real. Before she went crazy.

Thank God he was eager to fit himself inside her. He pushed and, damn it, her stupid body resisted for a moment. She was tighter than she'd expected—when was the last time she'd had sex?—even though she was on fire to have him inside. He touched her again. He had to feel how wet and slick she felt.

Even so, it took a moment of wiggling and maneuvering for both of them before he was finally fully inside. Before he began to move slowly inside her. She was sweating by then. She saw Kevin lick a drop of sweat from his own upper lip and she curled her fingers into the palms of her hands before she sank her teeth into that lip.

He was moving faster now and she moved with him. She'd never before heard herself make the sounds she made as he bucked, hard, inside her. She'd never locked her legs around anyone's hips to try to force him to move harder and faster. She'd never scratched anyone's back. But she did this time. She'd do more if she could think of what might get her get closer, reach release, to make it feel better and better yet...

"Come, Annie! Come!" He grunted the command into her ear, rough and desperate—the same voice she'd imagined in her dreams.

She wanted to laugh. As if telling her would work. As if—oh *yes!* He groaned and with the sound pleasure zinged through her. It didn't stop. Shocks of her climax pulsed, then poured over her in a giant crescendo. It was frightening, it was amazing, it was—Annie's body stiffened, then shook. She hadn't ever come, not like this, but she couldn't stop herself.

Fireworks. Shooting stars. Blackness. Every cliché she'd ever heard and not believed. It was true. All of it.

It took her a moment, more than a moment, to realize she was back on the planet, on the floor, with Kevin on top of her. His moan as he convulsed over her sounded as deep as hers must have been when she'd come. Then he collapsed, his forearms half-supporting his weight. Annie gradually calmed enough to hear them both panting.

"Yeah," he wheezed at last. "I can see sex with you is pretty boring. I almost got bored into a heart attack."

He grinned at her again. She had to smile back. She hadn't felt like smiling this way after the few sexual encounters she'd endured before this. A smile? She ought to be cheering. She had never felt this happy or this good after sex. After *anything*.

"You're really amazing, Kevin." That was an understatement. But for once she didn't have the words to describe or compliment or thank. There weren't any.

Annie thought about sitting up. Since Kevin was still on top of her and she felt completely boneless, she decided not to. She touched his chin instead, which seemed to be the closest body part her hand could get to easily. Even his chin was sexy.

"You're amazing, too, Annie." Kevin hesitated but he knew she needed things to be kept light. He always knew things like that. "I hate to think what you're like at the things you're good at if this is what you do when you're not. I suppose if you were good at sex I'd be dead by now. I'd have a smile on my face, but I'd be stone—cold—dead."

"I like you alive," Annie told him. "I'll try to contain myself for our next episode. I'd hate to get better at sex if it kills you."

"I'm willing to sacrifice myself," Kevin offered selflessly. "You probably could use the practice."

She laughed out loud before she put her hands over her mouth. But Kevin was laughing, too. Maybe they were both laughing a little more than the joke was worth, but that was fine. She felt giddy. She needed to laugh. To cry. To kiss the man who had finally given her one hell of a climax.

"Know what, Kevin?" Annie finally got herself under control.

"What?"

"I like you." She did. She wanted to fuck him blind *and* she liked him. What a perfect combination.

He grinned down at her with his familiar grin. "Same to you, Dr. Armstrong."

She wanted to try all over again but the need for sleep suddenly hit her hard. One minute she was lusting, the next...she was sound asleep.

As she slept, Kevin carefully pulled up a blanket over her body. He lightly touched a stray lock of her hair. God. He'd felt protective of his sisters but Annie—her strength and fragility shook him. What a bitch for a mother. How had Annie survived and stayed so sweet?

How had she stayed so sweet and still managed to screw him silly? His body was still ringing.

Every instinct he had was screaming that he needed to help her, to keep her close. She looked so fragile asleep, even while a smile drifted over her face. Without thinking about why his need to protect her was so strong, he lightly kissed the top of her head and then pulled her into his arms. He drifted off to sleep, still holding her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Annie woke up the next morning with a good feeling and an aching back. She thought about why for a moment, her eyes still closed. The morning light was beating on her face and she couldn't hear anyone else in the house.

God. It must have been a dream after all. She was alone again.

"Hey, Annie? You awake? You want some coffee?" It was Kevin's voice. She was sleeping on a wooden floor. This couldn't be a dream.

Oh, Lord. Now what?

"Hey, are you the type of person who can't wake up the morning? C'mon, Annie."

"I usually wake up quite well in the morning, thank you." Annie spoke distinctly. "However, we didn't have much sleep last night if you remember. My back is killing me. That's probably because of our—um—activities and because your sleeping bag isn't very soft. I think we should buy a futon at least. In fact, this bedroom is in fairly livable condition. I'll get some of Grandma's bedroom furniture out of storage and set it up here. I can't believe you lived like this for so long. I don't intend to. And, yes, I would like some coffee. Thank you."

"Yeah, I guess you do wake up pretty quickly in the morning."

She opened her eyes. Kevin sat down, naked and cross-legged, beside her and offered her a steaming mug of coffee.

"You and your family make me drink a lot of this. I really am a tea drinker but—" Annie took a very satisfying sip. "This is very good."

"So you think you'll stay here for a while then?" His tone was absolutely neutral.

"Yes."

Annie looked at him as she continued sipping her coffee. His face was expressionless for a moment. "Just the two of us?"

"Who else would be crazy enough to stay here?" Annie asked before doubts set in. "Do you mind having me here? Us both being here?"

His familiar smile appeared. "Nope. Seeing as it took me weeks to get you here with me, why would I mind?"

I guess I'll be living with him. For a while. Annie tried to ponder that. She'd never lived with anyone but her family for more than a week or two. She'd never had a roommate. Her dates or lovers or whatever they were hadn't usually stayed for the entire evening. This might require a whole new code of behavior. But what?

"Goodness." That was all she could manage while she pondered all the implications of her stay.

"Goodness indeed." He kissed her on the nose. "Listen, I can't do much about breakfast with the few useable cooking appliances I've got. But there's cereal and juice down in the kitchen. Interested?"

Annie had thought at one point yesterday evening that she'd never be able to eat again. Her stomach rumbled now and she quickly got up. She rubbed the small of her back and stretched. She'd see to the bedroom furniture as soon as possible. She could be crippled for life otherwise.

"I'd like that breakfast very much, thank you."

Kevin eyed her as she walked down the stairs. He hadn't been sure of what she'd do when she woke up. He thought she might be hesitant, full of morning after doubts. Instead she seemed quite serene – no, she seemed happy as she fixed herself cold cereal and juice. On the other hand she had seemed that way when she was about to be sick on the plane. She could hide what she felt better than anyone he knew.

He decided to believe that she was feeling happy. God knows he felt that way. He also felt smug and, despite feeling just a little tired, ready to try sex again if she was halfway interested.

She looked up at him and smiled. Oh yeah. She was interested.

He put his juice cup down. Annie saw his him prop his chin in his hand and smile at her. She wasn't sure how to take that smile. It looked a little smug and knowing, but it looked very happy, too. She decided she liked the look. She was quite sure she'd put it there.

Then she looked at the clock.

"I can't believe the time!" She almost leaped out of the kitchen chair. "You know, I'm actually looking forward to going in and doing some work at the office. I think it would probably be wise to go in anyhow. I wonder what people have to say about my departure from the party."

"Fuck what they say."

She looked at him, solemnly. "When I come back would you like me to help you? I'm not very skilled labor, but could you use me?"

"Uh. Sure. I'd love to use you."

His tone implied a lot more than the innocent way she'd meant it.

"Well then." Annie opened her mouth and shut it. "Well. Then. I'll see you this afternoon."

"All right. Do you want me to come with you to the house to pick up some clothes?" Kevin nodded at her outfit, which consisted of one of his longest old T-shirts. It made a short, if somewhat shapeless dress on Annie. "I have plenty more like that up in the bedroom, but you probably want your own stuff."

"I'll be fine." Annie worked to sound unconcerned. "My mother is due to leave this afternoon. I'll stop by and pick up what I need after that."

"Annie, are you sure you don't want to go back there? Especially if you'll be alone in the house? It would probably be more comfortable."

"I have no desire to go back and live at my parents' house. It's about time I live at my own place." Annie's voice was just a little cooler. "I said I wasn't going back and I'm not. Not ever."

Kevin stared hard at her again. Something was going on behind that serene exterior but Kevin wasn't sure what. He decided to leave it alone. He'd figure it out eventually.

"Let me know if you need anything," he offered.

"I'll be fine. Thank you."

She put on her high heels. She looked pretty strange, but if anyone could carry off wearing a shapeless shirt for a dress with evening shoes, it would be Annie. The old Annie would have been worried about it being odd. This new Annie acted as if she wore outfits like that every day. And, after all, it was a university town. People had seen worse. Just not on Annie.

She started to walk out, paused, then came back to give him a long, slow kiss with her arms tight around him. He was just starting to think she had changed her mind about leaving when she stopped, smiled at him, and left without saying good-bye.

That was how, very much to his surprise, Kevin found himself back to work as usual, just as if it were another day. He scowled. It shouldn't be just another day. They should make it special.

The problem was that he couldn't figure out how to make it special. After some thought, he decided to stop by the pound and get Annie a cat. If she was going to be living here she'd probably really mind hearing mice.

Maybe a cat wasn't what a guy was supposed to give a woman after they'd first made love, but he had a feeling she was going to appreciate the animal more than flowers or candy.

Annie almost lost her nerve as she drove to her office. She debated stopping at the nearest store – any store – and grabbing some kind of outfit. Then she assured herself she was covered up as well as most of her students and she was only going to have office hours for a short time today.

It was time for a new Antigone Armstrong. This one was going to be strong enough to ignore her mother, secure enough not to worry about what might happen if she did, and sexy enough to interest Kevin Turner for longer than the few days she seemed to average with other men. One way to show the new her was to stop worrying about what other people thought about her appearance.

Annie strode down the hall to her office, nodding at the few students and professors she saw on the way. She sat down behind her desk and forced herself to

concentrate on her papers and the essay questions she planned to give for a final. She wasn't going to stew about what had happened last night with her mother or what might happen tonight with Kevin. She was a grown woman who didn't care what other people thought. To her surprise, she found herself becoming absorbed in her work.

As she turned the corner of the hall on her way out, she heard two underclassmen from her class talking together.

"She's never worn anything like that before."

"No. Usually she has outfits, y'know? They always look put together."

"Yeah. But—that shirt thing she has on doesn't look too bad, actually. In fact, I never really thought about it before, but she looks kinda hot. Believe me, I never thought I would ever say that about Dr. Armstrong."

Annie paused and looked down at Kevin's shirt. Well, she hadn't expected *that* comment today. But since she planned to be different from today on, she was going to take that as a compliment.

She wondered if Kevin thought she looked 'kinda hot,' too. Maybe she should go back home and see. She wondered what she should bring back. Women weren't supposed to bring presents to their new lovers, but she felt like he deserved something.

Wine. She had a feeling Kevin liked beer better, but she had no idea what kind. She didn't drink beer and she did drink wine. The new Antigone Armstrong wasn't going to change her tastes that much.

* * * * *

Living with Annie these past few weeks was weird, Kevin finally decided. It was a good weird, but definitely weird. One good thing was that they had incredible sex, and often. They also had sex in a bed. Kevin had to admit the bedroom furniture Annie had moved in made things a lot more comfortable. Ever since she'd moved in, it had seemed less and less like camping out and more and more like they were living in a home. In fact, it was more and more like they were living in *their* home.

That was weird in itself. The last home Kevin had had was when he was nineteen, before his parents died. When he got back from the army, everything had changed. Cecilia and Jack had moved into his old family home. Cecilia had redecorated it. Kevin still had a room there but it wasn't home. Eventually he gave up even trying to pretend it was. The apartments he had rented off and on when he couldn't live in the buildings he was renovating had been furnished and very temporary. Even though he supposed it wasn't, strictly speaking, his own home, Kevin hadn't realized how much he had liked and missed having one until Annie started creating her home around him.

She didn't do it like he imagined most women would. It certainly wasn't the way Cecilia did it—in one mad, whirlwind rush that swept in new rugs and colors that matched and Made Statements. Even Kevin could tell Cecilia's home Made A

Statement. He just didn't know what it stated except that it looked exactly like a place she and Victor would live in.

Jen had redecorated Jack's old home, too. She'd done it cautiously, replacing one piece of furniture at a time until, after two or three years, he'd realized it was nothing like his old home and more like Jen and Jack's.

Annie was different from them both. In the bedroom where they slept, for example, she had simply changed everything. Of course he hadn't had much there – a bedroll, a boombox, a duffel bag full of clothes. She had taken over painting the bedroom walls and bringing in furniture until it had turned into a real bedroom. But somehow his boombox was on the antique dresser and his clothes were hanging up next to hers in the closet. It felt like it had been his bedroom for years. The bedroom he'd always shared with Annie.

In the small room off the parlor, where he had finally finished setting up the extra sturdy bookshelves, Annie had immediately filled the place with books and put in a roll top desk. There were still more boxes of books and he had set up still more bookshelves in the parlor and the bedroom. He wasn't sure there would be any end to the number of bookshelves she needed, though. That was all right. He could do bookshelves. If Annie wanted them, he could do them.

But then there wasn't much of anything else in any of the other rooms. How had she made the empty spaces seem like home? Kevin puzzled over it. She'd had him take the time to set up her very expensive sound system in the dining room. Even though there was no dining room table or chairs, they both found themselves drifting toward that room to play music and eat. He brought his set of CDs out of the truck and set them up next to hers. She liked his country and rock music. They both liked Cecilia's music although Kevin still felt a little strange about the idea of listening to his sister singing sexy songs. Unfortunately Annie also liked opera, classical and jazz too, but he was starting to learn to almost appreciate them.

And she set up his audiotape books. Every night they listened to a little bit more of a new novel while they ate dinner on the floor. They'd finished *Jane Eyre* and started on something of Dickens. She would talk about something in the book while he listened. Then she listened to his comments about what she'd said.

The whole thing was so cozy it was almost scary. Kevin could actually see himself coming home to this night after night. He was already used to doing this. He couldn't decide if it was good or bad. It was just...weird.

Still, Annie didn't seem to take it for granted he was coming home. Every morning she'd politely ask him his plans for the day and give him just one passionate morning kiss, like she was rationing them. Then she'd leave for her academic routine. Sometimes she was home early. She'd help him out and they would putter around until after dark, talking about the house or something a student had said that had amused her. Then she would go to the library and work. Sometimes she taught night classes and didn't get home until late. Then he'd eat dinner on his own and try not to sulk. Suddenly, though,

there she'd be. And then, finally, at the end of the day, they'd go to bed in that bedroom Annie had worked on and have more incredible sex.

Was this what married people did? Kevin wasn't sure he could ask his sisters. He couldn't quite remember what his parents' marriage had been like. He'd been a pretty self-absorbed kid, he supposed, and they had died before he could see them with an adult's eyes. They had seemed happy and settled. But Annie made him happy and unsettled at the same time. On one hand everything around him felt permanent, and on the other he felt like he was just temporarily in her life. It was like...it was like she had her own schedule and her very separate life outside of the house they lived in. But once they were both in the house together, they were a couple. Wasn't that the way most couples were? Still, something wasn't right. He couldn't figure what it was and damn, he was usually good at figuring things like that out.

It finally hit him the day he saw the cat batting at a crumpled piece of paper and realized it was the faculty tea invitation.

Annie thought she was handling the situation rather well for a novice. She really had no idea how one was supposed to treat one's live-in, temporary lover, especially a temporary lover that you wished would become a permanent one even though it was never going to happen.

Kevin seemed close to the perfect living companion. There were some flaws. He left towels on the bathroom floor and he didn't always put the toilet seat down at night, but Annie was willing to silently concede that perhaps her mother had made her just a little too compulsive about putting things in order. Certainly in other respects he was very easy to live with. He was quick to jump on any carpentry job she mentioned—like putting in extra bookshelves when she realized one library room wasn't going to hold all her volumes of books. He would actually volunteer to go shopping when they got low on groceries and, if she told him, he'd even bring back food she wanted.

Annie had always thought being an only child would make it hard for her to adjust to anyone new. But Kevin seemed to fade away when she needed to work and reappear when she was ready to go to bed. And, of course, the sex when they got to bed would have almost made up for him being the most inconsiderate live-in companion on the face of the earth. It was just an added bonus for her that he wasn't.

She tried not to depend on him being there too much. Even though she wished he would, he never said anything about staying. So she stuck to her old habits of working most of the day in the English Department, even though it would have been fun to be at home. She tried not to hang on him too much during the day even though that would have made it fun to be at home, too. She allowed herself one good morning kiss and then told herself she wasn't going to do anything else until they went to bed. Kevin always seemed happy with that arrangement and the last thing she wanted to do was scare him away from home.

And Annie felt at home. It was a new, strange feeling. She was sure she'd never felt at home before. She just hoped that some of that feeling came from living at her beloved grandmother's familiar old home and from having a pet to come home to—if the muscular, not quite friendly feline Kevin had brought home could be called a pet.

She was afraid, however, that the feeling of belonging was from being with Kevin. But Kevin wasn't someone she was meant to have forever.

In fact, it was too good not to end. She knew trouble would surface only too soon and she was doing her best to ignore it. For example, so far she had been able to ignore the messages her mother left for her at the office. When she'd gone to her parents' house to get her things she'd refused to check her answering machine. She suspected it had long since exploded from overuse. They were dependent on Kevin's cell phone at her home. She had placed the order for a new telephone, but she actually was in no rush. She enjoyed the peace, short-lived though it might be. Temporary or not, she liked everything about her new life.

Annie was pretty sure she had it all worked out until the day she walked into the kitchen and saw the cat indignantly winding itself around Kevin's legs. At first she grinned. It was good to see Kevin having problems with the cat, too. Then she saw Kevin scowling at a crumpled piece of paper that had missed the kitchen trashcan.

Her smile faded. She didn't know why or how, but somehow this meant trouble had finally arrived.

"This is an invitation, isn't it?" He picked it up. "It looks official."

She looked over his shoulder. "Yes. It's to the annual faculty tea."

"And you threw it away?"

"Well, yes. I didn't need it. I'm not going."

"Why not?"

"You've seen me at faculty parties now. Do you think I have a good time at them?"

"It's a big, fancy affair then? One where you bring your wife or husband or some guest?"

"Well, not as fancy as the thing at Mother's. But you do dress up. And it's nice to bring an escort. But it is full of...well...just department chit-chat and politics." Annie tried to dismiss the whole idea of the tea but she saw Kevin looking even stormier. "What are you getting at, Kevin?"

"This is probably something a lot of the faculty goes to, right? Especially the ones who are trying to get ahead in the department?"

"Maybe."

"You've gone to it before?"

"Yes."

She didn't want to add *because my mother told me to*. Whenever she thought about how she had allowed her parents to bully her, she cringed. She'd already changed enough to know she had been crazy to go along with all the things they'd demanded.

"Annie, I never asked before, but what did the folks at the university say to you about you and me leaving the party?"

"Well, Lindsey said she was sorry you left so early. A few people said they were sorry they'd missed me there. But no one said much of anything else. I suspect Mother managed brilliantly without me and no one even noticed whether I was there or not." Annie hoped so. She hadn't seen any sly glances or heard any whispers that hushed when she went by. Sometimes it was useful to be invisible at a party. No one ever remembered if she was there or not.

"What have they said about you moving into your house?"

"I haven't told anyone. All I've said is that people should contact me at the department office, not at home. It seems to work fine."

"So no one knows we're living together?"

"I—I don't talk about things like that. It isn't anyone's business." Annie was very confused. Wasn't he pleased about that? She wasn't trying to make him a target of speculation and gossip. She wanted her private life to be private. Didn't he want to keep things quiet, too?

"You know, ever since you moved in, you haven't gone anywhere with me." Kevin sounded accusing. "We haven't even been to a restaurant together."

She hadn't wanted to go out. She hadn't felt any need to go out. But Kevin was much more social than she was. Of course he'd want to go out. He hated their quiet evenings. He was bored with her. Annie bit her lower lip very hard.

"I hadn't thought about it, but we haven't."

"You don't want to be seen with me, do you?"

She didn't want to be seen with the handsomest man she had ever known? Was he crazy?

"Of course I want to be seen with you!" Annie blurted out. "Other women would kill to go out with you and here I am, living with you!"

He looked like he didn't think that was a compliment.

"Then why don't we go out? Why don't you show you're part of a couple to the folks you work with? I've just figured out what's wrong." Kevin now sounded like he was thinking out loud and getting madder by the minute. "You're treating me like some mix of long-term house guest and stud."

"What?"

"I'm good enough to have sex with but not good enough to be seen in public with."

Kevin blinked as he finished the sentence. Those words had a very familiar ring to him. Oh, damn. How often had he heard one of his ex-girlfriends say that? Even worse, how often had they been right? He'd usually gone out with girls who didn't think nearly as sharp as they looked. He figured no one else would be all that seriously interested in him.

Annie was gaping at him like he had hit her over the head.

"I didn't...I never... Kevin, I c-c-couldn't d-do that to you."

Now he had brought back the old Annie stammer. Great. To add to everything else, he was feeling guilty. Guilty about how he had treated women he couldn't even remember, and really guilty about how Annie was transforming from the serene new Annie to the nervous old Annie.

"Annie, forget it. I was being stupid and out of line and I must've got it wrong," he heard himself saying. "Why don't we just leave it alone?"

He was willing to say anything just now if Annie wouldn't cry. He'd hate it if she cried. And she looked like she was going to bawl in about two seconds.

One second. Two. Annie's face drew in.

"You want us to go out? Fine! We'll go out!" she yelled. "We'll go to this stupid tea. I'll parade you in front of Lindsey and Sally and everyone else I can find! You'll just charm them and have them follow you around. Where else do you want to go? We'll go! I hate going out, I love being here with you, but we'll go! You're the one who used to drag us all over the state before. You pick the spot and we'll go!"

"Uh, Annie..."

He knew he mustn't laugh. He absolutely must *not* laugh. A tiny snort worked its way out but he backed away from her just a little so she might not have heard.

"You idiot! Why would I be ashamed of you? You're the one who always knows what to do and say! I'm the one who feels stupid. Haven't you figured out that I'm not very good with people? I'd give anything to have people care about me and admire me the way they do you. I'd give up reading in a minute if that would do it. I'd give up anything if you cared about me—" Annie's unexpected tirade stopped short.

She looked a little bit like when she had started to take her clothes off for him for the first time. Terrified.

As Kevin sorted out what she had just said he started to feel a little terrified, too. Oh, God. This was it. The big scene where she told him she loved him and he had to try to dance his way out. He'd done this scene way too many times with other women.

He'd have to leave. Oh, God. He didn't want to leave. He didn't want to have to dance his way out of her life. What the hell did that mean?

"Annie? Are you all right?" He started slowly, trying to figure out what he was going to say next. What he wanted to say next. What he said would be important because Annie was important...

"I think so." Annie sounded uncertain.

"Annie, I don't want you to think... I didn't think..." He could tell this wasn't going well. He had an inspiration and started again. "Annie, don't get mad at me for being unsure of you. You're just about the most special woman I've ever met. Hell, you *are* the most special. I'm just not sure what to think or do around you sometimes. You're smarter, richer, classier than anyone I've ever been with."

Annie's smile trembled but looked like a real smile. "You don't have to lie, Kevin. I'm not mad now."

"You're kinder, sexier, prettier..." He managed to get close enough to kiss her under her ear. "I'm not lying, Annie. I mean it. I really do..."

He looked her in the eye and tried to say it. *I love you*. He couldn't. Damn, he wanted to and he couldn't. Not if he didn't mean it. Not just to calm her down.

She gave him a nice, long, slow kiss. The old Annie had disappeared again. Nice little girls didn't kiss like that. Of course nice little girls didn't get mad in the first place and have to be kissed and soothed. That was okay. He was really starting to like this Annie. He really enjoyed the part where he calmed her down with sex instead of talk.

"...care about you," he finished as he managed to get one hand under that cute little skirt she was wearing.

She was smiling at him and it sure as hell looked like they were going to have sex here in the kitchen in the middle of the afternoon. That must mean it was all right. He'd said the right thing. If it still didn't feel quite right, it was definitely close enough.

Close enough.

Then he stopped trying to think. Her pussy was warm and already wet when he finally got his hand on it. He loved seeing Annie trying to hold off against a moan, fighting every second and then helplessly letting go.

God, she knew how to get him boiling. He slid her onto the kitchen table, roughly flipping that skirt up. He wanted to slide into her, quick and pounding, slapping his balls hard against her while she gradually lost all control, while she forgot she wasn't supposed to make noise, forgot she wasn't supposed to dig into him with her fierce nails, forgot herself entirely as he drove deeper inside her.

He spread her thighs wide against the wooden surface, flicking his finger between her labia. She whimpered as he pulled a condom from his pocket. God, he didn't want to play any more. Didn't need to.

Annie couldn't hide it. She might try, but she wanted him. It was the biggest turn on of his life to see eyes go blind with need, her face go slack with desire, to see her writhe and grind when he touched her.

He could feel the heat pouring out from her, could smell how aroused she was. God. His cock was hard and desperate to see how tight she was, how close she'd cling. To torture them both, he just brushed the tip of his cock against her.

Her hips rose and fell.

"Kevin!" She sounded desperate.

He couldn't. He couldn't hold off any longer. The blood was pounding hard inside his cock. His chest. His brain.

Annie. *Now*.

He slid hard inside, ready to burst like a teenager. He heard her choked moan, felt her wrap tight and close around his cock. Felt her come with almost his first thrust. Oh, God. Yes. *Now*. He felt his own semen spurting out, hot and desperate. They burned each other alive when they had sex, made each other hot enough to forget everything else.

What more did he need?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kevin carefully finished caulking the kitchen window. He scowled ferociously at the wooden window frame. He was running out of things to do. It was just about down to where he would have to offer to hang curtains for Annie if he wanted to stay another day or two.

Annie knew it, too. She had painted and helped him wallpaper more rooms. She didn't seem anxious to do it, but she was slowly putting pieces of furniture throughout the house. The electricians had finished rewiring the kitchen last week, and now it had an actual working stove and a kitchen table and chairs. The phone line was installed and working. More and more the house was starting to look complete. It was a nice house. He would miss it if—when—he left.

He had to leave, right? He'd already accepted another job in Richmond and the house's owner had called to find out when he would arrive. He tried to think of how to ask Annie if he was welcome to come back on weekends. It was already early June. Soon it would be summer and he had no idea what her plans were. Maybe she was going to be gone all summer. Maybe she could come with him to Richmond. Oh, hell. How was he going to ask her without it sounding like a big deal? And why would she want to camp out with him in someone else's house when hers was finally done and looking so good?

He scowled. The faculty tea was coming up this afternoon. He'd have to escort her there or Annie would probably slit his throat. But really, it was time for him to tell her he was done.

He walked in to see Annie, her back to him, on her telephone.

"Anyhow, Mother, I saw the date and thought maybe I should...uh...call and tell you hello and that was I was thinking about you and Father," Annie mumbled. "Call if you want to."

She hung up, her shoulders slumped. Suddenly she seemed to realize he was standing completely still right by the kitchen entrance and she turned around.

Their eyes met. His heart twisted. Annie looked pale and really sad. Of course, she'd been trying to talk to her mother, so that would explain the look. But why had she bothered? As far as Kevin knew, she hadn't spoken to her mother since the night of the party.

Annie was having a terrible week. Today had been the worst day yet. Every year she hoped it would get better as it got closer to her birthday. She'd really thought it

might be fine this year, with Kevin here and in her new house. She'd been kidding herself.

The house was almost finished. She had resisted moving in all her furniture as long as she could. Somehow she hoped that if she didn't move in entirely, it would mean there was more work to be done on the house and Kevin would still be here. But she could see the rooms were shining with new paint and varnished floors. Kevin's work here was almost over. She'd heard him on the phone about new jobs. He'd leave soon. He hadn't said anything to her about what happened afterward.

Now she had something new to worry over. Annie had been hearing things in the department—or rather, she heard people stop talking as she came down the hall. She was due to hear soon about whether she would be granted tenure or not. No one was smiling at her lately, as if they were ready to congratulate her. She was getting sidelong looks instead, or people avoiding her gaze altogether. She hated that. It reminded her of so many other times when she got awful news...

Sally was the one who had finally told her, indirectly. Annie had been about to go into the photocopier room when she heard Sally's distinctive drawl.

"Well, she's bright enough and all, but can you see her really competing with Charles Harris?"

"Well, no. But are you sure he's going to come here? I mean he's at Yale and has been forever. Why is he interested?" someone else asked.

"I think he's looking for warmer weather or something. He's in his sixties after all." Sally laughed shrilly. "Who am I to question why Charles Harris would do anything? But if he wants a place here, he gets it. And how many teachers of Victorian literature do we need? Little Dr. Armstrong will be out."

"Too bad," the other person said, with passing sympathy.

"I know. It really seemed like she'd get it until now." Sally sounded more maliciously amused than sympathetic. "She certainly had an in with all her family connections. I wonder how they'll take it."

Annie walked carefully and quietly back to her office and shut the door, praying her office mate wouldn't unexpectedly show up. Then she put her face in her hands. Dr. Harris coming here? Dr. Harris had been her teacher. He'd been a real source of inspiration and knowledge and...she would choose him over her in a minute herself if he wanted to work here.

How would her parents take it? If they cared at all one way or another. Annie's stomach lurched. No tenure.

Annie had decided she had to call them when she got home. It probably would do no one any good and the idea was giving her stomach cramps, but she had to call them.

When she did, all she got was the answering machine. And after she did that, she turned around and saw Kevin.

She wasn't sure what to say to him. But before she could come up with anything, the telephone rang.

She jumped. Could it actually be Mo— She picked up the telephone and then sighed a little.

"It's your sister." She handed the phone to Kevin.

Kevin kept looking at her, letting her know he hadn't forgotten what she had just been doing as he spoke to Jen. It was a short conversation.

After he hung up he looked a little uneasy. "Annie, I know today is that tea. Do you think we—well, I—could cut out early? You can stay if you want, of course. I'm afraid Jen has another baby-sitting emergency."

"So you'll be gone this weekend?" Annie's heart sank. She'd really wanted him to be with her tomorrow.

"Well, tonight at least. I know what it was like last time but you could come, too, if you want." Kevin didn't look at her when he offered.

Stay forever at the faculty tea or baby-sit three children with Kevin and not be alone tomorrow?

"Of course. If we hurry and get to the tea unfashionably on time, we can leave after a half hour or so. That would be fine with me. You know how much I love these things."

"I'm sorry, Annie. I just...I just don't like to let my family down." Kevin was hesitant. "I promised...oh, well, this isn't the time to get into that. Let's get dressed, do tea and get out."

"That sounds like a plan," Annie agreed. Then she stopped and looked at him, horrified. "But what about the cat? We can't leave the cat!"

She knew she couldn't be trusted with an animal. She'd almost forgotten she had to take care of one.

Kevin laughed briefly. "Cats are easy. You can leave this one alone for the weekend with some food and water."

"That doesn't sound right." Annie frowned.

"Tell you what. Your neighbors next door have a key, don't they?"

"Yes. I'll ask them to look in on him." Annie relaxed again, enough to really look at him. Although he had laughed, she could tell he was troubled. "And Kevin, don't look so worried. I really am not angry about the change in plans."

"Right, Annie. I know. Maybe I'm the only one who is mad around here."

He disappeared from the kitchen before Annie could ask him why. Maybe he hadn't wanted her to come along. Maybe he wanted to leave and not come back. She hesitated in the kitchen and then she heard the piano.

Annie had arranged for the piano to be moved in yesterday. She thought it should be in place before Kevin started his work on sanding and finishing the hall. She certainly didn't want it to scrape the hall floors afterward.

That had been her only reason for returning the piano to the house right now. She had loved listening to Grandma play, so she couldn't get rid of the instrument, but she hadn't expected anyone to use it. Annie wasn't even sure it was in tune. She'd thought it would sit, beautiful but useless. Instead Kevin was playing some blues tune that she didn't recognize.

She listened in slowly mounting delight. Kevin was actually good at this. He hadn't said a word about being able to play when the movers arrived. Cautiously she moved toward the dining room, where she had temporarily put the piano until all the floors were ready.

Kevin looked up when she stood at the doorway and stopped playing. His hands stayed on the keys, though, as if he didn't want to.

"I didn't know you could play."

"I can't. Not really. Just by ear." He looked embarrassed. "I never took lessons or anything. I can't read music. Cecilia did, and Jen, I think. I just noodle around. It would be a waste of time to try to do anything serious with my playing."

Annie held up her hand in a gesture to hush. She moved closer to the piano and gently touched one key.

"I took lessons." Her voice was soft. "It was certainly a waste of time for me. I was terrible."

Child, you must practice! I'm sure you could do better than that if you just applied yourself. Think about what you are doing. If you just thought about it and worked harder, I know you could do it.

Annie winced at the memories of her failed attempts to learn and what her parents had said to her as she kept failing. She had reached the point where she felt physically ill when she sat down at the piano. But her parents wouldn't let her quit.

"I only really learned one piece," she told him. "It's called Für Elise. After all those years of work, it was the only one I felt comfortable playing. Funny. I still remember it today." Silently, Kevin made room for her on the bench.

Softly she began to play. Kevin sat next to her as she carefully played the correct notes. When she finished, he clapped. She looked at him, a little startled.

"It's a pretty tune. But sad." He put his hands over hers on the keyboard. "At least it sounds sad to me."

"Yes. I think so, too. Will taught it to me. My brother. Beethoven composed it. Will told me Beethoven was his favorite musician."

She had sat in tears one day, trying to get through her mandatory half hour of practice, when Will stopped by the music room. She had forgotten why he was there that day. She was just grateful he was. He had crouched next to her, his eyes gentle.

"Hey, Annie, what's wrong?"

"I hate doing this. I'm really terrible at it. Will, I can't do anything right with this stupid piano!"

Will had learned to play the piano when he was her age and, as her mother had often reminded her, learned to play it expertly. She'd expected him to laugh at her or scold her after her outburst.

Instead Will had held her for a minute and then patted her on the back.

"I bet you could learn to play a tune or two, kid. Anyone can play some tune or another. You just need to relax a little bit more."

"I don't think so."

"C'mon, Annie. If I teach you to play one of my favorite pieces of music ever, will you try? I won't laugh or anything. I promise."

He had sat beside her, the sunlight on his blond hair, and had very patiently begun to teach her. She'd probably never spent so long a period of time with her brother before or after.

She didn't know why he had taken the time that particular day to show his little sister what to do, but she had always been grateful for his presence. She could still remember his gray eyes looking down, his long fingers carefully guiding hers, and the smile he had given her when she had managed to get through the whole thing. Will's smile had been a rare thing, but it was worth seeing when he gave it.

That was how she had learned her one piano piece. The one she never would forget.

"Annie, you look like you're thinking of something sad." Kevin's voice broke in on her thoughts.

"No. I'm not really. I was thinking of a good memory."

The music kept playing in her head even while she turned to look at Kevin and said, "Could you keep playing, please? I really enjoyed it. We still have a little time before we have to get ready. And I suspect that it'll be a lot more pleasant than the faculty tea."

Kevin looked like he wanted to say something. Instead he turned back to the piano and kept playing.

A sudden rush of lust almost toppled her over as she watched his fingers move on the keyboard. She didn't want to sit and listen. She didn't want to remember anything in her past, good or bad. What she really wanted was to push him down, straddle him and make herself stay happy. Fuck him until she forgot everything but sex and Kevin and the pleasure he could give.

But she sat, politely listening to the music and wishing she could break from the remote shell she had escaped into. Wishing her life had been different. Wishing she was different.

* * * * *

Annie slumped against the seat of Kevin's truck. She'd escaped. Dr. Grantly had almost trapped her at the tea. He'd had a big smile on his face but his eyes had looked uneasy when he came toward her. That was a bad sign.

"Antigone, my dear." He'd given her his standard greeting. "I've been trying to find you for days. Shall we meet on Monday? I must talk to you about next year."

"Of course," Annie'd replied politely. "I'd be delighted. I'd talk more but Kevin and I have a previous engagement and, unfortunately, we really must leave soon."

To prove she wasn't lying, she had pried Kevin away from a small knot of people and given their excuses. Snatches of conversation drifted around them.

"Although most Freudian images don't work for me I think in this instance..."

"Charlottesville is really the only place where you can get an appointment with a lawyer in an hour and with a doctor in two hours but getting a repairman takes weeks..."

"Anyhow, if his wife ever finds out that George is involved with a grad student, I tremble to think what would happen..."

Annie wondered if she'd miss this. All her life there had been academics in the background. Ever since Grandma had taken her on a visit to the Grounds, she'd loved this particular academic place. What would it be like to admit failure and go somewhere else? There would be other places to teach, of course, but it was where she'd always seen herself.

Still saying nothing, the two of them got into the truck. They were already packed and ready to leave. Annie wondered if it would ever seem the same after she came back.

"What is going on inside you right now, Annie?" Kevin asked in the dusky half-light as he drove.

"I'm tired," Annie answered, honestly enough. "I'm very tired."

"Annie."

"There are a lot of things going on." Annie tried to decide what to say. What she could say to him. Anything. She couldn't force herself to be careful right now. "I think I'm going to be refused tenure. Funny, isn't it? I finally have my home all in order and I may not be living there after all."

There was a long silence. "And it's the day before my birthday. I've never handled any of that very well. Not for several years. Not since my brother Will died."

Kevin still didn't say anything and Annie found herself going on, telling him the things she had always known she wasn't supposed to tell anyone. "I can't tell you how much I envied Will his name. Mother got to name him and he is — was — named after William Congreve, the playwright. Mother is an expert in Restoration and Jacobean plays, you see. Father got to name me, and he is the Classical scholar. Will was brilliant. We were never close since I was younger. *Much* younger. I'm sure I was an unexpected

surprise. Will was all Mother and Father needed, really. He could read Greek with Father and always knew the right thing to say to Mother. He was in high school by the time I was old enough to realize I had a brother. He was pretty nice to me, though, when he remembered I was around. I think the family usually forgot I was there."

"Their loss," Kevin grunted.

"Will did everything my parents expected of him. Almost. He graduated with honors, went on to get tenure and...and..."

"And?"

"And four years ago today he shot himself."

The truck swerved on the road.

"Jesus, Annie!"

"I don't know why. Will never confided in me. That really wasn't a surprise, given our age difference. I know he didn't have a lot of close relationships with anyone. Our family isn't very good at that sort of thing. He didn't leave a note or anything. I don't think he realized...I'm sure he didn't realize that he killed himself the day before my birthday. Like I said, he hardly remembered me at all. But that made it very hard."

"Yes. Yes, it would."

"My parents took it hard, too. They hushed up everything as much as they could. But Mother started pushing me a lot harder after that as if...as if I had to make up for Will."

"Annie, I'm sorry."

"You know, at first I thought Mother was actually being nice when she came here. She seemed so worried about having that awful party for me. I know she went to different professors she knew and sort of...sort of lobbied for me. But then I realized she was doing all this because she didn't think I could manage on my own. She never thought I was as smart as my brother. I don't know what she'll do if she finds out I didn't make tenure. If she ever talks to me again. I don't know if I even care."

Annie felt tears running down her cheeks and forced herself to look straight ahead. She couldn't talk any more.

"You know, Annie, when I got my GED, my parents were proud. Here I was with a sister getting honors in college and another younger one who was graduating from high school the same year I was and they were proud. If I hadn't made it, they'd still never have blamed me. They knew what I had gone through and they didn't compare me to anyone else."

"Well, your family isn't mine."

"No. But Annie, with a family like yours, I'm not sure I can completely blame Will for checking out."

Annie's breath hissed in.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Although it is typical someone in your family would do that on a day that would make you feel about as bad as possible. Damn. I

shouldn't have said that, either. Annie, I'm so sorry. I'm really sorry that this happened to you. All of it. You didn't deserve this."

Annie wanted to protest. She wanted to defend her family. But Kevin knew. He knew more about her than her own family did. He now knew more about her family than anyone outside of her family did. And he wasn't mad at her. His hand had reached out to hold hers. Then he took one of her hands and kissed it.

Maybe it would be all right after all.

* * * * *

Jen was looking harassed and Johnny was scowling when they walked into the living room.

"Kevin, I'm so sorry!" Jen jumped up to give them both a kiss on the cheek. "I tried to contact you but your cell phone must have been out. I canceled going."

"I knew I needed to check that phone," Kevin groaned. "It's been acting up. So you're telling me that we came up for no reason?"

"I made up a spot in the guest room for you," Jennifer rushed on. "I'll get you some towels and things as soon as Johnny and I finish our work."

"I HATE this work." Johnny scowled even more. "It's stupid. And it doesn't make any sense."

"Johnny, go take a ten-minute break while I talk to Uncle Kevin and Annie."

Johnny didn't question his mom's decision. He took off at lightning speed.

"I'm so, so sorry. This has just been a nightmare of a day. After I get the kids to bed I need to talk to you about it, Kev. Annie...you're practically family. Why don't you join us? Please. To top everything off, Johnny and I are fighting about homework again. I'm afraid he needs extra work in reading readiness and I'm not sure I'm the one to give it to him."

"He's just in kindergarten, isn't he?" Kevin's voice sounded stricken.

"Yes, but you know what Northern Virginia is like. All these eager parents are pushing the schools to do more and more with their kids. He is already behind most of the class." Jen sighed. "I'm thinking of having him tested for...for dyslexia. It's a little early but if he does have it, the earlier we know the sooner we can get to working on it."

Kevin looked like he had been hit in the stomach. "Jen, I'm sorry."

Kevin had been saying this too much tonight. Annie stepped forward to take his hand, squeezing hard the way he had for her.

"It isn't your fault." Jen smiled at him. "I know what Mom and Dad and you went through but you certainly didn't wish it on John."

"I wouldn't wish it on anyone." Kevin's hand clutched at Annie's this time. "Listen, Jen, we just had a hell of a day and the ride up was no fun. After the kids are bedded down we can talk and all, but right now I need some quiet."

Jen looked at the two of them and made a shooping motion. "See you later."

Kevin sat on the bed and looked down at the carpet. Annie cleared her throat as she saw the one large bed. "Well, I see your sisters have figured out that we're sleeping together."

"Cecilia was after me for weeks about it," Kevin told her absently. "Jen just took matters into her own hands. They like you."

Annie pondered being a topic of conversation for Kevin's family. She wondered about whether a sister should be pestering her brother about his sex life. Then she decided she liked how things had turned out if it meant she was sharing a room with him.

"Annie, as long as we're trading secrets about each other, I might as well tell you the worst thing I've ever done." Kevin continued to stare at the carpet.

"Okay." Annie wasn't sure how many more revelations she could handle this evening. Her head was already starting to throb.

"It was when I went into the army. I was why I went into the army," Kevin looked up. "I joined up about two weeks after my parents were killed in a car accident. Jennifer was about to go to Europe with Victor—back when they were a couple. She came running home to help take care of the rest of my sisters. Molly and Cecilia were just teenagers then. Our whole family was torn up. Victor went on to Europe and he didn't come back. My family really needed some support. Jen stuck it out, even when it turned out that she was pregnant with Vicky. I left. I took one good look and said I can't handle this and I ran. I'm amazed my family ever forgave me."

"It must have been a terrible time for everyone." Annie sat down next to him.

"Yeah. It took me a while to grow up enough to realize what I had done. When I got back I promised I was going to be there for my family when they needed me. I'm sorry I got us up here when it turns out Jen didn't need us but...but I just don't want to let them down."

"I know how letting people down feels."

"No. You've never done anything like that. I've watched you. You keep trying to do your best. I don't seem to be much of anything but trouble."

"This conversation has something to do with Johnny, right?"

"Yeah, I guess it does. I feel like I did it to him somehow. "

"Kevin!"

"All right, I know I didn't do anything to Johnny but...I can't help feeling guilty."

"Don't. Think of it this way. Maybe having you in the family will help. Johnny won't feel alone if he does have problems. You felt like you were alone, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Sometimes. A lot of times."

"You can be there for him. Maybe you should even talk to him tomorrow. He seemed so miserable when we first saw him. Even more miserable than most kids feel about homework."

Kevin gave Annie a small half-smile.

"You're right, of course." He looked like he might give her a full smile before he went back to staring at the carpet. "It could happen to my kids, too. If I ever have any."

"Maybe your wife could contribute the intelligence. They might inherit your beautiful body and blond hair instead," Annie tried to tease. She was pretty sure that Kevin would understand she was joking.

"Dirty blond hair."

"What?"

"It's not blond. It's light brown. Some people call it dirty blond."

Annie didn't like that description. She would've argued about what color hair he had but she could see Kevin still was thinking about their previous conversation.

"It's something someone has to think about. Something a woman who wants kids would have to think about," Kevin muttered. "Having a kid like me wouldn't be easy."

What was he trying to tell her? Was he thinking in terms of children with her? Or just with anyone? She decided he was being much too indirect to figure out.

"There are lots of things to think about with having children," Annie told him. "Look at me. I'm going to be over thirty-five in a few hours. You have to start thinking about all kinds of problems if you have a child at that age. Dyslexia would be the least of the possibilities."

That wasn't exactly what she had wanted to say. It wasn't the thing a woman should tell a guy who might just possibly want her to have his children.

"Yeah." Kevin sounded as if he wasn't thinking about what he was saying. "Well, I think Jen's kids are asleep. It's quiet anyhow. Let's go talk to my big sister."

CHAPTER NINE

"So, Jennifer Turner Logan, what do you need to talk to us about?" Kevin walked in, holding Annie's hand.

"I haven't spoken to Cecilia about this. I just can't. And Molly is still barely back from her honeymoon," Jennifer said. "Sit down, you two. Please?"

"I don't like the sound of that," Kevin responded but they sat down anyhow. "All right, Jen. What is going on?"

Jennifer carefully poured each of them a glass of wine. Annie wasn't sure she could actually swallow it with her throat and stomach as knotted as they felt. She could feel the tension pouring out of Jennifer. Annie just wasn't sure how much more tension she could take.

"I'm not sure I should burden you with this," Jen finally said. "It isn't as if you can do anything about it."

"Jen, I'm here and I'm your brother. Besides, I know you. You never do things like cancel previous engagements or call your brother up on some wild goose chase. You want to talk to me, right?"

"For a little brother sometimes you are so smart it's scary," Jen observed and patted his hand for a minute. "Annie? I hope you don't mind?"

Annie shook her head. That was the best she could do. She had a feeling she was going to mind a lot.

"I sent Jack on by himself tonight. He is going to some big political get-together and wanted me to be there. I finally said I wouldn't go. I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want to pretend I'll go along with Jack's new plans. When we got married, Jack told me he had no desire to get into politics. Now he is thinking of running for Congress."

"Wow. I never thought of Jack doing something like that but he pretty much grew up with that kind of stuff, didn't he?" Kevin sipped a little of the wine and put it down. "So why don't you want it, Jen?"

"I hate everything about politics. I don't want to smile and shake hands for hours. I don't want to have to give up my column and my law practice because people will accuse me of using them to help my husband. You know about all the craziness and horrible publicity Cecilia deals with because of Victor and me. I don't want my family subjected to that!" Jennifer bit her lip. "The worst thing is that Jack isn't listening to any of this. When I try to talk to him he just...just slips away. Not physically, although he can do that, too. I just can't reach him when he doesn't want to be reached. It—it hurts because he hasn't done that to me in years. Right now all he says is that he hasn't made

up his mind yet. But he keeps on going to these fundraisers and making speeches and... If he does decide to do it, I won't go along. I've made my decision. I may... I don't want to divorce him, but I can't do this."

Jennifer began to cry, very quietly. Annie wanted to go and hug her, to do *something* but she sat there, frozen. Kevin hugged Jen instead while Annie tried to think of what to say.

"I'm sorry." Annie forced out the words in a whisper. "I can't take any more today. I'm sorry."

She got up somehow and headed for the bedroom. She fell onto the bed fully dressed, curling herself up in a small, miserable ball. She didn't cry. She almost wished she could.

She thought Jen and Jack were wonderful, together and separately. She'd envied their close and loving ties to each other. If Jen wanted to leave her marriage, what chance did she and Kevin have of maintaining real intimacy? There was none. She was supposed to be alone, supposed to be alone, supposed to be...

"Annie? Annie, honey?" Kevin whispered. "Are you asleep? I'm sorry it took so long for me to leave but I needed to calm Jen down and explain what was up. She's sorry to throw one more thing at you tonight. Are you all right, Annie?"

"I'm all right. You don't have to be sorry, Kevin."

His arms came around her; his body sheltered her. He held her tightly, and it felt so warm and safe that she almost relaxed. She almost felt less lonely.

"You're freezing. Hang onto me."

She held on as he picked her up and took her to the bathroom.

"I'm going to warm you up."

She could think of ways—better ways—than having them both stand in a tiny bathroom. Kevin turned on the shower.

"As soon as it warms up in here, I'm stripping you down."

Annie stopped shivering. This was better. This was what she'd wanted.

"Y-you aren't a dream, are you?"

She looked at him with half-shut eyes, as if she wasn't quite awake. Something hit him low, in the gut. Desire and pain.

She looked like a dream herself, under the dim bathroom light. A snow maiden come to life.

"No, darling. I'm a man. Just a man." He bent, kissed away the traces of tears from her face and stripped away their clothes. The steam from the shower misted around her.

Beautiful Annie. When he picked her up, she felt light and fragile against him. She needed to be cherished. Guarded. But he was just a man. When she turned her head to

kiss him, long and deep, as if he was a drink and she was parched, desire turned into dark lust.

He shouldn't. He shouldn't. But her legs climbed up around his hips as he stepped into the shower with her, completely forgetting about protection.

"I dreamed of us having sex in a shower once. I dreamed of us..." Her words trailed off, uncertainly, as he entered her. Warm and moist, like the water beating down on them.

She couldn't dream of him the way he did her. Hot, rich sex dreams. Wispy, half-remembered thoughts of kisses and warmth as he woke up. He slid her against the shower walls, slid further inside.

Her body welcomed him. Her heels dug hard into the small of his back, demanding more. She sighed against his neck. "This is better than my dream."

His cock was maddening—so slow as he pulled out. So full when he thrust back in. Her heels slipped a little against his tight butt but she didn't let go. She couldn't. She needed this too much.

She wanted him to stay here like this forever. She wanted... She wanted too much from him.

His pace quickened, just a little, as he lazily kept moving against her, the water above them pounding. Kevin kissed the pulse of her throat, cherishing her with his touch. For a moment she was afraid. Fantasy, she understood. Sex, she enjoyed. But sweetness? This meant more.

His hand slipped between them and he touched her clitoris, as gently as his mouth had touched the rest of her body. She began to shudder.

"It's midnight, sweet Annie." He kissed her eyelids as she trembled and came, softly this time, against him. This wasn't fierce and consuming. This was tender and overwhelming and too perfect to be true.

She turned thirty-six in Kevin's arms, knowing that Kevin made her feel safe. Knowing that he wouldn't be with her much longer.

* * * * *

"I can't believe you came up with this!" Annie looked at the cabin's interior. "No one has ever thought to take me to the back of beyond for my birthday and then made me think I'll like it. No, I'm absolutely positive you're the only one."

"C'mon, Annie. You need a change. You need to be away from everyone for a while. I promise you'll like it. It'll be fun."

Kevin used his most coaxing voice and smiled his most persuasive smile. As always, Annie wavered and let herself be charmed.

"This is a little like summer camp, isn't it?" She looked at the battered furniture, the dim light. "I never got to go. Boarding school, yes, the year that my parents went on a sabbatical to Greece, but never summer camp."

"Cecilia has a lot worse names for what the place is like. She threatens to come and redecorate it all the time." Kevin looked around, fondly. "So far Victor has managed to convince her not to. I think it's kinda grown on her. Victor has always been generous about letting me use his cabin. It's a great place to get away."

"Well, it certainly is far away from everything."

"Hang on, Annie." Kevin pulled out a box from the ice chest he had brought in. He handed it to her. Annie opened it up and laughed.

"Happy birthday."

"I've never had a Twinkie for a birthday cake before."

Annie tried not to be charmed by this, too. If she could find Kevin giving her a Twinkie with a candle in it adorable, she was hopeless. Oh, all right. She *was* hopeless.

"I imagine you've had a lot more impressive birthdays," Kevin finally said. "Bigger cakes. Better presents..."

He held out a smaller box and Annie's heart almost stopped. He couldn't be giving her...

"A necklace? How did you find this?" Annie looked at the little glass heart dangling on a chain and tried not to be charmed again. It was cute, even if it wasn't the engagement ring she had momentarily thought it might be. Not, of course, that he'd give her one. But why was he giving her a heart?

"I picked it up in the gas station on the way. Sorry. This was the least stupid thing they had for sale. Yesterday didn't give me a lot of time to work on a gift for you."

He looked sheepish but hopeful. Annie knew she was charmed again.

"Thank you, Kevin."

"You're welcome, Annie." He imitated her earnest tones perfectly. "Do realize how many times a day you say thank you? It's got to be three or four times at least. Anyhow, I have another present. If you'd like it."

Annie looked at his face and almost squished the necklace into the Twinkie she was still holding. Sex. Oh, yes. Sex. Definitely. "That'd be a really great present."

"Then just a minute. I know I have something somewhere..." He drifted away toward what must be the bedroom.

She heard a roar of anguish and jumped.

"That frigging thief!" Kevin burst out of the room, looking as if the end of the world had just hit. "He got into my stash!"

"Who did what?"

"Vic. He found my box of condoms. He left me one. *One!* Do you know how far it is to the nearest place that sells these things? At this time of night?"

Annie bit her lip to keep from laughing.

"You know more about this than I do," she pointed out. "But it seems to me that maybe it's time to get...um...creative."

"How creative would you like to be?" Kevin looked a little dangerous as he moved toward her, all his previous annoyance forgotten.

"What do you have in mind?" Annie ran through various possibilities in her head. What *did* Kevin have in mind? He knew a lot more about this than she did and she was already overwhelmed with the ideas she was coming up with.

"Oh no, this is your idea," Kevin told her. "I'm perfectly happy to take orders on this one, boss. After all, it's your birthday."

He kept reminding her of that and for some reason, she wasn't annoyed or saddened any more. It was her birthday. Yesterday had been horrible but Kevin had decided to make today wonderful for her. And when Kevin set his mind to do something, he did it. Even if his style was a little unusual. She was going to enjoy it. She was going to enjoy him. She would keep enjoying herself for as long as it lasted.

She smiled to herself. Maybe she had finally developed a new, mature outlook on life with her new birthday.

Then, very maturely, she flung herself on Kevin. He braced himself as he caught her. "Why don't you take off my clothes this time?"

Kevin was excellent at taking clothes off. By the time he had finished with slow unbuttonings and gentle strokes, Annie was trying very hard not to whimper. Then she did the same for him. He seemed to enjoy what she did just as much as she had.

She traced his naked chest. "Kevin, why did you give up being a model?"

Kevin stopped for a moment, looking supremely embarrassed.

"Aww, Annie. Cecilia told you, didn't she?"

"Yes, she did. I bet you could have made zillions. You have a beautiful body."

He looked even more embarrassed for a minute and then he shrugged and moved closer to her, gently kissing her on the ear. He did have ways of changing the subject. But he didn't quite yet.

"I did it because I thought I needed the money and I was a kid who didn't know what he wanted to do. But I figured out one thing. That wasn't the way I want to make a living. I don't want to depend on my looks to make money. That's...that's not very..." He searched for a word.

"Manly?"

"Well, yeah. I guess. It's just not what I want. okay?"

As she kissed the pulse point at his neck, she thought about how strange it was that she hadn't really seen him as human when she first met him. He had been too good-looking and unattainable. But now, now as she slowly moved down to gently bite one nipple, she knew he was human. And even more beautiful.

“God, Annie. You know I love that. Do it again.”

She could make this beautiful man want her. Even if it was for a little while, she could. Annie bit the other nipple and felt the hard ripple of desire shudder through him from her hands and mouth.

They used the condom right away. Kevin’s theory was he could last a lot longer after that. He seemed to be right. Then again, he did know about things like that. Annie had long ago decided she simply couldn’t be jealous of how he got his knowledge when he used it so devastatingly well on her. Well, at least she wasn’t jealous when he was concentrating all his attention and skill on her.

They both came fast the first time.

It was the second time though—the very slow, torturous second time—that almost destroyed them both.

Annie watched while Kevin entered her yet again, moving slowly. He stopped and gulped in air. She knew the routine by now. He’d stay inside her as long as he could and then pull himself hastily out, sweating. But he couldn’t seem to stay away. Back they would start again, moving slowly and carefully. She’d lost track of how often Kevin managed the slow push and pull. The one that made her clutch and gasp, too.

The one that melted her with his tenderness. With his need.

The long, slow slide of his cock made her moan. The quick pull up made her groan and clutch at him—with her hands and her pussy. She didn’t want him to leave. She wanted to feel him. Skin to skin. Desire against desire.

She ached for him.

“You feel so...good...God, Annie, don’t hold me so tight. I want this to last longer. Deeper.” His words sounded as desperate as she was.

She tried. She did. But that was too much.

“I want you to come inside me!”

She lost—completely lost—and gave up to the hard, racking climax that engulfed her.

Only after she had shuddered through her climax, when she felt Kevin tightly against her, his cock spurting hard against her thigh, did she realize what she’d begged for. She hadn’t meant it, had she? But why did she still wish that hot semen had spilled inside her, where it belonged? That she had milked his cock tight for a long, long time? That she’d taken his seed and begun to grow his baby? Oh, dear.

Now there was a fantasy.

“Jesus, I haven’t done that in a long time.” His breath whistled against her ear. “I don’t think I can handle what I used to do in high school. But I was careful. I damn near died, I was so careful.”

He curled up against her and lapsed into what seemed like unconsciousness. Annie settled herself more comfortably and waited for a while, watching his prone body while she considered her options.

"I've been thinking."

Annie watched Kevin's eyelids flicker open. She'd been pretty sure he was conscious before she made her announcement.

"Do you have to?" He reached out for her and she snuggled against him.

"I'm not thinking bad thoughts," she reassured him. "Quite the contrary. I've decided I'm finally going to relax and enjoy my money."

"Huh?" One of Kevin's eyes opened a little longer than before. "That doesn't sound like you, Annie Armstrong. You're usually much too ladylike to mention you have money, much less say you'd enjoy it. Does that mean you're going to stop driving that ancient Saab? Maybe we can ride around in something besides my pickup."

She pinched him in a strategic spot and was pleased to watch him wince.

"I have a trust fund from my grandfather and grandmother—my father's folks. Grandfather died when I was a baby, but he was the one who knew how to make money. He knew how to take care of it, too." Annie let her fingers drift down Kevin's back. They went down, further down, and both of Kevin's eyes opened this time. "I started with a small annuity each year. Grandfather said he wanted to make sure his grandchildren didn't have to take some job for the money but he didn't want to give us enough money to not have to take a job. When Will died, though, I got his annuity as well. I've never touched any of his or my money. Now would be a good time to use it. I think I've earned a year off while I decide what I want to do."

"Well, while you decide you could come with me to Richmond. I have a job there that will take two, three weeks max. You could be my unskilled labor. If you want."

"I thought you never worked with anyone."

"Not often. I did with Jared, once, when he needed some time off to think. He found pounding nails very helpful in organizing his thoughts." Kevin sat up. "Maybe you would, too."

Annie was tempted. But he was charming his way into having her agree to do something that would lead to disaster. If she hung around with him, while he thought it was a temporary vacation for her, she'd be thinking in terms of forever. Even if she could convince him it would be forever—no, that was stupid. So few marriages were ever forever and they had such terrible odds of being one of those few. If she was smart, she would cut it all off now.

"No, I think I want to stay in my own home, now that I have one." Annie knew she was doing the right thing. Then she couldn't help adding, "But you could come and see me. If you want. Whenever you want."

Well, it was her birthday.

"Oh, I want."

Kevin looked at her with pleasure openly on his face. He seemed to have no problems at all with just visiting. He probably hadn't thought in terms of forever with her at all. Maybe he was right. But even if there was no forever—well, they could continue to have sex and be together sometimes. And when, gradually, he lost interest or took a job too far away for too long, she would let it hurt then.

"Oh, damn. You look too good, Annie. I don't have the energy for this." His words broke in on her unhappy thoughts.

"This what?" She curled up against him anyhow. He nibbled on her neck.

"I have this idea for where to put that Twinkie of yours."

"Kevin, shame on you."

"Be a shame to waste a birthday Twinkie." He walked his fingers down her stomach, into her belly button. "We could make a wish. Blow out a few...candles."

She tugged on one lock of that darkish blond hair.

"You're sick."

"C'mon, Annie. Think of all that rich, creamy...filling." He winked at her.

God help her, she felt her insides turning liquid at the thought.

"You're not just sick, Kevin. You're depraved."

"Hey, just for calling me names, I think it's time for the birthday girl to get her spanking. Thirty-six whacks—one for each year. Right?" His hands reached around her rear and squeezed.

Oh. My.

"Annie? Annie, you're turning pink." Kevin's eyes narrowed. "Why, I think a birthday spanking is just what you're looking for."

She was the sick and depraved one. But it would be just like her fantasy...only better. If she just had the courage to say —

"Yes. Please."

"Two...four...six..."

His hand came down. Annie tried not to wince. Tried not to whimper. Tried very hard to keep the count.

"Twelve...fourteen..."

"Your cute tush is turning red, baby. How does it feel?"

"Uh...warm." She squirmed. His cock, thrusting hard, rubbed hard against her as she shifted on his lap. "Ninet—"

"Annie. I told you to count by twos."

How was she supposed to remember everything when she was tingling? From pain. From pleasure.

"I forgot."

"Do we have to go back and start over?"

Yes! Annie swallowed. He was distracting her. His cock was pressing hard against her already swollen, wet clitoris. His fingers brushed against where he had swatted her seconds before, igniting more heat.

"N—no. I'll try."

"How long have you been wanting to be spanked, Annie?"

"Twenty-two. I never said I did."

He chuckled. Let one finger press up inside her aching channel, just a little. She did let out a little cry before she held it back tightly, clamping her jaw shut.

"You don't have to say. You show it with every little moan."

"Twenty-six."

"You missed a count."

"I didn't!"

"Oh, yes you did. I really will have to go back if you can't get this right, birthday girl." His cock was wet, too. From her? From his pre-come? Did it matter?

"Thirty-two...thirty-four..." She was on fire. *"Thirty-six!"*

Annie couldn't stand it. She was so close. She rolled over, using her heels to keep her sore rear off the bed. "The Twinkie, Kevin. Please. Now."

"Okay, honey. Thirty-six spans. Now thirty-six licks." She felt him place the confection between her labia. It was already crumbling a little. "Let's see if I can get the crumbs out of here, sweetheart."

He watched her eyes glaze over, watched her wince and then lick her lips when she forgot and let her rear rest against the bed. Then he bent his head and concentrated on his task.

Her little moans of pleasure were driving him close to climax and God knows, he could tell she was wound tight. Just a little more...just some dives down deep inside her and she'd —

"Ah, ah, ah, ah! Oh, Kevin!"

God, he wanted to do this forever. He wanted to come this second.

He stood up, holding his balls. Teasing himself and her.

"Now it's my turn, Annie. Are you going to watch?"

Her eyes opened, as if they were almost too heavy to manage the task. She smiled, a slow, sweet smile. Annie's smile.

"Oh, yes."

What was she thinking? Did she love him as much as he did her? Did she know seeing her fascination made him do things he would never do with anyone else? He'd spanked her. He'd masturbated for her. God, whatever she was thinking, he couldn't

wait. She'd gotten him too hard, too ready. A hard, roaring rush of lust hit him the second he began to squeeze his cock.

Before everything hazed over from pleasure, he saw Annie smile again. Oh yeah. She was enjoying this, too.

That was all he needed. He could feel his knees starting to buckle, feel his own climax hit. God, it was good with her. No matter how they made love it was always good.

She wished—she wished they were like this forever, huddled together, exhausted from sex. “What are we going to do tomorrow?” Annie asked, trying to keep away from the bad thoughts.

“Besides sex?” He tickled the inside of her thigh and she squirmed.

“Besides sex.”

“Go fishing. That’s what you do up here. Go fishing and, if you’re lucky enough to have the right partner, have sex. In our case, first we’re going to make a trip to a store that sells condoms. Maybe condoms and fish bait.”

“Sounds like a real he-man type of store.” Annie reached out to hold onto him. “Do they let women in?”

“Guess we’ll have to find out. You don’t have any more classes to teach, do you? It’s too bad you have to go back on Monday.”

“Yes, it is, indeed.”

“See, I could take a day or two off. There really isn’t much left for me to do at your place, Annie. It would be nice to just loaf with you until I start up the next job.”

There it was. He’d said it. The job was over. For a moment Annie let herself think about calling Dr. Grantly and postponing the whole thing. She could wallow in the moment, postpone everything—her loss of a job, Kevin’s departure, everything. They could add a few more days onto the fantasy of her and Kevin being together.

She sighed. What would be the point?

“We have until Monday afternoon before I have to be back,” she told Kevin. “So we can stay here through Sunday night.”

“Gotta get some condoms and fish bait,” he muttered. “After we go back I’ll call the folks in Richmond and tell them I’ll swing down about the job. How about the next weekend, Annie?”

“How about it, Kevin? I have at least a hundred essays to go over and grade but if you can stand being around me doing that...”

Annie knew she should tell him she was too busy next weekend. And then the next. But it was her birthday. That was her present to herself. Her only important gift. When she got home she knew what would be waiting for her. Nothing. No messages from her mother or father, no presents from anyone, probably not even birthday cards from friends.

"I might want to indulge in a Twinkie." She spread her legs. Licked her lips. "If you'd like."

Happy birthday, Annie. Enjoy yourself now.

Kevin watched, propped up on one elbow, as Annie settled into sleep. What was little Dr. Annie thinking about now? She hadn't seemed sad—once or twice she had looked a little troubled, but it was nothing compared to yesterday.

He had been so terrified when he had come in and found her lying in a knotted pile of silent misery on the bed. He had calmed down Jen first, thinking that Annie had sounded upset and looked a little pale, but seemed all right. Well, more all right than Jen had been. He'd been wrong. Annie was good at hiding hurt but she wasn't able to last night. She'd been devastated and he hadn't been there fast enough to pick up all the pieces.

On the other hand, he had handled things pretty well today. He'd kept it light, kept the sex good, even managed to bring in the idea that although he might leave, there was a definite possibility they could keep being together.

She had seemed very calm about that whole thing, too. It was as if she had expected them to stay together. Maybe it had been the sex. That had been good sex despite—maybe even because—he didn't have any protection. Then again, whatever he did felt right with Annie.

But if everything was going so right, why did she always look so fragile and sad when she slept? It made him feel like he had done the wrong thing for her. It made him want to do more for her. He wanted to...

"Oh, damn."

He shot up in the bed but then forced himself to sit very still. He shut his mouth tight to keep from cursing out loud. Annie was tired and he didn't want to wake her. No, the more he thought about it, the more he didn't want her to wake up now.

He'd just told her good-bye, see you on the weekends if you want. She hadn't blinked an eye. She'd just reminded him that she was rich enough to afford to take a year off without any problem. In return, he'd offered to let her come pound nails for him in Richmond. He'd even been serious.

He was, without a doubt, the stupidest excuse for a man he had ever heard of.

He loved her. He had for weeks. Ever since he saw her. It took him starting the usual good-bye-I'm-outta-here routine to make him realize it. What had made him smart enough to tell her he wanted to keep seeing her? It must have been some survival instinct. It couldn't have been his brain. After all, his brain didn't work.

For just a second he felt the way he had in high school when he had bungled the answer on a test yet again.

No, it was worse than that. At least then he had known he had messed up. This time he had been telling himself he was handling everything just fine. He was beyond

stupid. There was no word to describe what he was. Here he was, halfway on the road to leaving this woman forever before he realized he didn't want to do that at all.

But what he wanted to do with her was never going to work, either. What kind of life did he have to offer her? God, he was stupid. But stupid or not, he finally knew what he really wanted. Someone ought to take him out and shoot him for this dumb idea.

Not only did he love her, but he wanted to marry her.

CHAPTER TEN

Annie walked out of Dr. Grantly's office very, very carefully. She set her mouth in a straight line. She looked straight ahead.

"Annie?"

She turned. She hadn't expected to hear that voice. Kevin was supposed to be on his way to Richmond. He'd said he'd try to push it and get back again tonight but they'd already had a long drive and she hadn't expected...

"I didn't think you'd be here!" Annie walked toward him, waiting for him to pull her up into a hug.

He didn't. He looked at her carefully, still propped up against the wall. "I didn't go. I started to, then I called to tell the guy I'd be there tomorrow. I wanted to stick around in case...well, in case."

Annie wondered why he was worrying over her now. They'd had a nice Sunday. They'd fished. They'd had sex. But even during the sex, Kevin had been a little different than usual. A little more distant, a little less quick to smile.

"Well, thank you." They both smiled at Annie's familiar words. Then Annie continued, "I guess I could really use a friend right now. You see, I need to celebrate. I got good news."

"Tenure?"

Annie paused and, looked around. She tugged on his hand. She couldn't tell him here in the building. But outside wasn't any better. There were far too many students on the lawn, sunning themselves and presumably studying for finals. She thought for a moment and then detoured away from the parking lot and toward the serpentine walls of the university's gardens. She pulled Kevin inside. For once there weren't too many people there. She could tell him in private.

"Well, yes. I got it in a way I didn't expect. Dr. Harris is coming here from Yale. But he's coming for a special reason. He wants to slow down a little, take on a less taxing teaching and research load, and he wants me."

"What?" Annie saw Kevin scowl. "How the hell old is this guy anyhow?"

"Not like that, silly!" Annie had to hug him for the thought. "He wants me to be here. He wants me to be his partner in researching and writing a book he's doing on attitudes in the Victorian novel. He told Dr. Grantly that he was coming here primarily because he knew I'd be a good partner. Dr. Harris left a message for me at the department on Friday but we left so fast that I never stopped to get it. Dr. Grantly seemed worried that I wouldn't want to be Charles Harris' assistant because I'd be getting less attention and working as sort of a subordinate. As if I cared! I loved

working with Charles! And I'm going to get tenure out of it! Well, I have to pass some sort of committee recommendation thing, but I'm pretty much guaranteed it."

"Congratulations, Dr. Armstrong."

Kevin's voice sounded sincere but there was something more to in his voice. Annie stared at him, trying to puzzle it out.

"Let me treat you to dinner, Kevin. Where would you like to go?"

Idly, Kevin pulled a blossom and handed it to her. "Let's get take-out and go home. Annie, I have something else I need to tell you in private. About a telephone call I got while I was waiting for you. And, you know, I'd just like to be with you tonight. We can pick up some champagne on the way. If you don't mind."

That should have been the perfect answer. Why was it making Annie feel so uneasy? Maybe because it was *her* perfect answer but not a Kevin answer. Kevin should want to take them out, go dancing, do something spontaneous and fun.

She looked at him. Maybe she should concentrate on him tonight. After all, concentrating on celebrating and Kevin sounded appealing. At least it would be if he didn't have that strange look on his face.

"Is something wrong, Kevin?"

"Naw. Listen, Annie. This is a big deal, right? This is what you've really wanted, right?"

"Absolutely."

"It's going to make you happy, right? To be Dr. Armstrong, all tenured and looked up to?"

"I don't know if I would put it like that, but, yes, I suppose so."

"Yeah. Then it is a really big deal."

Kevin felt like a jerk while Annie looked at him uncertainly. It was a big deal. The one catch was he might have had a shot at what he wanted if she was just Annie. But she was Dr. Armstrong now, sure of what her life held and sure it was exactly the way she wanted it to be. What would she want with some stupid handyman who wouldn't be able to read her upcoming book on *Attitudes in the Victorian Novel*?

"Kevin?"

He could see Annie's joy draining away. He forced a smile and even managed to make it look good. "Hey, when we get the champagne, I have some really fine ideas about where I'll pour it. We definitely must celebrate."

He wouldn't think about the small ring box he had in his pocket. There was no point. He'd swung up to Cecilia's briefly during the week to root through his stored belongings and found his mother's engagement ring. But even while he did it, he knew he was never going to actually go through with it. Today, just for a minute, after the lawyer's phone call he had been angry enough to think he could. But Annie was going

to do just fine without his proposal. No, she was going to do a lot better without it. And he'd do just fine without her.

"I'm glad you're here to celebrate with me." Annie squeezed his arm. "I'm really glad you were willing to be here to commiserate with me, too."

What the hell did commiserate mean? He didn't want to ask Annie a word she seemed so comfortable with. Some people could check it in a dictionary. He'd just remain in his usual ignorance unless he was willing to ask one of his sisters. What a loser.

"Just one thing, Annie, to get this out of the way..."

"Yes, Kevin?"

"I got a call today. From a Davis Harmon. The Third."

Annie stared at him. Why was that name familiar? Then it clicked. Her parents' attorney. "Yes?"

"He made me a really interesting offer. Apparently your parents think it's worth a few thousand to have me leave Charlottesville. Actually quite a few thousand."

"Oh."

"I told Mr. Harmon exactly what your parents should do with their money. But then... Annie, I started thinking. I'm leaving Charlottesville anyhow. I don't want their damn money but...but if you want to get in touch with your parents that much, I don't have to come back to visit. I know it bothers you that they haven't said anything to you. But with you getting tenure and with me gone, things could be okay between you. I guess."

"Do you really think so?" Annie stared at him. "You think we'd be a happy family if I just give in to them again? If I toss you out for the sake of two people who are willing to pay to make me miserable?"

"It doesn't matter what I think."

"Doesn't it? Don't you think I would be angry about this? Don't you think I care more about you—hell, don't you think I care more about *myself*?"

Kevin touched her hair. "Hey, Annie, you don't have to swear. I sort of figured you'd say that but I also figured you deserved the choice. I might not stack up next to your parents."

"Don't be stupid, Kevin."

She'd called him stupid. He hated it when people called him stupid. And Annie had sounded about as rude as he had ever heard her.

He was going nuts. Her saying those words sounded good.

"Oh!" Annie looked stricken. The confidence leaked out of her as if she'd never shown any.

"What is it?" Kevin asked.

"I just had a very bad thought. Kevin, if my parents would offer money to you, what would stop them from offering it to someone else?"

"Huh?"

"Dr. Harris is a colleague of my mother's. What if she put him up to coming here to work and asking for me? You know, bribed him. That sounds like something she would do... Oh God, almost like a birthday present."

Annie looked sick to her stomach. Kevin stepped forward to grab her shoulders. He thought fast. She'd been so happy when she told him about her tenure. Whether she was right or not, he wasn't going to let anything destroy her happiness.

"Do you think this guy you admire so much would do that?" Kevin asked. "More importantly, do you think your mother would reward you before she got me out of your life for sure? Wasn't she just as mad at you as at me? Maybe even madder?"

Annie began to look a little less sick.

"That's true. That's true." She began to sound a little more certain as she continued. "And since you aren't going anywhere — or at least not too far — she couldn't have put anyone up to this. She'd make sure things were going her way first. Right?"

"Right." He hoped so. For Annie's sake. If it wasn't true, he hoped she never found out.

"Right," she echoed, more firmly this time.

"So we'll get the champagne and celebrate?"

"Absolutely, Kevin."

What if? What if? She could just see Mother hatching up a plan like getting someone with Dr. Harris' stature to ask Annie to assist him. She could see her mother's sweetest smile as she talked to Charles Harris. Annie could imagine how she would explain it to someone so it didn't even sound like a bribe. Mother could make it sound like it was entirely the other person's idea. Annie would make a wonderful assistant, wouldn't she? She was such an intelligent, sweet, *obedient* girl, wasn't she?

Oh, the whole situation would suit Mother all right. Annie would have her tenure, just like her parents wanted, and still not be totally independent. After all, didn't her parents want her helpless, too? Didn't they think she couldn't handle things on her own?

Fuck them! If Mother had truly done this, then Annie would turn the tables on them. Her first instinct had been to refuse tenure, but her acceptance under these conditions would drive her mother insane. Mother wouldn't have her way, she couldn't tell anyone what she had done and Annie would get what she wanted. She was good at what she did. She could do a good job no matter why she had gotten her tenure. In fact, she would enjoy having her tenure. She would refuse to let any doubts make her unhappy.

As they stopped to get champagne, Annie realized that she was really going to celebrate after all. Maybe she had just enough of her mother in her to appreciate the possibilities of the situation.

"Hey, Annie..."

"Yes?"

"Don't cry, honey."

Annie realized tears had formed in her eyes even while she was telling herself how much she was going to be happy. She slid her hands into Kevin's. "I'm not. I'm not going to cry about my parents ever again."

Her mother's belated birthday present—if Mother had done anything at all—had been unexpected. But Annie would accept it. It was a gift to know that she'd never worry about her parents' approval again.

But Kevin wasn't through with his revelations for the evening. After they went back home and began eating their fast food, she saw Kevin was still obviously brooding. It was so unlike him that Annie wasn't sure what to say.

She concentrated on her barbecued chicken, thinking about how her food habits had changed since Kevin had come into her life. She couldn't have imagined eating something this messy and greasy before he convinced her it was worth it. While she bided her time thinking about cuisine and wiping sauce from her chin, she waited.

For once the man was going to outwait her. "Well, Kevin? What is it?"

Kevin finished up the last of his coleslaw, carefully avoiding looking at her. "You ought to be tired of hearing me open my mouth."

"I'm afraid not. You obviously have something more you're thinking about. If you have more to say, I want to hear it."

He finally looked up. "Annie, I don't want to take your money."

"What?"

"Listen, I'm not the most careful person in the world about finances, so I probably don't have all the money you paid me, but I want to pay you back. I think I probably have most of it right now. It might take me another day or two to get it all back, but I can do it. Easily."

Annie thought about that for a minute, working out the implications of what he said. "This is because of that offer my parents made, right? You're starting to feel strange about taking any money now."

"I just...it doesn't feel right." He looked briefly annoyed and then pushed his hand through his hair. "I can't explain it. I just don't want to take money from you."

"Man, I bet women would be offering to sleep with their repairmen every day if they knew they could get a deal like that."

He winced when she said that. Annie didn't care. She was starting to get very annoyed. She leaned forward and tried to speak reasonably to Kevin, even though she was feeling very unreasonable. Almost as unreasonable as he was.

"Listen, what you did for me on the house has nothing to do with anything else we've done. You worked for that. You worked really hard for it and you put up with a lot of problems most people don't have to put up with. Problems like my parents and me."

They glared at each other.

"I don't want any of your money, okay?"

"It isn't my money any more. It's yours. I don't want it, either. You said it wouldn't be right for you to take it. Well, it just wouldn't be right for me to keep it."

He opened his mouth and then shut it again. For a moment his mouth relaxed just a little and he looked like his usual self again. "This is a really stupid argument. Can we compromise on this? I'm sure you can argue about this and make me look even stupider than I feel right now about this whole thing. You're the one with the right words and all, Dr. Armstrong. But the truth is, I don't feel right taking your money. You don't feel like a client to me any more. But if you won't take your money back..."

"And I won't."

"Well, then, how about I just not take the last payment you're supposed to give me at the end of all this? I'm not going to bill you for it, believe me."

"I don't like it." Even as she said it, Annie realized he was right. This was a silly argument. No one else would ever believe she was arguing over giving a workman a huge amount of money because he refused to take it.

Except that he wasn't just her workman any more. Kevin was much more than that to her. What he said proved that she was much more than an employer to him. She tried to see it from his point of view. Would she take money from him now, even if she had worked for him?

"I don't, either," Kevin responded. "That's why it's a compromise. Neither of us is going to feel completely right about it. But I'll feel a little better than I do right now."

"I'll think about it," Annie finally said, grudgingly.

"You think hard about it, Dr. Armstrong." He leaned over to kiss her, very lingeringly. "Maybe I can take something in trade. You know, if you want to sweeten the deal."

"Wow, Kevin. I don't know if I'm that good. I still owed several thousand dollars."

He began, very carefully, to unbutton her shirt and to kiss where each button came undone. Annie shivered. How was it that he always managed, one way or the other, to persuade her to do things she had no intention of doing in the first place?

"You could try, Annie. I can be very easy to convince where you're concerned."

* * * * *

Annie looked up from the desk when she heard the front door slam. She could use a break. Even the pounding rock music in the background was failing to inspire her. She was grateful to Kevin for having some of that kind of music in the house, though. She had become rather fond of it. It certainly helped her to get through her grading more quickly than with the opera.

Congreve, the cat, lazily removed himself from the pile of essays he had been curled up on and stretched, too, then leaped gracefully to the floor.

"I'm really glad you're here!" For all her lectures to herself about how she would keep things calm and casual, Annie couldn't help smiling as Kevin walked into her study. "Things didn't seem the same without you this week."

Inwardly Annie kicked herself. That wasn't the rehearsed greeting she had planned for when Kevin showed up. She hadn't really believed he would show up again, though, and her stupid mouth couldn't help but open and say exactly what she was thinking.

"It's good to see you, too, Annie." Kevin didn't look particularly glad. He looked angry and a little embarrassed.

"Is something wrong?"

"Naw. The guy in Richmond is really anxious to have me start. He showed me all around the place. It's a nice one in the Fan District. Well, it could be really nice with a little work." Kevin's expression didn't change.

"But something's still wrong."

"Yes. No. Um, no. I just have a little favor I need to ask you. When you have the time and all." Kevin stared very hard at the floor. "I usually check things like this out with Jen, since she understands this stuff, but I had to choose between seeing you and seeing Jen this weekend, so I picked you."

"Thank you," Annie said, automatically. Kevin's scowl faded as they both briefly grinned at each other.

"That's at least one for today." He pretended to chalk one up in the air. "When I'm not here, do you thank the cat just to keep in practice?"

She really did say thank you too often. His teasing should annoy her, but Annie laughed instead and got up to kiss him. He began to look a little more cheerful.

"I suppose you only came to see me because I kiss better than your sister." She kissed him again to remind him.

"Well, you kiss *me* better than my sister does. Thank God! I don't think I want to think about what it would be like the other way around." Kevin looked thoroughly amused now, his arms around her, his body relaxed.

Just then Congreve gave a strange, choking cry. Annie whirled around to look at the cat. The cat gagged fiercely.

"Oh Lord! She's choking!" Annie held her hand over her mouth.

Congreve did it again.

"Annie..."

"I can't give CPR to a human, much less a cat. What should we do? She's going to die. Kevin, what do we do?"

"Congreve's a he. He'll be fine, Annie."

"What do you mean? She — he — isn't fine at all. I know. We'll call your sister. Molly will tell us what to do. Hurry, Kevin, dial the number before Congreve dies! Kevin? Kevin, why're you laughing?"

Congreve spat something onto the floor.

"Annie, it was a hairball. Cats lick themselves and get hairballs. Then they spit them out."

"Oh." Annie stared at the tiny, disgusting mess on the floor near her foot. Congreve was good at leaving disgusting messes. Her mother had been right. But, annoying as the cat could be, Congreve was worth it. Annie couldn't explain why. She wasn't even sure Congreve cared about her. But it was nice to have a pet. Something to care about. The cat yawned, disdainfully, as if responding to Annie's thoughts. Then the ill-mannered beast stretched again for a final time and sauntered off.

She looked up and calmly told Kevin, "I feel really stupid. You can stop trying not to laugh anytime, Kevin. You sound more disgusting right now than the cat did."

Kevin gurgled.

"I told you I don't know anything about cats or how to take care of them. But I'm trying very hard."

"You're being very conscientious about it." Kevin swallowed his laughter with an effort. "And see how much you're learning about taking care of pets? You're already a hairball expert. Once you clean that thing up, you'll know exactly what to do from start to finish when Congreve starts coughing up another one. There never seems to be just one."

Annie thought about that delightful image and tried not to make a face. She wasn't very successful. She glared at Kevin, whose mouth was quivering just the tiniest bit.

Annie decided to change the subject.

"So, what did you want to ask me?" She saw Kevin tense a little at her words, but this time he was definitely not as angry.

"I have this contract I need to sign with the guy in Richmond. He put in a few new items, like folks sometimes do. Usually I ask Jen or Jack about the wording, but this looks like it should be pretty standard. If you would be willing to, you know, just read it to me, I should be able to figure it out. I've gone through a million of these. I just need to, um, make sure everything is the usual." Kevin looked much too casual to be believed.

"I'd be happy to," Annie assured him. "How about after dinner? I could fix some stir-fry. If you'd like that."

"Sure. You know, until I met you, I was pretty happy eating hamburgers and maybe a salad for my veggies. Cecilia has tried for years to reform me with her gourmet stuff, but you've got me eating stir-fry and Thai and all sorts of chi chi stuff. It's hard to believe. I guess you aren't a bad cook."

Annie admired the way he could change the subject. Besides, no one had ever told her she was much of any cook before. She'd be happy to eat salads and sandwiches most of the time. But she couldn't tell Kevin that she had been making more of an effort lately because he was eating with her.

"Wait until I try you on sushi," she warned. "I promise you that I will someday."

"I cook my seafood, thanks."

Annie began to tidy up her desk. She saw Kevin staring at the composition books and essays that littered it, his mood changed back to a more somber one.

She glanced over at him as she pulled the roll top down. No, he wasn't happy about something.

"Annie, why do you put up with me?" Kevin asked, abruptly.

"Pardon me?"

"You heard. I don't do what you do. I can't do what you do. I don't even understand what you do. I must be different from any other guy you've ever been out with. Hell, you even have to read to me. Why do you bother?"

Kevin had never been so direct about their differences since he had first told her about his dyslexia. Annie wondered why and then, even more panicked, wondered what she would say. She had a feeling Kevin might walk out the door if she wasn't careful.

"Are you asking if I look down on you? Why should I? I can't do what you do, either. I don't understand how and I probably wouldn't be any good at it. You had to finish the rooms I started and put up the wallpaper after I stripped the old stuff off. I couldn't do it. Do you look down on me? I'm not handy in the least. I admire someone who can do the things you do. You made my house beautiful again. I appreciate that. I appreciate you. If I have to read a few pages of a contract in return, that's fine with me."

She put her arms around him. He didn't respond.

"Besides, you do understand some of what I do. You tried new things for me. When I babbled on about Jane Eyre, you went out and found out about the book. You wanted to know about me and what I found important. That's more than my own family has ever done. It's more than anyone else has ever done for me. How could I not appreciate you?"

A few seconds ticked by.

"Yeah, well, I appreciate that you were willing to try to work on the house, too. Even if it was just to save yourself some money." Kevin smoothed her hair and smiled at her.

"I discovered you do hard work." She looked up at the eight-foot walls and remembered just how impossible it was to reach the top of them. Yes, those walls were beautiful now and she never wanted to try to do anything with them on her own again.

"How fast can you do stir fry?" Kevin asked.

"Maybe a half hour at most." Annie stared at him, puzzled.

"No. That's too long. Let's go to bed now and worry about dinner later. I mean, please let's go to bed. If you want. It's not like all I want is to get you to bed. I wouldn't want you to think I'm not romantic or something. And I definitely want you to say yes right now." Kevin picked her up. "So, is this romantic enough for you?"

It was. Annie nuzzled her face against his neck and thought about all the crazy but romantic things he did for her. That was one of the big reasons why she loved him.

Then her breath caught. Not because he'd made one quick and dizzy circle around, with her in his arms. Not because she'd spent the last few days realizing he was a big reason why she had the courage to defy her parents and still be happy. It wasn't even that she still saw him as some sort of trophy boyfriend. She could almost list all the way she'd grown to care for him in neat stages, just the way she would lay a problem out for her students.

It had started out with her being dazzled by the exterior and the smile. She'd fantasized about what it would be like to show him off to other people. Then came the next stage, where she had realized he was kind and funny and considerate. Bright, too, although he wouldn't believe it. Brighter than she had believed when all she saw was Kevin's good looks and assumed he'd be shallow. But it was when he was willing to show his flaws that she had been pulled in even deeper. And somewhere, very easily, she'd fallen in love with him.

Annie'd had little moments of being in lust, or dazzled, or even enraptured by other men. A few had reciprocated. But this wasn't the same. This was a little frightening because Kevin didn't dazzle her any more. How could she be dazzled? She knew he was vulnerable, in ways that were similar to her insecurities. She didn't care. She just loved him. But this new stage in her feelings was...this stage was one she had never been in before. She'd never even come close. She felt a part of him.

"Oh my." Annie breathed it out on his neck. He didn't understand, of course.

This was serious. This was dangerous. When he left, it was going to hurt more than the usual and expected break-ups she had had with other men. They'd hurt her pride. This man's departure could change her life.

Oh my. Kevin had already changed her life and there was nothing she could do about it. But he had moved out of her house. He was talking about how different they were. She was about to get into real trouble here.

"Oh. My." Annie couldn't help saying it again.

"Annie? Is Kevin there?"

"Jennifer? How are you?"

Annie spoke eagerly into the telephone. She tried to ignore the flare-up of guilt. She should have called Jennifer before this. She should have checked on her. It had been more than a month since she had left Jennifer and Kevin in the living room, with Jennifer crying bitterly. Annie hadn't done a thing about Jen after that. She hadn't even had the decency to call and wish Jennifer well. But then, what did you say in such a situation?

"I'm very, very fine. That's why I wanted to call Kevin."

"He isn't here." Annie tried to sound nonchalant and was careful not to add that he hadn't been at the house for the last two weeks. "I don't know where he is just now."

She might never know where he was again. Annie had just figured out that Kevin had taken all his CDs and tapes away the last time he had been here. She shivered. Kevin didn't have enough stuff to make a dramatic statement when he did it, but he'd packed up and moved out of the house.

"Ever since he finished up that job in Richmond he's been impossible to get in touch with," Jennifer complained. "I thought for sure he would be with you this weekend."

"No. Not this weekend."

"Well let me tell you then!" Apparently Jen didn't seem to think Annie had said anything strange. "It's really good news and you deserve to hear it too after all my silly blubbing to you and Kevin."

"Yes?"

"It's all okay. Really okay. After that evening when I whined, Jack came home late. You guys were in bed but Jack and I talked. At last. It was sweet, really. You mustn't ever tell Jack that I said that or he'll divorce me after all. You see, a long time ago I'd said I chose Jack because he always put me first. And he told me he remembered that and that he always would. He always thought of it as part of the wedding vows we made."

Annie felt a sudden quick urge to snifle.

"That *is* sweet. And I promise I'll never tell Jack."

"Thanks. Anyhow, we've been talking about it more and more. I know Jack would like to try for a national office. I just don't understand why except that it's there and he's competitive. Anyhow, a few days ago, he told me he'd really thought about what he wanted and the life he needed to lead and then he remembered what we think is important. Each other."

Annie was crying now, very soundlessly.

"You know, Annie, Cecilia and I teased you and Kevin before but, really, as long as I'm being sentimental here, I might as well tell you we're all hoping you and Kevin get married. It's the best thing ever to be married to someone who loves you. I think you and Kevin do care about each other. Annie?"

"Well, I do care." Annie had to admit it. She was dimly grateful that her voice only sounded a little husky. "I just wish I was the right one for Kevin."

"Of course you are! I've never seen anyone so right for Kevin in my life."

Annie realized that if Kevin drifted away from her as he seemed to have done, she'd lose contact with his family, too. Of course she would. She'd miss them almost as much as she missed Kevin. This might be the last time she would ever talk to Jennifer.

"Kevin doesn't think so."

"Annie, I've never seen the boy more interested in anyone."

"Interested, maybe. That isn't caring."

"Annie, when he checks in, you have him call me. I'll set him straight."

"No, please don't mention what I said. I'm very, very happy for you, though, Jen. Very."

And then Annie hung up and bawled.

This was all Kevin's fault. She looked around at her home. Kevin had fixed things beautifully. Annie had arranged Grandmother's old furniture to best advantage. The Oriental carpets, the little knickknacks, the roomfuls of books—they were just what Annie had always wanted. But she was miserable. Kevin's absence made her feel like her wonderful house was empty. Instead of feeling at peace, Annie felt like she was turning into an old maid, with her old house and nothing but a cat—wonderful though Congreve was—for company. Kevin had restored her house, given her a cat and then left her alone with them. Now he'd made her miss his sisters. Everything about the damn man was making her cry hysterically.

When she was done with her tears, she very carefully wiped her face and picked up the small brown bag she had purchased at the drugstore. She carried it to the bathroom, very gingerly, as if there was a bomb inside. Then she stared at it. Of course it wasn't a bomb. Not really. It was just a small brown bag. A small brown bag with a pregnancy test kit inside.

Kevin stared very thoughtfully at the beer he held. This was a really bad idea. He knew that. He knew he couldn't drink. On the other hand, he didn't have any better ideas.

He felt like hell. He felt like this was the end of the world. He felt like he was a self-pitying idiot. So what? He was tired of being a good guy, always putting on a smile and working to make the best of a bad situation. What had being a good sport gotten him? He was in about as bad a situation as he had ever been in his life and there wasn't anyone else around he needed to make happy. If a man couldn't feel bad when he made up his mind to give up the woman he wanted to marry—well, when could he feel bad?

He thought about what his family was going to say when he showed up again. He could avoid Annie, but not them. He let out a whoosh of air. Hell, they liked Annie.

They would probably kick him out and go adopt her. Why not? If he were them, he would.

He rubbed his head again. They'd ask why he'd dumped her. They'd tell him how sweet she was and how she really cared about him, even knowing what he was like. They'd tell him everything he already knew.

What they couldn't tell him was how he could live with her, knowing that someday she was going to look at him the way other people did. He couldn't stand it if Annie looked at him with pity. He had made it through when other people laughed at him or felt sorry for him. He couldn't do it if Annie did. He just couldn't.

Then again, maybe he was being stupid again. Annie knew what she was and she knew what he was. She'd read to him, for God's sake. He hadn't seen any pity in her eyes when she did it. But could she always be that way? Hell, her beginning students were smarter than he was. Could she really stand having a husband who...

He carefully put the empty can down on the cabin floor and scowled when he heard a car engine driving up the dirt road. That engine had a very distinctive sound.

Someone stood at the half-opened door. Someone with a cat in her arms. Both of them looked at him with similar expressions on their faces.

"Annie?"

Even impaired, Kevin could figure out that Annie hadn't come to see him in a forgiving mood. Kevin almost laughed. Almost. He hadn't wanted pity. She sure didn't have any pity in her eyes right now.

He tried to remember if he had called to cancel their weekend or just driven off to the cabin without talking to her. He probably hadn't spoken to her. He probably shouldn't have turned the cell phone off, either.

"Hello, Kevin."

Annie looked at him and the beer cans and he had an absurd urge to hide them, just like when he was in high school and his parents had found him in the garage. Annie put the cat down. The cat stalked away, while Annie stalked toward him. Without a word, she took the last beer can from his hands, went to the sink and poured it out. Then she began to make coffee.

"I didn't expect you here," Kevin told her, very honestly.

"I suppose I should be grateful you were here by yourself and not...not out buying fish bait and condoms with someone else." Annie's voice was as icy as her look. She would have made her mother proud. "I'm making coffee for you because I want you sober when I talk to you."

Kevin decided that meant he'd better shut up. So he did. When she slapped a coffee mug down in front of him, he sipped it meekly. She still didn't say anything. He finished the coffee before he ventured another sentence.

"I think I'm about as sober as you'll get me for now." He thought about it and added, "I don't usually drink all that much, you know."

Kevin knew better than to try to flash his automatic smile at her. Anyhow, he didn't feel like smiling. His head hurt. His heart hurt, too. Yeah, sober was the word for him.

"Now I don't know where to start." Annie swallowed after she said those words.

Annie's voice had changed to the diffident one she used to have. It was funny how he had forgotten that voice until he heard it again. Damn. Now that made him hurt, too. He didn't want the old scared rabbit Annie, even if she had been cute enough to get him worked up. He really liked the feisty, funny, sweet Annie who had lived with him. He wanted to keep living with her for more than a few weeks. But, scared or mad, funny or serious, he just wanted Annie.

Oh damn. Maybe he wasn't as sober as he thought. Here it came. He knew this would happen if he saw her again. Was it his fault? He'd tried to keep away. She was the one who had followed him up here. It was *her* fault.

"Annie, I know this is a bad idea. I'm not even sure how to say this. You can stop me whenever you can't stand to hear any more. But while I was here I...uh...I started thinking some more about Rochester and how he acted around Jane Eyre. Y'know, about him not contacting Jane once he was free. You know why? He wanted Jane to have the best. And he wasn't. He wasn't even close to being what she deserved. But he knew if he saw her again he was going to ask her to marry him. He didn't have any pride left by the time she showed up."

"Kevin, why are we talking about Jane Eyre right now?" Annie was starting to look outraged again.

Outrage might not be the best emotion for a woman to have when you laid your heart out for her to tear into, but even that was better than the scared rabbit look.

"Because I'm gonna do it, too. And you should say no. I wouldn't blame you at all if you say no. But anyhow...uh...I love you. I'd love to marry you. Would you think about it, even though you shouldn't and it probably would never work and..." He shut up.

Yeah, he was pretty suave. No wonder Annie was looking at him as if he had started talking in Swahili.

"Kevin, did you say what I thought you did?"

"Probably."

"You want to marry me?"

"Yeah."

"You do love me? You love me and that's why you want to marry me?"

"Yeah."

Annie's hand slammed down on the table and Kevin jumped. Even so, he figured he was probably lucky. She looked like she really wanted to slam that hand into his face.

"Then why didn't you call me? Why have you made me and everyone in your family crazy wondering where you are and why you'd disappeared? It took hours for

me to get here. I thought the car was going to stall on me for sure back near Staunton. I had to stop and ask directions from every Godforsaken country store within the last fifty miles. And all you had to do was call and talk to me! *I needed to talk to you!*" Annie was really screaming now.

Annie never screamed.

"I was scared to talk."

Annie looked at him and then she began to cry. Kevin jumped up and went to hold her. For a second she clung to him. Then she shoved him away, hard enough to make him stumble back a step.

"You were scared? *You* were scared?" she sobbed. "I'm the one who's terrified here. I figured you never wanted to see me again and then Jen called and told me how great marriage is and how we should try it and then I found out we're having a baby and...and if I don't figure out some way to turn off these tears and mood swings while I'm pregnant I'm going to scream! I *hate* losing control like this. I never do this. It's *all your fault*. I hate you. If I didn't love you, I'd kill you!"

"Honey?" Kevin tried to process her sentences. When he had, he risked his life and got close enough to hold her very tightly. "Honey, you're pregnant?"

She nodded.

It took him a few more seconds to absorb that idea.

"That's gre...uh...is it great?"

"I don't know. I've never been pregnant before."

"And you don't deal with kids well, right?" Kevin let out a deep breath. "Of course there is a good chance you'll have a kid who can't read novels with you."

"And I'm thirty-six years old and probably will have to have amniocentesis and worry about whether my age is risking the baby's health." Annie sniffled, her head very tight against his chest.

"I really messed up, huh? Except this time I messed both of us up."

They stayed that way for a long time. Annie gradually realized he was holding her and not saying anything. Her own emotions began to level out again. This wasn't as bad as she thought it would be. He was here, he was holding her and he'd said he wanted to marry her. In fact, he'd said pretty much everything she wanted him to say, what she had been mentally willing him to say while she drove up to the cabin. Maybe she could cope with this after all.

"I wouldn't say you did it, exactly. Well, at least you didn't do it alone. I mean, I was around, too," Annie pointed out.

"Oh, yeah. I definitely remember you being around." Kevin smiled at her and then his face sobered again. "Listen, Annie, if you don't want the kid or me, I understand. This wasn't anything you asked for. I guess this decision has to be whatever you want. If you don't want to deal with a baby, I'll take him or her. Or if you want to get rid of

the baby, I'll—I guess I'll understand that. But it would be nice if you at least, maybe, considered sticking around with me."

"I'll probably make a terrible mother." Annie raised her head to look at Kevin. "I don't have the world's greatest example in mine, but at least I know enough to do just about the opposite of everything she did. I bet you had a great mom, didn't you?"

"Yeah. She was."

"Well, if you really do want to marry me, then could you stick around and show me what you're supposed to do? After all, you have a lot more experience at this than I do."

"You want me around to be the baby-sitter?" Kevin began to scowl. "Now wait a minute, Annie. I'm sick of being the one who gets to make everything better around here. I try not to whine about things. I try to keep things cheerful. But I'm not a damned doormat, either. I can get my feelings hurt, just like yours. I know I'm not in your league in almost anything but I think I deserve better than to be married because I can change some damned diapers!"

"Good."

He stared at her. Good? Well, she hadn't shown herself to be any too stable in the last few minutes but he started to wonder if maybe he was losing his mind, too. Was he was starting to hear things?

"What the hell does that mean?" Kevin snapped.

"I'm getting really tired of your humble Mr. Rochester routine. I know you're a human being. Human beings have problems. That's okay. I don't mind your problems. I'm accepting your proposal of marriage. If you can't figure out why, I want to marry you because you are about the most exciting man I've ever met—and the kindest. And because I love you."

"Yeah?"

"And because I like your smile."

"I like yours, too, Annie."

"And your body."

"Likewise."

"I also really love your family."

"Weeell..." He coughed. "I love you as much as a whole family."

"So, Kevin, are we going to bed or not?"

"So, Annie, are we getting married or not?"

"Are you trading your body for an acceptance?" Annie slid herself against him in the way she knew he liked.

"Absolutely." Kevin shook her off gently, crossed his arms and tried to look prim. "No sex until you promise to marry me."

"All right then."

He grinned right before he realized the implications.

"Are you sure, Annie?" he asked. "You're taking on a lot if you agree. Things you don't even know about yet."

"Kevin, who *does* know what they are getting into for sure when they get married and have kids? I've been reading up on dyslexia," Annie began earnestly. "There are all sorts of things you can try, if you want. I'm not an expert, but I'll help. And if you never get to read, I don't care. I'm more worried about what I don't know than what you don't."

"Like what don't you know, Dr. Armstrong?" Kevin was inching her toward the bedroom. She had the feeling he wasn't listening to a word she was saying. She almost didn't care, because she knew what was on his mind. Still, she made an attempt to be serious.

"I don't know how to be part of a real family. I don't know how to take care of people. Babies, husbands, anyone. I want to learn. If you'll be willing to be my family."

"I think that was what I signed up for here when I proposed." Kevin sounded unconcerned. "Annie, you're my family already. And you know how to take care of people. Honey, look how much you fuss over the stupid cat. If you don't think you can do it, then you just need a little more confidence. I know you can."

Annie took a deep breath. She hoped he was right. Marriage and family were such tricky things. But then again, she'd be marrying Kevin. They could handle it together.

"Now I'm going to do what I've been wanting to do since I first saw you."

"Don't hurt me too much, sweetie."

"Not that. I'm going to fuck you this time."

"Jesus, Annie. You never say things like that."

"Maybe it's time I did."

She'd tasted how much she could make him want her before. This time she'd show them both how long she could make him want.

"God. That could hurt, too." His eyes were soft. "Do what you want, Annie. Everything you want."

She could hardly breathe. From desire. From fear. From excitement. She was going to be a wild woman. She was going to show him how far he could take her. How far she could take him.

"I'm on top this time." God, she was so ignorant. He'd laugh.

No. That was the old Annie talking. The one who wasn't Kevin's. The one who failed. This new Annie could make Kevin moan and plead and want her forever. She already had.

She would just do it again.

"Yeah, babe. Here I am." Kevin eagerly shucked out of his shirt, then fumbled with the fly of his pants. He cursed as his pant legs wouldn't fall down. It was as if he was as desperate as she was. As if he couldn't wait. As if he was clumsy with desire, the way she could be with him.

"Then lie back. I want to look at you. You're sooo pretty, Kevin."

"Pretty? Jesus, Annie."

"You are. I want to lick that tight stomach of yours – and bite that gorgeous bicep – Mmm. You're a sugar treat. So tasty. Let me eat you up."

"Jee-sus."

She could taste the slick sweat on his skin. She made him sweat. She made him writhe under her mouth as she left a wet trail against his stomach, then blew.

She made him groan and clutch at her hair, the way he had done to her.

"When I first saw you, Kevin, I wanted you." She sucked one of his balls into her mouth. So vulnerable. So powerful. Mmm.

"God, you hid it pretty well then. Because I would've jumped you if I'd known."

"Of course I hid it. You terrified me. I never wanted a sex toy before. Not the way I wanted you to be my sex toy." She tickled the tip of his cock with her tongue.

His whole cock leapt up as if to demand equal time. "God. I would've been...happy...to start being your—harder, Annie, please God, harder—sex toy earlier."

"But now I want more." She slid on top of him, allowing just the head of his cock to rest against her clit. Letting them both suffer and enjoy.

"Annie, damn it, I want more, too. C'mon, girl." She could see him thinking about pushing her down and climbing on top himself. She chuckled and held him tighter between her thighs.

Not yet. Soon. But not yet. Not until she told him.

"I want to be married to you and do this forever. Ever and ever." She pushed herself down to the hilt. God, what was she saying? She forced it through the hard shots of pleasure already hitting her, tipping her into orgasm. "Kevin, I love you so much. All of you."

EPILOGUE

They walked up the front steps, Annie carefully holding onto the railing as she went up. They had both made it home, with Kevin carefully tailing her Saab, just in case she had any more problems. He was being very protective and perhaps he should. She was already starting to feel a little unsteady on her feet, although she knew that was crazy. Still, crazy or not, she wasn't going to take a chance on anything happening to their child. It was scary, the way she was already starting to feel protective about it. Not it. Him. Her.

She stared at her hand on the railing, watching the glinting of the engagement ring and wedding band. She was married and pregnant and everything. It wasn't precisely the wedding of her dreams, but Kevin had bought her a huge bouquet of flowers and produced her rings. Annie wondered if she would miss having a more elaborate affair sometime later. Right now she didn't care. The look Kevin had given her while they got married had made it all perfect.

The engagement ring glinted in the sun again. She was almost tempted to flash it again, just to look at it glitter, then restrained herself. She had to keep a tight grip on the railing. She didn't want to fall.

"Kevin! Kevin, what if I lose the baby?" Annie asked, suddenly.

Kevin squinted at her, assessing her mood. He had to smile. Given her moodiness lately, it was the wisest thing to do. Whatever he seemed to be looking for, he must have found, because he answered her without any impatience or nervousness.

"Well, we'd be really sad for a while and then, the next time we go to the cabin, I guess all I'd have to buy would be fish bait," Kevin told her. "I wouldn't mind trying again. I'm sort of liking the idea of seeing you as a mommy."

"Okay. And Kevin, I've been thinking about baby names. Names are important," she assured him earnestly. "What about Kevin Daniel if it's a boy? That way he won't get confused with Danny, but he still has your name. And if it's a girl, I want to name her after my grandmother. Her name was Helen, but everyone called her Nell. Wouldn't that be nice? It's a little unusual nowadays, but nothing like Antigone."

"Sure, honey. Have we gone through the whole list of your concerns for the day?"

Kevin kissed the top of her head. He was being so sweet that Annie could feel tears starting up again. Before they fell Kevin had unlocked the door and then scooped her up to carry her over the threshold. This was nice. She knew she wasn't making a lot of sense any more, skipping from subject to subject, but Kevin was still being incredibly sweet to her. Maybe she didn't have to make sense when she was just married. Married and pregnant and everything. If she just kept repeating it to herself, maybe she'd believe it.

"Kevin!"

"Yes?"

"I had this thought. I've started reading up on pregnancy."

"I know. I'm the one who is going to have to bring all those books about pregnancy in from the car."

"Well anyhow, the older you are, the more likely you are to have twins. What if we have tw –?"

Kevin kissed her on the mouth to silence her. Well, she would just have to come up with more names. Just in case.

"This seems kinda silly when it's your house, but why start off wrong?" Kevin told her as he carried her to the threshold.

"Congratulations!"

Annie was glad Kevin was holding her or she might just possibly have fallen down. Kevin's family was there. All of them. She couldn't believe how large a crowd they made, standing in the hall.

"Kevin—" She tried to glare at him.

She'd been the one to say they should just get married on the way back. It took a little longer than they had expected—neither of them had figured out there were waiting requirements for a marriage license until they applied—but they had time. She'd been the one to beg Kevin not to tell his family to come up for the ceremony. The idea of being the center of attention had been too much. But she'd forgotten to say anything about not having family show up for a surprise wedding reception.

On the other hand, she couldn't be upset. It felt absolutely right to see them. All of them from the children running around, shrieking with excitement to the adults, who were swarming all at once, talking excitedly.

Annie gradually picked out pieces of the conversation.

"Doesn't anyone in this family besides me believe in sending out invitations? Giving people a little notice before they have to haul themselves across country for the wedding?" Cecilia complained as she ran up to give her brother a smacking kiss.

He returned it and swung her off the ground for a hug.

"You only did it because you love to have huge parties," Jen informed her sister as she gave Annie a hug.

Annie knew, without asking, that Kevin had called her parents. He'd think it was the right thing to do. She also knew, without asking, what their response—if they'd had any—had been. It still hurt, but at least she knew what to expect. She had been semi-ignored by her family for far too long without admitting it. Not being a part of them at all wasn't that different.

Molly came up and kissed her, too. Annie held on to her. She had a new family now. She didn't need to try to cling to the old one.

"Welcome to the family, Sis." Molly echoed Annie's thoughts.

"Thank you."

Annie began to smile again after she said that. That was the first thank you of the day. But she really did mean it.

"Look at Kevin. See that strut in his walk?" Cecilia came up on Annie's other side. "He looks really pleased with himself."

"Well, he should be," Molly's answer was prompt. "He did a really smart thing. It took him a while, but he did it."

For one horrible minute, Annie thought she might start crying again at the approval in the other women's voices. She glanced over at Kevin, who, she had to admit, was looking remarkably proud of himself. He seemed to think he deserved praise, too. He caught her eye.

"Are you mad at me?" Kevin got closer to her. "I just couldn't not tell my sisters. We would have been thrown to the wolves the next time we showed up."

"I suppose not. But I do hate surprise parties as a general rule. Just so you know not to ever do this again. Wonderful though it might be this time." Annie reached out to smooth his hair back. A new thought hit. "Kevin!"

"Annie!"

"What do we have to feed them?" Annie asked, horror in her voice.

She loved her house. She wanted everyone to think of it as welcoming. There wasn't much of a welcome without food and drink. She had never hosted a party in her life when she had done no preparation at all.

"Oh, I knew my sisters would take care of that." Kevin gave an unconcerned shrug.

"Kevin, that isn't the proper thing to do!" Annie hissed at him.

Kevin smiled and then gave her a huge kiss.

"I'd tell you to relax, but I love it when you get all prissy," he told her. "It must be something perverted about me. Whenever your voice goes all New England and raises just a little bit—"

"Kevin!" Annie could feel her voice do exactly that.

"Oh, yeah. Gets me hard every time."

He leered at her. Annie glanced over to see if anyone else had heard and decided for her own peace of mind that she'd believe they hadn't. She also realized that Kevin had won the argument. She couldn't say anything more right now. With a smug smile, Kevin headed off to where—just as he predicted—his family had provided a wedding cake. She saw him coming back toward her with a slice.

Kevin was going to feed her cake, just like a real wedding reception. And he was going to look very smug while he did it. He knew he'd won the argument, too.

Then she smiled and shook her head. All right. She'd let him win this one. She was, after all, in a very good mood. She now had her own resident gorgeous husband.

Wouldn't Sally and Lindsey be jealous once they found out? She wouldn't mind showing him off at all. Let people think she had her very own boy toy, her personal trophy husband. She wouldn't mind. The best part of people thinking that was that only she knew just what a prize she had. He was better than her best fantasy.

About the author:

When she isn't writing or tending to her children, husband, and dog (not necessarily in that order), Treva Harte works full-time as a government attorney in a city with many other government attorneys. In a previous lifetime Treva got her Master's in English Lit and had once planned to be an English professor. She is an active member of both the Romance Writers of America (RWA) and Washington (D.C.) Romance Writers (WRW).

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