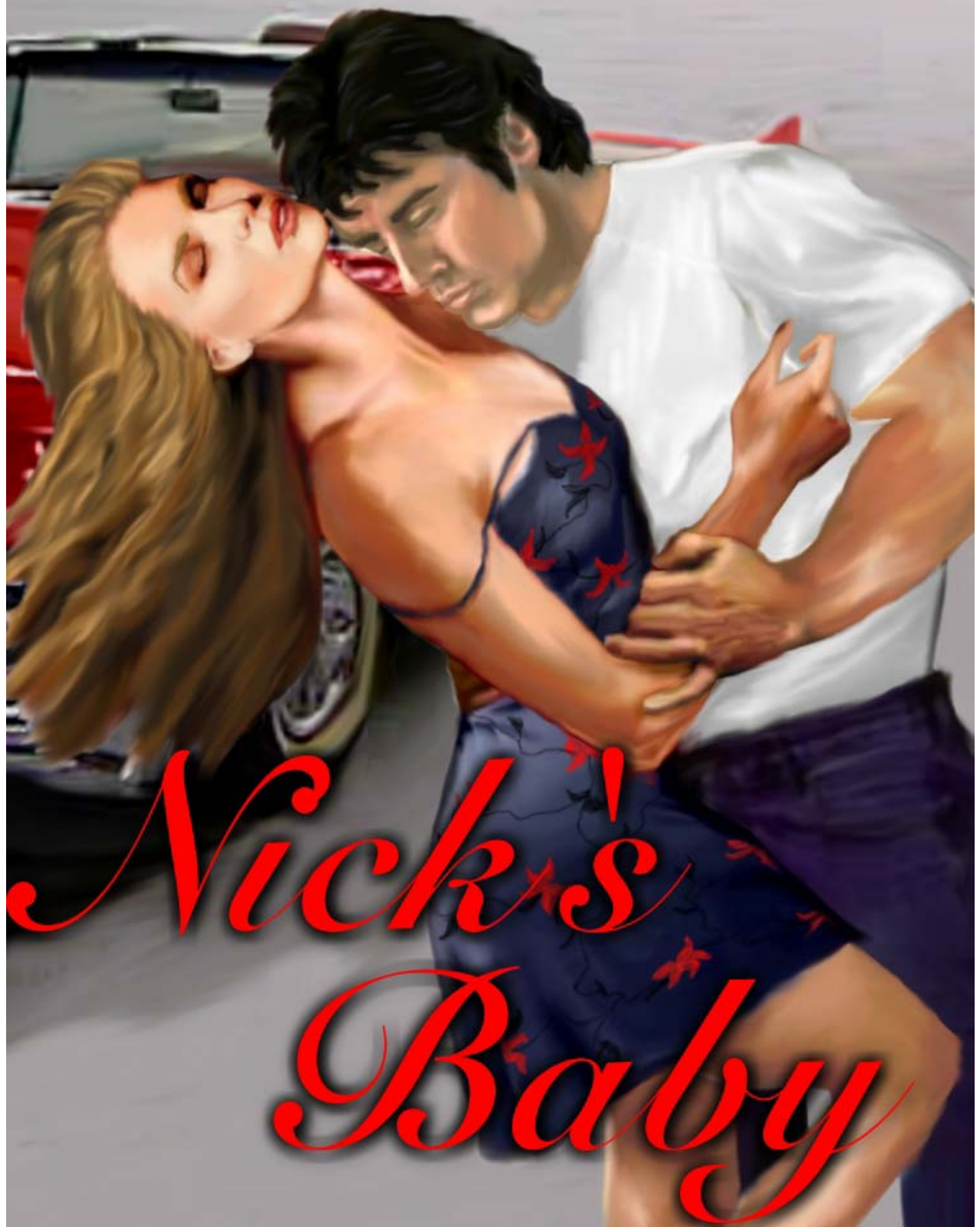


*Rita Hestand*



# **NICK'S BABY**

**By Rita Hestand**

**Writers Exchange E-Publishing**

**<http://www.writers-exchange.com/epublishing/>**

NICK'S BABY  
Copyright 2004 Rita Hestand  
Writers Exchange E-Publishing  
PO Box 372  
ATHERTON QLD 4883

Published Online by Writers Exchange E-Publishing  
<http://www.writers-exchange.com/epublishing/>  
ISBN 1 920741 89 5

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation to anyone bearing the same name or names. Any resemblance to individuals known or unknown to the author are purely coincidental.

---

I'd like to dedicate this book to Sandy Cummins, CEO of Writer's Exchange Publishing for having the heart of a romance writer and the brain of a publisher in seeing what I see in Nick's Baby! Thank you for your faith in me!

Also to Cathy Spangler, who was a big part of Nick's Baby; and to the people of Hell's Kitchen, who wrote to me personally about their city, their feelings, and helped to make Nick Leonetti what he is in this book!

Thank you all!!!

Rita Hestand

-----

## Chapter One

Nick Leonetti eyed the people around him with a sense of impending doom. He adjusted his tie several times, feeling like a man at the gallows about to be hung. He hated ties. Whoever invented them must have had a sadistic mind he decided with a quick jerk on the knot. He glanced at his shoes and saw his reflection. "This is definitely not the Nick Leonetti I know," he grumbled to himself.

He surveyed the room. Stale cigarettes stashed in overflowing ashtrays, magazines strewn haphazardly on the coffee tables, humdrum music playing in the background, and an impatient man strumming his fingernails incessantly against the plate glass window of the receptionist desk reminded Nick of his mission.

A company picture hung on one wall, men in hard hats--reassuring Nick that he was applying at a sheet metal company. It was the only thing that reassured him.

True, the note had been vague. So, he didn't get a look at who sent it to his table the other night at his mother's birthday party at L'Allegria's Restaurant. So what? It was a job, wasn't it? And Nick needed a second job to accomplish his goal.

Jumping up, he intended to make a quick dash for the front office door, but halted when the secretary came into the room. "Mr. Leonetti, would you follow me please?"

He followed her down a long narrow hallway. The secretary opened another door for him, and quickly closed it behind him. He felt as though a dungeon door had slammed shut. He took in the room with a single glance. It appeared empty. A solid plate glass window lined one wall, providing a highlighted view of the area. The carpet, a deep plush mauve, surprised him. Pink carpet? The furniture echoed a cold modern art form of chrome, glass and black lacquer. Two tall black leather chairs adorned both sides of the wide expansive desk.

Not his style. No sir, not his style at all. He was out of here.

His hand on the doorknob stilled when he heard a woman's voice. Not just any voice, but a soft, sexy voice, the kind a man likes to hear in the heat of the night. Desire speared him like a hot sword aiming for his loins. Lord, it was just a voice, he scolded himself as he turned around slowly.

"Mr. Leonetti?" The woman whirled about in the leather chair to face him and abruptly stood. Small, delicate, and composed with an air of confidence, she stepped toward him, her hand extended.

She didn't take his breath away, but few women did that anymore. Nick's heartbeat returned to normal. She just didn't knock his socks off, and with a voice like that she should have. For a man that usually dated busty blondes, or redheads with figures like Venus statues, a sexy voice shouldn't have thrown him. Still, he admitted, God granted some with looks, some with brains, and some--with a voice. And she definitely had a voice.

"I assume you are here about the job?"

He nodded. The voice lied to him, played him for a sucker. It promised much more than this little lady could deliver.

Nick studied the woman. He faced straight lines, starched linen, and big black glasses that were so thick they distorted her eyes into two sunken wells of who knew what color. Even the color of her suit--a blah brown--didn't invite a second glance. Only her long, straight, golden brown hair, held by a clasp at the base of her neck, caught his attention. It looked like the only thing she didn't control. Little Miss Plain and Simple. Not all that bad, just not his type he conceded, with an inward grimace.

"Sorry you had to wait so long. I've had numerous interruptions this morning."

He clasped her hand. Her skin felt petal soft, but her grip firmed in his. More like the handshake of a man than a woman.

"That's okay."

"It's unfortunate, but unavoidable."

The intercom buzzed. She pivoted then hit the switch so hard the phone rattled. She looked delicate, but apparently she packed quite a punch. Nick smiled at her actions.

"What is it, Paula?"

The secretary's voice faltered. "Uh, Mr. Guyon is on line three, Ms. O'Sullivan."

"Tell him I'll call him back. And hold my calls for now, Paula, please." She waved Nick to the chair in front of her.

She snapped off the intercom and slumped into the chair, grabbed an odd object off the top of her desk, then turned away from Nick for a moment. He saw her shoulders bunch, her spine stiffen. He couldn't be certain about the object in her hand but it appeared to be some sort of baby rattle. Funny, he hadn't pictured her as the motherly type, more along the lines of Miss Goody-Two-Shoes, married to her job.

"Now, where were we?" Once again composed, she whirled about and glanced at Nick. He watched her lay the rattle down, gently. It could've been fine bone china the way she was handling it.

Unexpected awareness shot through Nick again at the sound of her voice, low and raspy. If she kept that up, he wouldn't be able to walk out of the room. How could a voice so sexy, belong to a woman so--bland? And yet, bland or not, she had his attention. Her voice and mannerisms caught him off guard.

Curiosity and unwelcome awareness forced Nick to notice her finer features. Not that he wanted to notice, but the need to find a reason for his reactions became necessary. She did have a peaches and cream complexion, thin brown brows that arched arrogantly at his stare, and full lush lips. He couldn't quite pull his gaze from her lips--undoubtedly one of her better features.

She returned his sensual glance, scanning every inch of him from his shoe tips to his thick head of black hair, without a trace of embarrassment. Nick didn't mind; he was used to assessing stares from women. Yet her examination of him went deeper than most, as though she were probing his mind and soul. What was she after?

Her lips slanted, capturing his attention again. Not overtly full, nor too thin, just well formed and dotted with a pale pink lipstick, barely noticeable. There were no laugh wrinkles around her eyes or mouth. This woman took life seriously. Too bad.

"Please make yourself comfortable, this--interview, might take a while."

He watched her every move, oddly fascinated. He wondered what she might taste like--sugar or vinegar.

He was definitely losing it. He'd never entangled himself with a boss-lady before. Hell, he'd never had a boss lady before. The guys down at the garage would get a kick out of this, if they knew.

Glancing at the pile of files on her desk, she set his aside as though it told her nothing. She tapped her fingernail on the desk. "Mr. Leonetti." She cleared her throat and waited until he looked straight at her. "May I call you Nick, or do you prefer Nicholas?"

"Nick's fine."

Nick watched the way her hands clenched the arms of her chair, as though this interview made her uncomfortable too.

Annoyed and puzzled by his mild attraction to her, Nick stirred restlessly in his chair. He'd walked straight into this one. Okay, so he'd walk out of it too. He'd come here for a job, and he wasn't leaving until he found out about it.

"Good, I hate formalities. I'm Kelsey O'Sullivan. I'd like to keep this on a first name basis. You are answering the ad in the paper, aren't you?"

"Paper? Uh no, as a matter of fact it was the note at the restaurant last night."

She paled.

Nick adjusted his tie. He wanted to jerk it off his neck and throw it in the nearest trashcan. He shouldn't have come here. The woman would probably think he was crazy or desperate. Well--maybe he was. Still, if she had forgotten the note, he was in trouble.

"Note? Restaurant? I'm afraid there must be a mistake."

Uneasiness surged through him, but he'd tough it out. "The waiter said a lady sent this note," he explained as he reached into his jacket pocket and offered her the crumpled paper with the O'Sullivan logo on top. She stared at the note a long time.

"Oh dear, at L'Allegria's?"

"Yeah, that's it." He sighed with relief, glad she finally remembered.

"Oh ... I'm so sorry, Mr. Leonetti."

Uh-oh, back to last names again. "No problem, I figured it had to be a screw-up."

"It was meant for a colleague of mine," she said hurriedly as he stood and began backing toward the door.

"Yeah, well, no harm done. Thanks anyway."

"Wait!" She practically jumped from her chair, knocking the rattle off the desk. She issued a soft exclamation, glanced at him, then stooped to pick it up. That's when he noticed she wasn't wearing shoes. Goody-Two-Shoes barefoot? He spotted the shoes beside her desk on the floor. As though she'd kicked them aside. At first it stunned him, then it tickled him. He grinned. Maybe she wasn't quite as uptight as he thought.

She slipped into her heels with a reluctant grimace. "I feel as though I owe you an explanation, and the job is still open. You did come about the job? Didn't you?"

Bare feet and baby rattles? What next? Nothing seemed to fit with this woman. He'd form an opinion of her, and she'd destroy it within seconds. Everything about her looked professional except for her bare feet and that rattle.

"Yeah, sure, but--"

"Well then the least I can do is give you an opportunity, if you're still interested."

Nick hesitated, detecting what seemed to be a note of desperation in her voice, another unexpected twist to the lady. Now why would a lady like her be desperate? And what was she desperate for? He should be walking out about now, but something rooted him. Yeah, his brain wasn't working.

"You don't like ties, Mr. Leonetti?" she asked jerking him out of his thoughts again.

"No ma'am," he admitted, taking his hand away from the offending material. "As you can see I'm not a white collar man, although I'm willing to try almost anything once."

This time, her mouth quirked.

Something told him he should be out the door. Still, this might be a good opportunity and he couldn't pass it up. He had to give it a shot.

"Then please remove it."

"What'd you say?"

"I said, please remove the tie, if it's bothering you. If something bothers you, get rid of it. I remove my shoes when they bother me, which I'm sure you've already

noticed. And I'm aware that it's very unprofessional but you try wearing three inch heels all day and see how you feel."

Something comfortable slipped between them--a smile.

Removing things wasn't how it was supposed to work. Remove the tie? Just like that? What next? He didn't like this. Bosses weren't supposed to say such things. Bosses weren't supposed to go bare foot, either, or have rattles on their desks.

Nick loosened the tie, and moved slowly back to the middle of the room. "About the job?"

"This isn't an ordinary job, Nick. I'm sure you've already guessed that much. And it isn't easy for me." She sank into her chair. The smile disappeared. Tension took its place. Her lips firmed into a grim line. "The first three men I interviewed ran out before we could get to the details."

Nick waited for her to continue. Wasn't easy for him to sit through this either, but he had to.

She sought eye contact when she spoke. He liked that. He could read her better that way. She looked almost vulnerable as she sat staring at him.

"I do remember you now, at the restaurant," she gasped. "You were with a large group of people. It looked like a celebration. You were sitting next to an elderly lady who only had eyes for you."

"My mother."

Another hint of a smile lit Kelsey's eyes, softening her expression. "A very beautiful woman."

"Yeah."

Just then she could have grown two heads and turned purple and Nick still would have liked her. No one, absolutely no one had said that about his mother before, and it touched him deeply.

Rosa Leonetti had worked hard all her life as a laundress in a Dry Cleaner's. She'd never enjoyed the finer luxuries of life. Her hands wore raw calluses from working with hot water and chemicals all day. Her hair was always in a frumpy bun on top of her head, frizzed from the humidity. She was a fine woman, a good woman, but no one, had ever called her beautiful except her children--and this woman.

He took a good long look at Kelsey O'Sullivan, realizing he had misjudged her. There was more to the lady than met the eye. Much more. "Yes, she is," he agreed slowly, his eyes never leaving Kelsey's. He took the chair again, relaxing despite the odd circumstances. "It was her birthday."

He shouldn't be talking about birthdays. He couldn't fathom why he felt so comfortable with a business executive in starched linen suits and Coke bottle glasses.



"And did you arrange for all the family to be there?"

"Not much arranging in the Leonetti family. Everyone knows Mama's birthday and they are there, or else."

"Or else they'll have Nick Leonetti to deal with?"

"Something like that." He wondered where this was leading. Dammit, he was attracted to her. He didn't want to be attracted. He could think of a million reasons not to be. So why her? He didn't have time for a woman in his life. He had other worries. He needed to concentrate on getting his family out of Hell's Kitchen and into a nice comfy home in Queens.

"Tell me about your mother, your ... family."

"Y--you wanna know about my family?"

She nodded.

"What do you wanna know? I mean, they're just family. Like anybody else's. My mother is a God-fearing Italian woman who loves her children more than her life. My sister Tina is sixteen. She's turning into quite a young lady, which happens to scare the hell outta me. And Tony, well, what can I say? I guess we tend to spoil him a little. He's the baby of the family."

Nick watched Kelsey's face. No ridicule there. Instead, she was quiet, pensive, glancing occasionally out the window as he spoke. Her expression reminded him of a child looking inside a department store window at Christmas and longing for the toys. He recognized something in her face, something he'd seen many times before, from neighbors, friends, even relatives. He saw loneliness--and sudden envy.

"It sounds like a lovely family." She cleared her throat, straightened her jacket and blinked hard. God, the woman was close to tears. And all he had done was talk about his family. She might appear a hardened businesswoman, but Nick suspected a hidden tenderness lurked beneath her surface. "I like you, Nick." Her voice sounded soft, like a whisper.

He liked her too, and he had absolutely no idea why. They had nothing in common. He ate hot dogs with 'kraut on top, she probably had caviar and imported wines. He was poor, she was rich. It'd never work, even if he wanted it to.

"I don't normally form opinions so quickly about strangers," she explained, her face strained. "But I'm very glad we met, even if it was through a--a screw-up."

Nick didn't say a word.

"The note was meant for an old friend. But I'm not the least upset."

"You aren't?"

"No. Because I am a desperate woman."

Oh God, here it comes. She wants me to kill somebody! He knew he should have walked out. He couldn't kill anybody; he wasn't the type. Sure, he'd seen the "Godfather." Sure, he was Italian, but that was as far as it went. Just because he lived in the infamous "Hell's Kitchen" didn't give her the right to jump to conclusions.

He could take care of himself, in any given situation. His thorough knowledge of Karate saved him more than once, but kill--no, not this Leonetti! She had the wrong guy. He had the wrong job. He was out of here!

Yet instead of leaving, like he knew he should be doing, he heard himself saying, "Go on." He wanted to yank his own tongue out, but he had no control over his mouth any longer.

Her eyes locked with his, darkening with intensity. "It's really very simple."

Why did he not quite believe that? "What is?" Nick prompted, totally curious.

She was doing it again, looking him straight in the eyes and daring him to leave. She actually glanced at the door, as though she might be waiting for him to do just that. But Nick Leonetti was no quitter and she'd soon learn that.

"The job you applied for--the reason you're here--what I need ..."

Now he was nervous. Why didn't she just spit it out? The longer she waited the more tense Nick became. The way she hedged, he was sure he wasn't going to like what she was about to say. Obviously no one else had.

"There's just no delicate way of putting this. No way to sound nice. I don't want you getting a wrong impression, nor jumping to conclusions but I need your ..."

Her voice grew low, like a whisper and even then Nick wasn't sure he had heard right. He sat very still. It became very quiet. Very, very quiet. "My--what?"

She exhaled a long breath, rolled her eyes, and blushed. "I said I want you to be a sperm donor for me!"

## Chapter Two

Disbelief and outrage shot through Nick. Surely he hadn't heard right. Did the lady say ...sperm? He finally found his voice. "What? Are you crazy?" He stood up. "You don't go around asking a total stranger something like that." He flailed his hands in the air dramatically. "It's crazy! You're crazy! It's--indecent."

"You're shocked. I expected a reaction. At least you haven't made a run for the door."

"I can't. My legs are in shock, too."

But his eyes found hers, and a strange compassion filled him again. He didn't know why. Something about her expression held more than words. Poor woman, she probably couldn't get a man of her own. But this...

"I know that sounds blunt. But I've learned it's always best to state your goal. I'm a woman, and I run a multi-million dollar business. My branch alone brings in twenty-five million a year. It's taken some time to establish myself as a corporate executive. In my line of work a woman has to push hard to be respected. Especially if she's the boss. I've worked like the devil. I'm a success because of it. I've always known exactly what I've wanted and I've gotten it. This is no different."

Compassion and outrage warred. "And now you want a sperm donation? Just like that? As though we were talking about salt and pepper passed across the table. It ain't decent."

"I've shocked you?" She picked up the rattle and tapped it against her palm. "Come, come, Mr. Leonetti, I thought you'd be hard to shock. A big tough guy like you. Your application reads like a refugee from a war zone. You've attacked every job from truck driving to mud wrestling. How can something like this throw you?"

Big? Maybe from her point of view, but he was probably only a half-foot taller than her. Tough, sure. But crazy, no. He tilted his head, pulled at his tie again, cleared his throat and waited for the right answer to come. It didn't.

"You've got the wrong man." He finally forced the words from his mouth.

Kelsey firmed her lips, narrowed her gaze and crossed her arms over her chest. Raw determination glared at him. His words hadn't deterred her. "Oh, are you sterile?"

Sterile? It was a challenge, a gauntlet. Nick felt his blood pounding in his head. He didn't deserve this; all he wanted was a job. His nostrils flared, as he wiped his face with his hand. He wondered what might happen if he slowly kissed away her judgmental expression and opened that straight linen jacket of hers. In ten minutes he could make a real woman out of her, change her entire attitude. Damn, he'd been way too long without a woman! That wasn't his style though.

He blew out breath, as he willed his body to calm. "Not that I know of, no. But I came here under the impression this was a sheet-metal company. I figured you were looking for a warehouse foreman, or shipyard crew. Not--not something like this."

"It is a sheet-metal company Nick. And I have a full crew right now. But what I don't have is a sperm donor."

"You can say that again, lady." Jeez. No way was he going to give this woman what she wanted.

She sighed heavily, as though the weight of the world were on her shoulders. "I should be used to dealing with this reaction. As I said earlier, three of the others stormed out of here this morning as though I'd shot them. But Nick, there isn't an easy way to approach the subject. I figured bluntness might be best. I know it's a big thing to ask of any person."

The way she wrung her hands made Nick stop and consider her request for just a second. This couldn't be easy for a woman like her, he reflected. Not for Goody-Two-Shoes. But there was nothing short of moving the earth that would make him agree to something like this. So why was she proposing such an outlandish thing in the first place?

If it hadn't been for that sultry voice, but damn if the woman didn't turn him on. It was crazy but he found himself wondering what her hair might be like if he undid the clasp, and what lay beneath that dowdy linen suit and thick set of glasses. Forget it, he silently scolded himself. She's crazy!

"Look, I thought this was a job."

She leaned forward, her expression earnest, almost pleading. "Oh, it is. It is, Nick. This isn't personal, believe me. I mean, I don't expect it to be. It can all be taken care of clinically. I've made all the arrangements. All I have to do is find a donor. And I will pick my own donor. But there are a few things that have to be done first--if you agree to it."

Of course he wouldn't agree to it! Did she need it in writing? Mama would pin his ears back for staying as long as he had, if she knew.

The word No, was on the tip of his tongue, but instead he heard himself saying, "Such as?"

"First," her face lit with hope, "I'll need to run a complete check on your background. Have a medical history done. This will require more information than you might be willing to give. I see you listed no medical problems, but of course that would have to be checked out. You listed a lot of jobs. On an ordinary resume that wouldn't look good. It hints at instability. There's probably a reason behind all of them, but I don't have the time nor the inclination to delve into it."

"Look, don't bother. There's nothing wrong with my background, medical or otherwise. As for the jobs, it's real simple. My family comes first. A lot of bosses just

don't seem to get the message. But that's how it is in my family. That's why I'm not the right guy. I've got enough obligations for now."

He wanted to shake some sense into her, but he'd never manhandled a woman and he certainly wouldn't start now.

"Nonsense." She cleared her throat. The arrogance was gone from her face. "I'm glad to hear it, Nick. And I find you a very well rounded man. You are a street-wise, self-educated man who happens to have morals, too. I like that. But naturally, I'd need more information. I'd have you investigated; I want you to understand that. I'm an honest person. Then you'd be sent to a clinic and tested for sperm count and a complete physical, that is, if you pass the background check. Assuming you are 100% healthy we'll draw up a contract that in effect makes me the legal guardian of the child. You'll have no further responsibilities. That's all there is to it."

She made it sound like a formula for a corporate deal. But she still hadn't got his message yet.

"Is that all?" Nick respected the lady, even went as far as feeling sorry for her, but now, he was rethinking it. Not that she hadn't calculated every move. That was the problem, it was too calculated. The woman was obviously suffering from delusions. No further responsibilities? Who was she kidding? Babies weren't born that way--in a clinic, with no responsibilities. They spelled responsibilities, with a capital R. Besides, babies were meant to be born out of love and affection and family. Who was she trying to kid?

"No." She took her glasses off and wiped at her eyes. Nick saw fatigue, and something else, something deeper, something that made him feel protective of her. He didn't want to feel protective.

Strange, he'd decided she didn't have eyes when he first walked in, but he was wrong. She had beautiful blue eyes, the kind a man remembers for a long, long time.

She stood up and paced, her shoulders bunching.

Nick's thoughts went into overdrive.

She strummed her fingers against her upper arms as she crossed them again. "You haven't walked out yet, so I'm assuming you're considering this. I'd want to explain a few things. Things you probably aren't aware of. You see, I'm from a very wealthy family. My parents expect me to marry and have children. And as long as the prospective husband has a couple of million in the bank, they'll be satisfied. But that's not for me. I've been down that road once; it didn't work."

She looked away, her expression pensive. Nick's gaze lingered on her face, squelching the need to reach out and console her. So, she'd been hurt, that might explain a few things. But you didn't go off the deep end just because someone hurt you. She looked stronger than that.

Kelsey faced him, her eyes luminous and big. "I really want a child, Nick. I've always wanted one. But I can't go through another marital disaster. I won't." She glanced at

him, then went on. "Naturally, I've already gone to the sperm bank and spoken with them about this. They are very understanding. But I just couldn't go along with the insemination process. Not their way. I wouldn't know the father. And it's important to know the father, even though I don't expect him to be around. There are qualities in a man I want to pass on to my child. Traits, looks, personality. And yes, I'm looking for something even deeper than that. So you see, if I'm willing to go to that length for what I want, I'll go a step farther and choose the man I want for the job. It can be done. I've already inquired. They'll work with me, any way I choose. After all, I'm doing all the footwork so to speak. But make no mistake, Nick, I'm the one who wants this baby. It will be my baby!"

Her vehemence didn't deter Nick from his own convictions. So, she wanted a kid, so what? Didn't mean he had to compromise his principles for her. "Doesn't the father have any say in this?"

"I'm not advertising for a father. I'm looking for a sperm donor. There's a big difference."

He twisted his head sideways. Okay, someone had hurt her and naturally, Goody-Two-Shoes wasn't about to get hurt again. No, she was too smart for that.

"Maybe so, but it's pretty hard to rule out a father, lady. Having a baby takes two people, a woman and a man."

"Unfortunately, yes. I've considered other options, but this is the only acceptable answer for me." Her voice faded away as though a sadness gripped her.

Nick stared.

"No, the only thing I want is a baby--without the man."

"I figured that part out, but why?"

"Why?" She stared blankly at him for a moment, as though the question had never been asked. "That's my concern." She lifted her chin a notch.

"A man helps you bring life into this world and he isn't entitled to know why? Don't you think he's a little involved? You can't have everything your way."

"You're right, of course. Okay, if you decide to try this--I'll tell you. Fair enough?"

Their eyes met and held for a long breathless moment. Then slowly he shook his head. "Nah. I'm not interested in one-way deals. What about the guy the note was really intended for."

"George? I doubt he'd have any part of it, now that I think about it. The note wasn't a preconceived idea. George plays everything by the book. I'm glad it was misdirected. You probably saved a friendship."

"You'd rather have a baby by a stranger?"

"The more I think on it, yes. Less complications. Besides, George wouldn't like my terms."

"Terms? You got terms?"

She looked him straight in the eye, and he realized again with surprise she was pretty. God, he was losing it. Next thing you know he'd be asking her out on a date.

"Yes, it's called a contract. I wouldn't dream of doing something this important without it. No strings. No personal involvement. Nothing to argue about. Everything covered. This is strictly a business arrangement. It's a job, and that's all. That's why I advertised. Naturally, I'll need a man with a high sperm count. That's why you'll be subjected to tests, which can all be accomplished with one visit. I've waited long enough. I need quick results."

"Just science to you, huh?"

"Almost, yes."

"Then why not just adopt?"

"Oh, no, that would never do. The baby must have O'Sullivan blood. We're a rather old and proud Irish family. I'm obligated to carry on the bloodline in some respect at least. I took my maiden name back when I divorced. My baby will be an O'Sullivan. Besides, it takes much too long for a single woman to adopt."

His brow shot up, questioningly.

"And, no, I'm not off my rocker, as I assume you're thinking." She wrung her hands once more and Nick saw the inner turmoil in her eyes. "You've passed one test. You're still here. You must need money badly if you'd consider a job from something so trivial as a note in a restaurant."

The barb stung, but what could Nick say. He was desperate for cash. One job wasn't enough for what he needed to do.

She sat down again, her posture very regal, her hands tightening against the armrest. Slipping on her glasses she looked at the application again.

"I see you still live with your mother."

"I take care of my mother and family."

"Oh, then you're..." she swallowed, "...married?"

"No wife. Just a mother, a sister and a younger brother to look after. My two older brothers married and moved off."

"You're Italian?"

"That's right."

"You're Catholic?"

"Also right." His voice started to harden.

"That could be a drawback."

Nick nodded and this time he stared directly at her until she met his gaze. "I'm from an old Italian family, and believe me, babies aren't born into this world that way. Not where I come from."

A blush crept across her cheeks. "Of course. I understand."

Did she? He doubted that.

"I'm Irish Catholic," she continued. "I realize what I'm asking of you, Nick. The only consolation might be the money. So tell me, why do you need it so badly?"

"We rent on 47th street." He cleared his throat. "In Clinton, better known to most as 'Hell's Kitchen.' My mama, sister and younger brother, live there too, I take care of them. I own a garage on 44th."

"Oh, you live in Midtown West?"

"No, ma'am. Hell's Kitchen. It'll always be Hell's Kitchen no matter how many skyscrapers they decide to put up. No matter how many tenement buildings they tear down."

"I see. You are a product of the zoning wars?"

"That's it. I want my family outta there. It ain't the same anymore. Price wars on rent, porn shops offering top dollar for land. We got rid of some of the problems and earned a few more in the process. I'm sure you're aware. Reconstruction sometimes causes people to rebel, in one way or another. Not everyone can adjust to change, nor afford them. No, I want to buy Mama a house in Queens, in a quiet little neighborhood. I want to give them a better life."

"That's understandable. But why move, if reconstruction is improving the area, why not just move into a newer apartment building?"

"Nah, If I'm going to pay those prices, at least I want something worth it in the long run. A real house--a home. And I'm willing to work two jobs to get it. Three if necessary. It's something I been promising Mama for years. A place of her own. Where she can grow flowers, and the kids can walk to school without fear."

"I see. Tell me about this garage of yours?"

"It's just a hole in the wall. I tinker with older cars, ya know, the classics. It's not a business anymore, just a hangout. A place for me to go. It don't bring in much, not in that neighborhood."



"Doesn't."

"Huh?"

"I said it doesn't bring in much." She paused, grimacing slightly. "Sorry, bad habit I have of correcting people."

He didn't need this. No one needed to remind him of his lack of education, or that he was Italian, or Catholic. He stood and walked slowly to the door. "Look, I'd like to help, but I'm not the right guy."

"Nick, wait! Won't you reconsider? I happen to think you might be the right guy."

He turned to look at her again. "How do you figure?"

"A man who supports and cares for his family is exactly the kind of person I'm looking for. A good man. You're dependable even though your job history doesn't reflect it. I detect a strong sense of character in you. I like that. It's rather hard to find these days. I like--you. Now, tell me what happened to your father. Why isn't he supporting your family?"

Startled by her shift in subject, Nick hesitated. "I don't wanna waste your time."

"I have to ask, Nick."

Why was he still here, putting up with her nosey questions?

"Please tell me."

"My dad left us. Enough said. A lot of dads walk out. He drank too much, didn't work enough."

"Drugs?"

"Nah, gambling and drinking and other women, mostly."

"I see." Her expression softened again and her voice lowered. "How painful for you. Were you very young?"

Her compassion confused him. He didn't need pity. "No, look, I was grown, okay? He done good to leave, I might have killed him if he'd hung around much longer. Tony was still little. I was twenty-one, trying to decide whether to go to trade school or the army."

"And you went to work instead, and supported your family." She cleared her throat. Pretty soon she'd be pinning medals on his chest and telling him what a hero he was. She had blinders on.

He didn't want pity or concern, and yet the very fact that she sympathized forced him to rethink his opinion of her--again. This stone woman, a woman who would ask for sperm so casually, apparently cared about people and their troubles. A woman from

so different a world, who could understand. So what? That didn't mean he had to get her pregnant, did it?

"Look, Nick, I'm taking the time to find the right man, and I can make it worth your time."

"You'd pay me to go through with these tests?"

"Naturally. At least you won't lose any money being off work, and it might be worth the effort for both of us. As I said, this is strictly business. Contracts will have to be drawn. The money would be sufficient to take care of all your family's needs. I'd see to that."

"What if we don't get along?"

"That's irrelevant. This isn't personal. Please understand that."

He took a step toward her, leaning toward her. "You want to have my baby and that's not personal? You like a person who recognizes responsibilities, but you don't want me to hang around? That doesn't jive."

"Not in the way you're thinking at least. I'd want to get to know you for the child's sake, naturally. She'll want to know what her daddy was really like."

The woman was already determining sex. She'd really preplanned this, maybe down to the last detail. But even she wasn't God.

Daddy. He liked that sound. It warmed him. And a little girl, nice. But it was crazy and he wasn't about to do it.

"What about you?"

"Me?"

"Yeah. What qualifies you to be a mother? And who's gonna take care of you while you're pregnant?"

She chuckled, a heady little laugh.

"I'm quite capable of taking care of myself. My credentials are all over the walls of this office, in case you haven't noticed." She gestured to the walls behind her.

"Nah, I don't care about your credentials." He glanced to the walls and shook his head. "I wanna know who you are. What's behind all this? What qualifies you to be my kid's one and only parent? Don't you have any feelings for the kid? Don't you think the kid would miss a father? Don't you think you're being a bit selfish?"

"Of course I do. But I'd compensate. I've considered her feelings in the matter. But when a person is truly loved, how can they miss anything? And she would be loved. I'd give her so much love and attention, she wouldn't think about it."

"Look, being Chairman of the Board don't make you 'Mother of the Year.'"

Her cheeks flamed, her eyes blazed angrily. "I happen to be good at anything I set my mind to. I'll be a good mother! I'll love my child beyond limits. You can't imagine how much I've got stored inside to give."

It was as though he had turned on a switch, and boy did he like the switch. Now she looked real, sounded real, not just some Chairman of the Board talking out the side of her mouth. Not some plastic person sitting there, giving him a bunch of crap about test tube babies. Until this moment, the child seemed hypothetical. Now it was a female child, asking about its father. If that wasn't personal, what was?

The woman was fire and ice rolled into one.

"Look, lady, I came here for a job. You know, a laborer, a warehouse foreman, something I could understand. But this--this ain't a job. It ain't even decent."

"Isn't."

He nodded, looking straight at her, past the glasses to the soul. He gritted his teeth, and clenched his hands. "Yeah, see what I mean? That should tell you somethin'. You probably graduated from Yale or Harvard. I'm from the other side of the tracks, and we stick to our own. Maybe that's what you should do. Most of my acquaintances are hoods, big ones and little ones."

She stiffened. "That's hardly relevant."

"Maybe, but I barely got a high school education. That's relevant. I had to finish in summer school--two years. With a part time job in the process. You want a refined gentleman to father your child. I can understand and even respect that. Besides, I'm not the kind of guy who goes around making babies. I know what protection is all about. What's the matter with gettin' pregnant the normal way? You gotta a disease or somethin'?"

She grabbed the rattle so hard her knuckles turned white, but she answered calmly. "Good question, at least you're well informed."

"You can't live in Hell's Kitchen without being informed."

She exhaled as though she'd been holding her breath too long. "All right. Look, you're attractive, in good shape, and you're also a very decent man. At least from what I've seen and heard today. What's not to like about you, Leonetti? You appear to be a man who finishes what he starts, since you took the trouble to go to summer school, and you do seem to find other jobs when you lose one. That's admirable. Things don't get you down easily. Our language barrier isn't a problem. But no, I don't have a disease, and would be happy to submit to any tests you want, to prove it. I'll also have a history of myself done, so that we can start on an equal basis."

"Why don't you just marry some nice guy, and have yourself some babies?"

"I've already told you--" Frustration fired from her eyes.

"Yeah, I know. You don't want a husband, because you obviously don't trust men. So why trust me? In case you hadn't noticed ...I'm a man."

She tossed the rattle on the desk, wiped at her eyes, and met his questioning gaze. "Of course I've noticed. And yet ... I do trust you, Nick. Don't ask me why. But I do. And I can make it worth your while."

Nick shook his head adamantly, irritated by her words. He should be flattered, but this was so wrong. "Everything comes down to money to you, doesn't it? There really ain't a lot of difference in you and most of the hoods I know. Pushers, loan sharks, and you." He knew it wasn't fair to size someone up so quickly, but she was doing it to him.

She slid the glasses back on once more. "I'm trying to be up front with you. Dear God, you don't know how much I admire your morals and conscience."

"Look." He stood and walked up to her. He purposely leaned closer. "When I make a baby, it's going to be with a woman I'm in love with."

Her eyes widened, her breath became labored. He liked rattling her cool facade.

"And I don't consider that misplaced. I got standards I live by, too. That baby is going to have me hooked around her finger. She's gonna know somebody loves her." He leaned closer and got a faint whiff of expensive perfume. He hadn't expected her to smell sweet. He'd expected her to smell like starch. "If I were to consider something this crazy, I'd want to date you. Be with you. I'd want to know everything about you. Not just some application on a desk. You're talking about creating a life, real life, and being responsible for that life. My kid will have a father. My father might have been rotten, but I'm not. Not by a long shot. I'm poor, but I have my principles. Sorry lady, no dice. I want a real job."

He turned to leave.

"Dammit, this is a job!" she cried, her voice breaking. "You think I don't take this seriously? You're wrong. Dead wrong. I want a baby, Mr. Leonetti. Is that so bad? You just don't understand. Marriage in my circles isn't what it's cracked up to be. It's more like a prison than a relationship."

"Then maybe you should change circles." Nick gave her one last look before he walked out the door.

## Chapter Three

The aroma of Mama's spaghetti simmering on the stove sent Nick careening into the kitchen, sniffing with a delighted smile. "Smells great, Mama. How's your back today?"

"It's better, Nicky, much better. Are you hungry?"

The small round woman brushed a wayward strand of graying brown hair away from her pumpkin shaped face, and washed her hands in the deep-welled sink. She glanced at her son over her shoulder.

Nick eyed his mother. She had aged much too quickly in the last ten years since their father had left. He wished he could turn back the clock for her. Now, if he could convince her to quit worrying.

"Always hungry. Hey, I got another job today, Mama."

"A job! Wonderful Nicky. Does it pay good?"

He shook his head, "Not as much as I wanted. But we'll manage, and it won't interfere with the time at the garage on the weekends."

"Ah yes, your garage." Mama sighed heavily. "The job where everyone takes advantage of Nicholas Leonetti. Nicky, Nicky, you work too hard and have too little time for yourself. You should be married by now. I want grandchildren."

Nick itched to tell her about the job he could have had, but she would never believe such a thing. He wasn't sure he believed it. "Jo-Jo is good for the money."

Wiping the sweat from her brow, she looked at him fondly. "He won't pay. He'll give you another hard luck story, and you'll believe it, or pretend you do. But no matter."

"We'll get out of here. I got my eye on a place in Queens. I'll get the money, Mama."

"Such a dreamer, Nicky. Just like your father."

Nick started to protest the parallel, but she rattled on.

"I've lived here all my life. Seen many changes. Some good, some bad. We do what we gotta do. We can always go live with Cousin Louis, if things don't work out here."

"Things aren't going to work out here, Mama. The building is practically sold. We gotta move." He picked up a toothpick and rolled it into the corner of his mouth.

Tina dashed through the kitchen, distracting everyone in her path. Her dark hair swished gently over rosy cheeks. Her books clutched in her hands, she headed straight for the kitchen door.

"Don't hold supper for me. I'm going to Gloria's."

"Come on, I'll walk you over, princess."

"Oh, please, just once, can't I go by myself? It's only across the street, Mama. It's Gloria's, for Pete's sake. This family, honestly."

"We've had this discussion before. Now, let's go."

"Mama?"

"Walk her over, Nicky," Mama said chuckling softly, not giving either of them a second glance as she stirred her sauce. "Nicky knows what he's doing, Tina."

"Good grief, why couldn't I have been a boy?" Tina pouted and ran out of the door trying to escape her brother.

Nick grabbed her round the neck, pulling her to a slower pace. "Look, sometimes, I wish you'd been born a boy too. It would be easier for both of us."

"I told you Nicky, the car only stopped once, and asked to take my picture. They were going to pay me, Nicky."

"And you're old enough to know what they were paying you for. I catch you messing with those skin pushers again, I'll ..."

"I'd never do it. If I'd known you'd act this way, I wouldn't have told you about it in the first place. I'll probably never be able to date because of you."

"Who's to say you can't date? But you know the rules as well as anyone. First you gotta bring him home."

"Yeah, to be inspected."

"A hazard of growing up. You think Mama doesn't inspect whoever I bring home? Don't kid yourself."

Tina smiled, her anger fading.

They walked down the long row of stairs, across the dimly lit street, and up into the far building on the corner. Another tenement building, just as overcrowded as their own, just as run down. Before long, these old building would only be a memory.

"Maybe so, but you haven't bothered bringing anyone home in a long time."

Nick cast Tina a warning look, then waited until she was safely inside Gloria's apartment. He also made sure Gloria's mother was at home, and that the stairs were clear of any bystanders before he took off. It was a precaution.

He sympathized with Tina's impatience, but he knew best. Like his older brothers, Jenö and Lon had, Nick carried the burden of responsibility for his family with pride.

He figured when he got the garage paid for, moved them into a better neighborhood, he could relax and start thinking of a family of his own. If that ever happened.

"Hey, Leonetti!" A raspy voice from the side of the apartment complex brought Nick out of his thoughts. "Babysittin' that sister of yours again?"

"That's right. Gotta a problem with it, Calvin?"

The big man with long whiskers and dirty black hair shrugged, hiding the fact that the name 'Calvin' irritated him. "No problem. But it looks to me like she's big enough to take care of herself. A real looker, too."

The hair on the back of Nick's neck rose. He rolled his shoulders, then shot his intruder a quick, decisive glance. "That's exactly why I'm walkin' her, Davinchy."

"Gotta let go of the strings sometime." Davinchy snorted, a gold tooth protruding from the side of his mouth.

Nick felt the toothpick break in his mouth as he bit back a retort. It did no good wasting his breath with thugs like this one. But Calvin Davinchy was harmless--one of the few--all mouth.

"Not as long as mean little hoods like you are around, Calvin." Nick switched his toothpick to the other side of his mouth and nodded at him. Calvin Davinchy was twice Nick's size, but not in Nick's league.

You'll make plenty of money, Kelsey had promised.

Somehow, he had to get that dame off his mind. Sure he had his troubles, but they were his troubles, and in time he'd solve them. Kelsey O'Sullivan was a nut; he had to remember that.

Wrestling with his priorities, Nick didn't sleep well that night. Late for work the next morning, he grimaced as he drove the kids to school, and dodged the traffic jam. Not that it was his intention to be late. It never was. Naturally, his explanation didn't keep his six-foot-nine boss from glaring at him, a half-eaten cigar hanging from one side of his bagel-shaped mouth as he watched Nick clock in a half hour late.

"Sorry I'm late, boss," Nick managed, awaiting instructions with the other men. "I had to take the kids to school and there was this traffic jam ..."

"Thought you weren't married," the big man said, drooling his tobacco.

"Nah. It's my kid sister and brother."

"So, can't they walk?"

Nick ignored the jabs like he always did. He always tried explaining about his family. Family first. No one understood, or cared. Why should this boss be different?

\* \* \*

Four hours later, Kelsey O'Sullivan stood watching Nick as he sat on a concrete slab in the shade, talking garbage to one of his coworkers, munching on a delicious smelling sandwich. Kelsey's mouth watered; she'd forgotten to eat this morning in all the excitement to catch up with him. Seeing him again still did things to her heart rate. How could such a drop dead gorgeous guy like him stay single?

It wasn't just the sight of all that muscle and brawn, nor the sexy twinkle in those secretive black eyes. Maybe it was his magnificently white smile against perfect olive skin? Or the way his lean hips hugged a pair of jeans, or the way his arms bulged from his t-shirt, sending her imagination spiraling in avenues she never dared before. Did he have hair on his chest or was he a solid golden torso? Would his long legs curl about her hips perfectly, protectively? Slow down, she ordered her wayward heart. He wasn't perfect, his nose crooked at the bridge, as though it might have been broken once, and he had a couple of scars by his left ear. His mouth was full and firm, and begged to be stared at when he grinned that sexy grin.

He looked up and frowned instantly. So much for fond greetings, Kelsey surmised, sniffing his sandwich, and trying not to lick her lips. God, she was hungry.

"Mr. Leonetti, you are the devil himself to find."

"Didn't know anyone was lookin' for me." He smirked, until one of the men began whistling. Cat calls.

"Hey, Nick? Who's the dame?"

"I'm Kelsey O'Sullivan, good morning." She extended her hand to the man closest to her and shook it firmly.

"That's some piece ya got there, Nick."

"That your old lady, Nick?" another called.

Kelsey kept her smile in place, refusing to be intimidated.

"Cut the crap, she's a lady." Nick stood up and pulled her by the upper arm, out of earshot. The warmth from his touch spread through her quickly, surprising her, again. His handshake in the office had been firm, and warm, not hot and sweaty. She was fighting this underlying attraction she had for the man all along and every time he touched her she went to putty. She'd had so many dealings with men through her business she hadn't expected direct contact to affect her. But Nick's touch electrified, and momentarily confused her.

"What do you think you are doing here? How on earth did you find me?"

"Well, which answer do you want first?" she huffed, straightening her slacks. "I came to talk some sense into you."



"Here? Are you crazy? How did you find me? I've been in six different places this morning. And we don't have visiting hours. You might be a corporate executive, but here, you're just another dame. This ain't no place for you."

"Isn't."

He frowned and shook his head. "Go home."

"Now wait a minute," she protested vehemently, following him back to the concrete slab. Throwing her purse down beside him, she dusted the spot next to him with the flat of her hand and sat. "I tried calling first. The line was constantly busy. When I finally got your mother, she couldn't tell me exactly where you were. She said you worked for the city sewer, and I spent some time tracking you here, after I called the city. I've been running all morning to keep up with you. I'm hot, tired, and sweaty, and if you think traveling on foot in these shoes is easy, try it sometime."

A smile escaped his stern face. "For a girl who doesn't like shoes, I'm surprised you never heard of sneakers?"

She rolled her eyes.

"You tracked me all this way?"

"Yes, of course."

"To the city sewer? Nobody does something that stupid."

"Stupid? Are you calling me stupid?"

"If the shoe fits ..." He glanced at her feet, and shot her a lazy smile. "Look, it's lunchtime, Ms. O'Sullivan, do you mind? I only have thirty minutes."

"Thirty minutes?" she gasped loudly, making heads turn her direction. "That's absurd. You can't properly chew your food in that length of time."

"Chew my food?"

"Yes, of course. You should chew your food at least forty times before you swallow." When he crooked his head at her she continued, "It helps in digesting."

"Really? Do you?"

"Naturally." She withdrew a Kleenex from her purse to wipe the sweat from her brow. As she looked down at her hand by his side, she noticed a big ugly black bug crawling out of a crack in the cement, and she bolted upright. But when she tried to lift her foot to move, she found herself trapped by a big wad of chewing gum. "Dammit!"

Grinning, Nick flicked the bug away. He seemed to enjoy her losing her cool. He watched in fascination as she squirmed, trying to free her foot, but he didn't offer assistance.

Without forethought, she leaned a hand against his big strong shoulder, as she tried removing the gum with a Kleenex. It only made matters worse, and her more aware of him. He smelled like sweat and grime and all man. A combination she found heady. His flesh was hard and hot to the touch. Perspiration formed between her hand and his shoulder. Her mind skittered about recklessly wondering what the rest of him might feel like, as she lamely attempted to free her shoe.

Nick should be against the law; her mind wandered with her pulse rate pounding in her ears. Were all Italians so sexy?

Great! She groaned as she watched the gum yo-yo. She tried to pry it with a pencil from her purse. It merely stuck, then broke. Nothing would remove her heel from the offending goop. Nick whipped out his pocketknife, a big O'Henry, and loosened the gum from her shoe. Grabbing her chest, she gaped at the large knife.

"Thanks, I think. Do you always carry a weapon?"

"Hey, Nick, need some help?" one man called out.

"You're scarin' the sweet little thing," another said with a chuckle.

Nick ignored them, his gaze lingering on Kelsey.

Kelsey's heart felt as though it might explode it was beating so fast. He shouldn't stare at her like that. Those dark eyes probing her. His big wide smile contrasted with the perfectly teaked skin, taking her breath away as she stared back.

"I always carry my knife. But I wouldn't call this a weapon, merely a token of my grandfather's love. Now, go back to your tower, Ms. O'Sullivan. Where you belong."

For the second time Nick was calling her a snob and she didn't like it. Her mouth firmed, her frown widened and she glared at him. "You know you have a very nasty habit of putting people in their places, don't you? And they say the rich are snobs. Perhaps you should take a good long look at yourself."

He grinned. She grimaced.

"Look, all I want to do is talk. Give me a chance."

She glanced at his half eaten sandwich with open desire.

"Want some?" he offered.

She grabbed the sandwich, breaking it in half and handing the other half back to him. He watched her as though he couldn't believe she would take the sandwich.

Then he did the unthinkable--he ignored her. Not used to being ignored she bristled. Well, two could play at that game. Finishing the sandwich, she crossed her arms and waited. Why couldn't he see that she wanted to help him achieve his goal while attaining her own? They could have a beautiful child together. It wasn't a fantasy, it was fact. What was wrong with that?

"So, why are you following me? I've told you, I'm not interested. That should be plain enough. You had a whole room full of applicants. So, what gives, why me?"

She bit her lower lip. "I can't answer that." Honesty seemed best at the moment. She paused, trying to find the words. "Yes, I can. I sympathize with you and your neighbors over the zoning law. It's unfair, in some ways. Progress often is. Look, Nick, I trust you. I don't trust easily. You've been honest with me, so far. I like you. I like your attitude."

It was the truth. Still there was more to it than that and she knew it. Smart enough to know they came from different worlds, and a relationship would never work, she couldn't just blurt out this unbelievable attraction she had for him.

"Yeah, and you like giving to charity?" He shot her a thunderous look. "No thanks, lady. I'm not a charity."

"You're deliberately putting words in my mouth. I never suggested you were. If you weren't so pigheaded you might realize you've got exactly the qualities I want in the father of my baby."

"Just go to the damn sperm bank? Can't they pick the best sperm or something? A genius or something? I've got problems of my own. I don't need any more."

Now, the men were looking from her to him and back.

Kelsey pulled her gaze from Nick to their audience. She smiled, determined to make them all realize she wasn't shaken.

"But then I'd never know anything about the father of my baby. Why do you think I'm taking such pains with this in the first place? Do you think I'm approaching this frivolously? I've got to know something about him. Like him. He's got to be a person I respect. And I respect you, Nick. Don't you see? He has to be special in some way."

"And you think I'm--special?" Nick's head jerked up, a hint of a smile played at his lips again. "You know nothing about me. Why a poor schnook like me? Why not a rich guy with a pedigree? Besides, you gotta admit an Irish, Italian mix would be murder."

Exasperated, she felt like throttling him. "Yes, I do think you're a special kind of person. Pedigrees are not what I'm looking for. It's a quality, a spirit, a certain kind of character. And you're right. I don't know you. But I know what I like. I can help you. What you want is attainable. Taking care of your family is a noble gesture, and I'd like to be a part of it. That zoning law is putting families on the street. Decent families who have nowhere to go. Innocent children without a home. Won't you listen, for your family's sake?"

The money she kept promising should make him come around. Somehow, she had to convince him it was his one and only chance. Ten minutes passed and she was still talking. He was definitely a hard sell.

"We can help each other Nick," she persisted.

He finished his sandwich, and stood up, and she did the same. He towered over her by several inches, although she wore heels. She lifted her chin to meet his gaze evenly. Something smoldered in those dark Italian eyes, fusing her to the spot. She could almost feel the heat between them.

"Beat it, okay? I can't say it any plainer. I do need money. You've got me on that one. But I won't sell my kid down the river to do it."

"There's a call for you, Leonetti. I thought I told you no personal calls." Hatch bit down on his cigar once more and drooled onto his less than white shirt.

Nick stomped into the small office, grabbed the receiver off the wall phone, and gave a quick demeaning glance over his shoulder at Kelsey. She hadn't budged, and the men were crowding around her. She refused to let it rumple her. She wasn't leaving.

Minutes later he stormed out of the office, and approached his boss.

"Look Hatch, I've gotta go."

"Go? Hell, you just here, Leonetti. What do you think this is, a bridge party? Get your butt to work or you're fired!" Hatch yelled taking one last chew on the cigar.

"You don't understand, and I don't have time to explain. It's my little brother, Tony. He got in some kind of trouble at school. I've gotta go."

"Oh, Nick, I'm so sor--" Kelsey began only to be cut off by the big man.

"Too bad."

"What kind of boss are you?" Kelsey demanded.

Nick shot her an incredulous glance. Then he stormed up the embankment. Kelsey stood rooted for a second, amazed by Nick's decisive choice of his family over his job. Never had she seen a man do such a thing. A man of his word, he did put his family first. God, she liked him even more now, if that were possible.

She took off after him. "Nick, wait, you're going too fast. I can't keep up."

Nick shot her a glance over his shoulder.

"Wait, please wait. My car's just up the hill. I'll drive you."

"Great," he muttered. "Get in it, and go home."

He didn't have to be so bossy. She was doing her best to be nice, offering assistance even. Why couldn't he just accept help?

Kelsey had no reason to care about Nick's little brother, but the look in Nick's eyes when he stormed out of the office told her this could be serious. She had to go with him, if for no other reason than to reassure herself that all was well.

She shouldn't care, but she did. It made no sense.

"I insist," she rasped, catching up to him at last. "Besides, it's much faster."

He turned to stare at her, and their eyes met. Kelsey was drowning in those dark orbs that stared like a savage beast at his prey. A new tension sprang between them like a live current. His frown began to fade. Of all times for a man to attract her. He did. Right here in the basement of the city sewer department. The thought scared her witless. Men had always been such a mystery to her. Unsure of herself. All her life she'd only managed to screw-up where men were concerned. Yet, Nick had some kind of draw on her, making her bolder, more daring. He pulled at her heartstrings.

He stopped abruptly, stared at her through her thick set of glasses.

"You just don't give up, do you?" his voice went husky. "Don't you ever take those damned glasses off?"

"Occasionally." The breath froze in her chest, her heart pounded like a drum. For a moment time seemed to stop. "And no. It's not in my nature to give up." She paused, trying not to drown in those big brown eyes. "Besides, I'd like to help, if I can."

Nick moved away from her. But her hand touched his and he took it, pulling her up with him.

Within minutes, they were strapped into a fire-red Lamborghini. "She's a beaut." He ran his hand along the soft leather interior.

"You like her?"

"What's not to like? This is the closest I've been to one of these babies, or ever will be. It's a privilege to sit here. Must have set you back a small fortune."

"Not really, it was a birthday present." She realized as soon as she said it how hollow it sounded. Most of her friends drove equally nice cars. She had never thought anything of it. He probably already had his mind made up that she was just some little airhead princess.

Nick's expression hardened.

"It's just a car, Nick."

"Hardly just a car!"

They rode in silence until Nick suddenly shouted, "Pull up there. Thanks."

As they pulled to the curb by his apartment building, he jumped out. He didn't say goodbye. He didn't even look back.

\* \* \*

Nick flew up the stairs, taking them two at a time, his worry only tempered by the woman behind him. Kelsey followed, panting all the way. He heard her gasp, heard her curse under her breath, and turned at the top of the stairs to see what her problem could be.

She had stopped, and bent over to remove her shoes and now carried them in one hand. He didn't have time to look at feet! But dammit he was looking.

Whirling back, he threw open the door and stalked in. He slowed, calming himself, and cast a curious glance over his shoulder at Kelsey who had momentarily slowed down too. He watched her take in the surroundings. A frown puckered her forehead. His control snapped, grabbing her up short, he held her a moment. They seemed to stop breathing.

He hadn't expected or wanted to desire her in the middle of a family crisis. Hell, he hadn't expected to want her period. Silently scolding himself he declared vehemently, "Look, you don't belong here. You're really out of place. Don't expect much. It's no mansion, but it's clean. Nothing here bites either, okay?"

"I never--" She cleared her throat and backed up.

It wasn't until she retreated, that he realized how badly he must smell, but she was doing a great job of not noticing. A great job of not noticing a lot of things. After all, she was caviar, he was hotdogs. But damn, caviar sure smelled good!

Whipping about he stomped through the apartment, like a storm erupting into a tornado. His mind should be on Tony. But the truth was he had lost it back on the stairwell. What was wrong with him, bringing a woman like her here?

"Mama, where are you? What's going on? Where's Tony?"

Mama came running out of the bedroom, her hands raised in frustration. Sweat peppered her brow, her dark eyes full of worry.

"He's in here, Nicky. How many times have we told him not to fight?" Her voice shook.

Nick stormed into the small bedroom. Just the look in his mother's eyes convinced him he was right to come home. He hated to see that look. But she worried endlessly.

"Tony, what the he--" Nick saw Tony laying on the bed, but no blood like he expected. There were no huge lumps on Tony's face or body, only one obnoxious black eye, staring back at Nick. Nick let out his breath in one long rush.

Slowly, Nick sank to his knees, covering his face with his hands. "When's she gonna learn?" He moved his head back and forth. He shook for a moment. Lord, when would Mama stop pulling him off jobs for something so trivial as a black eye? The way Mama had described it, Tony had been beaten.

Nick fought his temper, then looked up at his brother and smiled crookedly. Running a hand through Tony's thick black hair, he asked, "First shiner, huh, Tony?"

"Pretty cool, huh?" Tony seemed amused by all the fuss.

"Yeah, really cool." Nick sighed aloud getting to his feet. His shoulders hunched tensely and his face felt frozen into a permanent frown. He quickly decided it would do no good to yell at Mama. It would only hurt her.

Going to the kitchen, he passed Kelsey again and realized how quickly he had squashed the strange sense of desire within him. But the look of concern on her face lit another flame inside him, and he had to turn away to keep from grabbing her to him. Something about this woman made him feel things he hadn't felt in years. Her compassion threw him, confused, needled him. He hadn't expected her to care one way or another. Why should she? But one look into those unfathomable blue eyes and he knew she did care. She was almost as bad as Mama.

He rinsed a cloth in cool water and took it to Tony. "Here kid, try this."

Mama stood by the doorway, her hand on her chest, her eyes filled with worry. "I wasn't going to call you, Nicky."

Nick's eyes rolled before he turned around, but he said nothing.

"I promise, I wasn't. But his teacher said he'd been fighting at school. They suspended him and the others for three days. He has to go to the counselor's office before he can return."

Nick glanced at his brother's guilty face. "That true? You were fighting?"

Tony hung his head, shame erasing his smile. "Yeah, I guess so. I'm sorry, Nick. I know what you said, but you don't know how they talk about us. Some kid popped off about you takin' Tina everywhere and I lit into him."

Nick's mouth firmed and he nodded. "Look, Tony, how often have I told you, you can't change what people think? Someone's always gonna laugh at you, me, or Tina, or someone else for that matter. Is it so important what they think? You have to learn to ignore it. Rise above it. Deal with it now. It's just talk, kid. Crazy talk. I told you, they're stupid. You are a Leonetti and don't you ever forget it. Be proud of what you are, of who you are."

Tony nodded. "I know, Nick. I know. But it's hard. The kids are always teasing me. Calling me a baby. Sometimes it just gets to me. Everybody knows I don't do gangs or dope, they think I'm a complete nerd. Sometimes it just gets to me and I have to do something."

Nick smiled.

"Sure it does. And if you let it, it always will, kid. I understand, I was young once, too. But if you don't deal with it now, you never will, Tony. I'm doing what's safe for you and Tina, whether you like it or not. Someday you'll understand it." Nick reached his hand to Tony's head and ruffled his hair, this time with more patience. "Growin' up is always hard. Not much in life is easy, kid. Maybe this time you learned your lesson."

Fightin' ain't the answer. I've told you that before. Now, maybe you'll believe me. You only fight when you have to, Tony. Remember what I've taught you. You can handle yourself."

Tony placed the cool cloth to his eye, then jerked it away quickly, and looked past Nick's shoulder. "Who's she?"

Nick glanced at Kelsey and got a quick glimpse of a shyness he hadn't expected. He swallowed. It had seemed natural for her to come along, almost as if she belonged. But who was he kidding? Goody-Two-Shoes would never belong in Hell's Kitchen.

"Oh." He glanced around to see his mother staring at Kelsey as well. "I'm sorry. This is Kelsey O'Sullivan. She gave me a lift home."

Mama went to Kelsey, taking her small hand in hers and smiling. "How do you do? I'm sorry you had to see us at our worst. This doesn't happen all the time. Kelsey, that's a pretty name, Irish isn't it? She's lovely, Nicky, and Irish women make good wives. Good Catholic wives. What beautiful children you could make. But I'm sorry if my saying it embarrasses you. I simply speak my mind, without thinking."

Nick wiped his face with one hand, and stood, looking sheepishly at both women. "Kelsey, my mother, Rosa, and my brother, Tony."

Kelsey smiled warmly. "Pleased to meet you."

Mama pulled her into the other room. "Please, come into the living room and sit down, won't you? Can I offer you some tea?"

"No thank you, Mrs. Leonetti. Really. I just came along with Nick when I heard there was trouble."

"She don't want no tea, Mama," Nick gritted.

"Doesn't." Kelsey corrected, then reddened.

All heads turned to her at once. "What?"

"I'm sorry, and please don't bother. Could you just walk me to my car, Nick?"

"Why of course he can," Mama insisted. "Can't you, Nicky? Please come again."

"Yes, thank you, if I'm welcome," Kelsey managed to get out before Nick nudged her through the front door.

"Of course you're welcome," Mama said frowning at her son.

"I'll just see her to her car."

"Man, is that her car?" Tony's voice squeaked from the window.

"That's it. We better get you down before someone decides to strip it clean."



Without forethought Nick took Kelsey by the arm and guided her toward the narrow stairway. It was a mistake! The contact brought immediate awareness. The shock of her ran through him like a buzz saw. He wasn't used to women affecting him like this. Not in a long time, at least.

The stairs creaked like old wood rotten from a bad storm. The building smelled musty. Nick mused, while she smelled like a delicate flower. He watched as she held close to the railing, her soft white hands clutching it.

"Your mother and Tony are wonderful, Nick." She glanced back at him and caught him staring. He riveted his gaze to the doorway ahead.

God, how was he going to resist her now? Had she turned her pert little nose to the air and had nothing nice to say, he might have a chance in hell of not liking Kelsey O'Sullivan. The fastest way to Nick's heart was through his family. Most women found his mother too smothering, but not Goody-Two-Shoes.

Mrs. Giavanni stuck her head out her front door and spotted Nick, shaking her head and frowning. "Is Tony all right? I saw your mama bringing him home."

"He's fine, Mrs. Giavanni. Thanks for askin'."

Mrs. Giavanni nodded, "Well you give him what for."

She turned and shut the door quickly as she glanced curiously at Kelsey.

Kelsey looked at Nick with big, wide eyes when the old woman went inside and closed her door. "Her face, it's all black and blue. What happened?"

"Yeah, her old man beats her."

"That's disgusting. Why does she put up with it? Why doesn't she leave him?"

Nick glared at her as though she had grown two heads. "Here, you marry, you stay married, for better or worse, and usually, it's worse."

"Is that why you've never married?"

"Maybe." His eyes met hers momentarily until good sense prevailed. God, Kelsey O'Sullivan was growing on him. And if he didn't get rid of her fast he might do something really stupid.

"You have a nice family, Nick."

Great. That's all he needed, her liking them. Still, the fact that she did, impressed him.

He liked her. Dammit! He didn't want to like her. Didn't want to want her, either. Despite everything, he liked just being near her. She was barefoot and charming.

"Look." He halted beside her as they reached the bottom of the stairs. He took her shoes from her hands and gently put them on her feet, then straightened to meet her gaze. "I'm sorry for all the inconvenience, Ms. O'Sullivan. You really shouldn't have put yourself to all this trouble. My answer is still no."

"No problem."

"I think you should stick to your neck of the woods, though, from now on. Especially in that car. Thieves could strip it in five minutes."

"So why haven't they?" She glanced around, noticing a crowd of onlookers.

Nick smiled.

"Because of you?"

He nodded.

"My, what clout! You must be a pretty big man here. And you can certainly put me in my place, can't you?"

"Me?"

"You. But I'm not accustomed to taking no for an answer. I can see where that clout might be hard to give up. But for your family's sake, I hope you reconsider. I know the man who owns most of this property, and he isn't going to sit still. You've got to get out of here, Nick."

He couldn't stop the smile. She was full of determination. Kelsey's eyes lit as she looked at him. She had pretty eyes and a pretty smile. So why did she hide behind those glasses? And what else was she hiding under all those rich clothes of hers? Would she fit him like a glove, like he fantasized she would? God, he had to quit thinking in those directions.

"Okay, I'll leave you alone, Nick. I promise I won't chase you anymore. I'll do my best not to call your mother again. Although I do like her. I think we could become very good friends. This might be your last chance. It's an obtainable goal. I can help. I can offer you the chance, a real chance to get away from here, if that's what you really want."

"So, you're my last chance?"

"Maybe I'm being presumptuous." She shrugged indifferently.

"Nah, you're probably right." He sighed.

"Listen, I admire principles in anyone. That's probably what attracts me to you. But there's a time to be smart. You don't have to like me, just work for me. This is only a job, Nick. At least consider it. You have to see it as a job or it would never work in the first place. I'm not after a relationship. Call me if you change your mind. Please."

She put her hand on top of his, and looked him in the eye.

"I like you, Kelsey. But like I said, you got the wrong guy."

She handed him a number scribbled on the back of a credit card receipt. Their hands touched again, and he felt as though he'd been struck by lightning. She started the car and without looking back she sped away.

Nick clutched the paper in his hand, then held it up to his nose and inhaled the same sweet perfume. God, she smelled sweet, sounded sexy, and her offer was tempting. But could hotdogs and caviar ever mix?

## Chapter Four

Kelsey stared out the window of her office, not really seeing anything. The same sadness that ripped her world apart months ago replayed in her mind. A never ending sadness. She closed her eyes, willing the mental image of the small, unadorned casket to go away. The short, private service she had attended for her baby seemed only yesterday. The pain today was the same as then.

"Are you all right?" Jackson, her private secretary, entered through the connecting doors of his own office.

She straightened and got to her feet. "Y-yes, I'm fine, Jackson."

"Are you sure you want to pursue this?" He held the Leonetti file in his hands, concern furrowing his brow.

"Yes, Jackson. I just had a melancholy moment, that's all."

She stood and managed a weak smile. "I guess seeing Ralph brought back memories. How I thought I could have loved the man is still beyond me. He hasn't changed a bit. I wonder if anyone has ever broken through that hard exterior to his heart?"

"Ralph was a hard life lesson. I only hope you're not letting yourself in for more hurt with this Leonetti character." Jackson made no effort to mask his concern for Kelsey.

She thought about Nick's soft brown eyes-honest eyes--and sexy. Lord, Nick had eyes a woman could get lost in. Nothing like Ralph's cold gray eyes.

"Oh, Jackson, Nick's nothing like Ralph. Besides, this isn't going to become personal. I won't let it. Ralph and Nick are like night and day. Nick would think nothing of walking off a job to tend his family. Ralph would die first before he'd let family come between him and a deal. It's amusing when you think about it. A man like Ralph, with his Harvard education, and his social position, still can't hold a candle to a man like Nick."

"That's in this Nick Leonetti's favor."

Kelsey poured herself a cup of coffee, offering Jackson some, which he declined. Jackson Luther Montgomery was, above all else, her best friend and right now, she needed a friend. She'd always need Jackson--to just be Jackson. "I'm drinking this for courage. Just being in the same room with Ralph will be upsetting."

"I could handle the negotiations for you."

She could always count on Jackson to try to protect her, like a mother hen would a chick. "No, I've got to face him again. I want to get on with my life now. He's a closed chapter. He can't hurt me anymore."

Just then the intercom buzzed. "Ms. O'Sullivan, Mr. Ralph Butterfield is on line 3."

"Want me to take it?" Jackson offered, his finger dangling over the button.

"No, that's okay. He must be running late."

Kelsey hit line three with a stab of her finger. "Yes, Ralph?"

"Yes, I'm running behind schedule. Hold off for another twenty minutes or so. I'm tied up in traffic," came the agitated voice of the man she dreaded.

"I'll do my best, but most of them are your stock holders, not mine. Why didn't you just call your secretary to handle it?" she replied, not bothering to hide her frustration with the man.

"Because you should be in there right now, hobnobbing with them. You're a woman - you should use it. Twenty minutes won't kill any of them. Serve them some coffee or something. I know you're not much on entertaining, Kelsey, but I'm sure you can handle a few minutes alone. After all it's for the family business." Ralph's voice held a tinge of anger.

"I'm not a waitress, Ralph, but I can stall as good as you," Kelsey affirmed.

"This merger is as important to you as it is me, so try not to overload your mouth, or embarrass the company. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Kelsey's teeth gritted and her eyes rolled, but one glance from Jackson and she managed an edge of control. "I'll do my best not to make a scene, Ralph." Her hands were shaking as she hung up. "If he was this phone, Jackson, I think he'd be a dead man, by now."

Jackson cleared his throat. "He certainly hasn't changed, has he?"

"No, if anything he's worse. It's not my company holding its breath, it's his."

Kelsey's face was red with anger, and she shook from her own fury, but she managed a weak smile at Jackson.

Jackson inspected her, as he always did before she faced the Board of Directors. Flicking a small piece of lent from her coral jacket he met her gaze. He reminded her of a general inspecting his troops. Giving herself a few minutes to recoup she buzzed the intercom. "Paula, check the conference room and see how many have arrived. Serve them some coffee and stall for a few minutes."

"Yes, ma'am. Oh, and your mother is on line three."

Great! Her mother just when she needed to stay focused, Kelsey groaned. "I'm in no mood to talk to her this morning."

Jackson nodded, and buzzed the intercom. "Put Mrs. O'Sullivan on the line please, Miss Summers." Jackson hit the intercom button.

"Yes, Mr. Montgomery."

"Mrs. O'Sullivan," Jackson said, beaming, in his element now. "How good to hear from you today. What can we do for you this beautiful morning?"

Kelsey sat back in her chair to watch Jackson at his best. He was a master at handling her family, especially her mother.

"O-oh, hello Jackson, I wanted to speak with Kelsey," her mother replied, her voice rising with each word.

Jackson shot Kelsey a sly grin. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Mrs. O'Sullivan, but Kelsey is in a board meeting and can't be disturbed this morning. May I take a message?"

"I just knew you were going to put me off again, Jackson. And you're so good at it too. But of course she can be disturbed."

Jackson grimaced at the phone comically and rolled his eyes. Kelsey stifled a giggle.

"I'm her mother for goodness sake. You'd think I wasn't a welcome intrusion."

"You're always welcome, Mrs. O'Sullivan, but you know Kelsey. She left strict orders about being interrupted. She's working on the McGregor account today and you know how important that is to the merger. I'd be happy to give her any message you care to leave, though." Jackson glanced at Kelsey again with a knowing smile.

"Now I know why Kelsey hired you, Jackson. You are the best at fending calls I've ever run across in all my years. And believe me, I've run across a few. I only wished I'd found you first. Well, you're practically one of the family anyway, so just tell her that Taylor Huntington was over the other day and she's invited to his yacht party on Friday. I think he's about to pop the question. And I do so want her to make a good impression."

Knowing Kelsey as well as he did, Jackson didn't hesitate to refuse the party for her. "I'm afraid she won't be able to make it, Mrs. O'Sullivan. Her calendar indicates she has a prior engagement."

"Prior engagement? Whatever are you talking about, Jackson? Kelsey hasn't dated in months," her mother insisted adamantly. "Are you trying to throw me off again?"

"Not at all. Kelsey has a date with a Mr. Nicholas Leonetti," Jackson replied reading the name from the file in his hand. He glanced up at Kelsey's smiling face.

"Leonetti? Nonsense! I don't know a Leonetti, do I?" her mother asked, sounding somewhat confused by this news. "Is he in plastics, Jackson?"

Even the older Ms. O'Sullivan tended to lean on Jackson's thorough knowledge of things out of her realm.

He glanced at the file and checked Nick's application quickly. "No ma'am. I think Mr. Leonetti is in concrete."

Concrete? How clever, Kelsey marveled. A slight exaggeration on Jackson's part, but she found it amusing. She put her hand over her mouth to keep from giggling aloud.

"Concrete? Did you say concrete, Jackson? How odd. I see. My little girl has been busy, hasn't she? Concrete? I know almost every conglomerate this side of the Red River. Probably one of those new tycoons. Tell Kelsey to call me when she has a spare moment from all those board meetings, will you? I'd like to hear more about this man in concrete."

As he hung up, Kelsey let out a roar of approval. "Oh, Jackson, what would I ever do without you? And just how did you come up with concrete?"

"It struck me that a man with that many jobs, had busted more than his share of concrete to get them." Jackson looked smug.

"Now that I don't have to concentrate on getting out of that stupid yacht party, I can start working on convincing Nick. You know, Jackson, I may need guidance with this man. He really is out of my realm. I've come to realize in a very short amount of time that the poor have a lot of foolish pride."

"Are you comfortable being out of your realm?" Jackson probed, worry still lacing his voice.

Kelsey sank into her chair feeling surprisingly light hearted. "Oddly enough, I'm very comfortable with him. So comfortable, I'm a little frightened by it. I know we're from entirely different cultures and backgrounds. And yet, we seem to meet on some neutral territory. I've never been one to class people Jackson, you know that, but I'm afraid I have to be careful with this particular problem. I can't be sure of course, but I think Nick wears his principles on his sleeve."

Jackson studied her a long time, his expression thoughtful. "Then it's our job to make him compromise those principles. It can be done, but are you sure you want to be the one to do it?"

"What choice do I have? I believe he's perfect for the job."

Jackson looked thoughtful. "If you think so, then. I like this man, education or not. What we must do then, is make him realize that sacrifices have to be made to sometimes accomplish the impossible."

"What are you saying?"

"Samson was tempted."

"By love, Jackson, not money."

"Hmm, but temptation is still temptation, no matter what resources you use." Jackson smiled, his eyes calculating.

\* \* \*

"And all I thought I was getting into was a job," Nick remarked as he pulled the old battery from the '59 Ford and set it on the counter. "This battery must have been put in by the factory. I don't even recognize the brand."

"Hey, I've heard of those sperm bank places. Like a regular baby-making factory. If she's paying you to go, why not." Rodney Newsome joined the conversation, brushing a strand of long hair from his face and pushing it over his bald spot. "It's not like you'd be havin' sex with her. Not personal or anything. It's all sort of scientific. Nothing to it. Got a brother-in-law that went to one of those places and that's how they finally had a kid."

Jimmy, the younger mechanic peeked his head out from under the Ford's hood, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Doesn't sound like as much fun as sex. I mean it's no big deal, why not? This is the nineties, Nick. And she's willing to pay you for it, too. Sounds like a good deal to me."

"Call me old fashioned, but it's not the way a kid should get started in this world," Nick protested.

"Ya gotta go with the times, Nick. It's a new world today. Things are just done different. Maybe you're making too much of it. It's not like it would really be your kid, you just sort of donated parts, so to speak," Rodney added.

Nick chuckled. He glanced at Rodney, the old man he had hired three years previously. Rodney scratched his overhanging belly seriously as he studied the battery. "Sure ain't no Die Hard, is it?"

While they were replacing the battery, three young teenagers strolled into the garage and Nick acknowledged them with a smile. "Be with you guys in a second."

Jimmy spotted the kids and motioned to Rodney to shut-up.

"He,y Phillipe, where'd the black eye come from? You been messin' with the hoods again?" Jimmy laughed.

"Somethin' like that." Phillipe nodded.

Nick moved towards the young man. "What happened?"

"They caught him with Chino's sister," another youth said, laughing.

Just great, Nick thought. Kids getting beat up, maybe even killed, because they couldn't keep their hormones under control. He'd been working with these teenagers, trying to teach them how to stay alive, and out of trouble. Obviously, he hadn't shown them enough, by the looks of Phillipe. He playfully punched Phillipe's shoulder. "Okay, Romeo, I think you need another lesson in offensive defense."

\* \* \*



Kelsey was just biting into a tuna sandwich when the phone rang. She had been relaxing on the patio, in her sleek new peek-a-boo bathing suit, trying to decide if she wanted to go over the McGregor stock reports, or just lie there and sunbathe.

Dorothy, her housekeeper, was out shopping so Kelsey answered the phone herself. "O'Sullivan residence."

"Hello, Ms. O'Sullivan, please."

"This is she." She ignored the quiver running down her spine from the deep drawl of Nick Leonetti's voice, which she recognized instantly. How could a man's voice have such an affect through a telephone line? And when was the last time a man's voice had affected her at all?

"I didn't recognize your voice," came his throaty reply.

"Mr. Leonetti, how nice of you to call. I hadn't expected to hear from you. Have you reconsidered, perhaps?"

"Let's just say I'd like to talk to you about this deal a little more. I've been talking with some of the guys down at the garage, and they say this is really nothing at all. That it's more scientific than anything else. But I want you to know up front, that if I do it, I want to do it, and get it over, clean and dry, you know what I mean? The less personal, the better."

Kelsey felt a disappointment she couldn't explain. However, Nick had reconsidered. She couldn't dwell on her attraction. This was business, and he seemed to be coming around to her way of thinking. Perhaps Jackson had been right. There would have to be sacrifices on both parts. So he wasn't attracted to her? Had she wanted him to be? She had down-played her looks intentionally. No complications, she reminded herself sternly.

"Hey, are you still there?"

"Uh, yes, I'm sorry. I'm here. Look, why don't you drop by this afternoon and we'll talk about it," she suggested.

"Sure, I guess I could do that."

Her heartbeat quickened. "Great, in an hour then?"

"Okay, but I'll need directions on how to get to your place."

After giving him her address and directions to her Morningside Heights apartment, she hung up the phone. Immediately, she flew out of her chair, glancing at herself in the hall mirror. The bathing suit would never do, even if something deep inside of her wanted to show off. Now was not the time. Especially since she felt so vulnerable with Nick. She'd change into something more conservative.

While showering she debated what to wear. And then she needed the glasses. Oh, dear, the glasses. She'd left them at the office, when she put her contacts in. Those glasses had become a shield for her, and she wanted them on when she faced Nick.

She'd just have to phone Jackson and have him drop them off. If Nick saw her looking like this, he might get other ideas, and she wanted this to be strictly business--didn't she? Yes, she told herself firmly, of course she did. So why was her heart racing?

Half an hour later, Jackson brought her glasses by. Dorothy had returned and answered the door. When Kelsey heard the doorbell, she went to meet him.

Jackson handed her the glasses, his skepticism obvious from his expression.

"Stop fretting Jackson," she reassured him. "I know it seems ridiculous, but I don't want to confuse the whole issue here. If I represent myself one way, I've got to play it out that way. Besides, it's for my own protection. He's too good looking. Too nice! He let me know he wanted this finished as quickly and discreetly as possible. No hang-ups. He's agreeing to this because someone has convinced him it is scientific. Thank God for whomever."

"You think he might want to see you and the baby later?"

Kelsey froze, sorting her options. "I don't know. But you can start working on a contract to the effect that he can't. I've gone this far I don't want any screw-ups now. I've already spoken to him about it. He'll just have to agree. And don't look at me like that, Jackson. I don't want any hang-ups either!"

"I'll get right on it."

"Thanks for taking care of this for me." She waved the glasses in the air.

"No problem." Jackson accepted a cola from the housekeeper.

Tightening the belt of her robe, Kelsey darted back to her bedroom, knotted her hair back behind her ears, dotted just a little makeup on, and then threw a cotton pantsuit on. Not as conservative as she had been, but she didn't want to scare him away completely.

Jackson was about to leave as she came out of her bedroom again. "Oh, why don't you go ahead with the investigation, Jackson. It sounds like he's taking the bait."

"As you wish. And the other investigations?"

Kelsey thought of all the other candidates. None of them could compare to Nick. "That might be a good idea."

He was out the door when he turned to look at her. "Don't be so uptight about all this. He's only one man."

A man capable of raising her blood pressure, Kelsey thought. "I know, but he's the right man, Jackson."

"Then maybe you should let him see the real Kelsey O'Sullivan."

A shiver ran down her spine at the exciting possibilities that conjured, but she squashed them. "I don't think so. He laid down the rules, and I'll abide by them. He wants to do this really quickly and get it over with. I can't risk changing things now."

"You know best," Jackson agreed, doubt etching his face.

Kelsey refused to give into that knowing expression. "I hope so."

Once Jackson was gone, she felt herself coming down with a severe case of the jitters. She couldn't deny that men made her nervous. She remembered all the embarrassing, dumb things she had done as a young woman trying to impress a man. Apprehension tingled through her.

Men were a mystery to Kelsey. Her first and only marriage had been a complete disaster. She had been so frightened, and such a klutz. After a year, and an earth-shattering miscarriage, the marriage was over. Now, she was older, wiser, and desperately longing for a child. She prayed God she would succeed this time.

She glanced in the mirror for a long moment. She was no longer the young awkward girl who accidentally bumped waiters into swimming pools at dinner parties, and sat on guest's hats. But her confidence in her social graces still lagged.

The doorbell rang, and her stomach knotted. Taking a deep breath, she answered it. At the sight of Nick Leonetti, her heart took flight.

He had been handsome upon their first meeting, but the virile man standing in front of her now seemed even more impressive. Today, he wore a bright yellow oxford shirt and black jeans that hugged his narrowed hips. He looked so--Italian! The sight of him took what little breath she had away.

He looked as if he had just stepped out of the shower himself, his oh-so-thick hair still damp. Her fingers itched to run rampant through its blackness. His dark eyes penetrated through her, and his smile melted her reserve. Terrified of her giddy reactions, Kelsey realized she was already smitten. But she'd never let him know it. Perhaps years down the line, she could tell her beautiful daughter just how gorgeous her father was.

Other thoughts, sensual and provocative, slid into her mind. Kelsey could have gone all her life without thinking about going to bed with Nick Leonetti. At least she tried to convince herself of that, but the thought of their having a child together brought images of making love front and center. What would it be like to lay beside his golden torso, to kiss those well-formed lips, to be the center of his intense attention even for a brief interlude? Probably nothing short of heaven ... she told herself.

"Nick, you're very prompt." Her voice trembled, as she stepped back to let him in. Not too close, she cautioned herself.

He strolled past her, and she inhaled his tantalizing cologne. Not over-powering, just manly--and sexy.

Her eyes slid to the back of his jeans. Feeling guilty, she knew she shouldn't be looking, but just once, while he had his back to her. Nice buns! She sighed, her heartbeat quickening.

"Would you like a lemonade? It's rather hot today."

"Sounds good." He nodded and glanced about, a strange expression on his face. Perhaps he didn't like her place. Maybe he wasn't impressed by her mother's taste in exquisite paintings, and modern art forms? Kelsey eyed the room, a replica of a Better Homes and Gardens living room. It certainly impressed most of her guests. But Nick barely gave the hallway and living room a glance.

"I'll be just a moment, with the lemonade."

She headed for the kitchen perplexed. She could feel his eyes on her now, and she wondered if he was assessing her like she had him?

When she joined him by the patio, with a tall glass of lemonade in her hand, he was scanning the magnificent view of the Hudson.

"Nice place," he commented.

He meant the view. She grimaced. Hadn't he bothered to notice the beautiful flowers she had cultivated on her windowsill?

She wondered if he found her pretentious. She'd tried very hard to live an average life, to have a moderate home, with all the comforts, but not necessarily luxurious.

Their fingers grazed each other as she handed him the glass, and they both jumped.

"Uh, thanks, I like it. I've lived here nearly three years. I just love the view." She noticed he was still looking around. "Why don't we sit down?"

She followed Nick to the leather couch, pretending a calm she didn't come close to feeling. She noticed him staring at the bearskin rug in front of the fireplace.

When he finally perched himself on the edge of the couch, he eyed her closely. She smoothed her pants. Keep it impersonal, she reminded herself. "So," she drawled, claiming his attention once more, "you've reconsidered my offer?"

Nick nodded, but didn't say a word, his eyes glued to the floor.

"So--"

"So," he let out a long breath, his eyes found and held hers for a long moment, "I've been thinking a lot about your offer," he said finally, his eyes still not connecting with hers. "It didn't sit well with me at first. You really hit me over the head with this--job--as you call it. I guess because you took me by surprise. Then I got to talkin' to some

of the guys down at the garage about it. The way they all talk this could be a very impersonal kind of thing. I mean, no contact. Nothing personal."

"As impersonal as you want to make it," Kelsey reassured him, grateful for the opportunity, but still feeling let down.

"All done in a clinic, with no further contact."

She felt as if someone had slapped her in the face, and hot, surprising tears stung her eyes. Her hurt surprised her. Yet she refused to display the slightest emotion in front of him. Her emotions had been riding on a roller coaster lately. Why should she take it personally? He wasn't.

She knew she wasn't a knockout. Ralph had certainly pointed that out often enough. Kelsey stared at her clenched hands and suddenly unclenched them.

After a minute of silence, he cleared his throat. "Ms. O'Sullivan?"

"Please, call me Kelsey," she insisted, shaking herself from her reverie. Honestly, if she didn't keep her mind on what he was saying, he might walk away and never come back.

"Kelsey," he repeated, rolling it off his tongue as though he had just tasted it. She couldn't tell from his hooded expression if he liked her name or anything about her. Not that she cared.

Eyeing her thoughtfully, he said, "There is just one thing. I gotta know why you want this baby so bad."

"It's important to you?"

"Very."

Kelsey released her breath slowly, wondering just how much she should tell him. The old pain rose within her, sharp and bitter choking her words from her. "I've always wanted children, Nick. I suppose most women do. But maybe more so for me. I was an only child, and the loneliness was quite unbearable. My parents led a busy life. Don't get me wrong, they loved me, but they never realized how much they isolated themselves from me. My father was a career man, my mother a socialite. I've always wanted to share my life with someone, to give all I have. I've tried marriage, and that wasn't for me. I've come to the conclusion that I'm better suited for motherhood than marriage."

"And that's it?" He watched her intently.

She stared deep into his midnight eyes, then sighed heavily. "No, it's not." She gestured with her hand in the air. "You're very perceptive. I can't fool a man like you, can I? You want the whole story. All right, I'll be honest with you." She stood up and turned away, unable to face him. "I lost a baby once..." her voice faltered, "...during my marriage. Ever since then I've felt--incomplete. A failure, somehow. I can run a company practically by myself, but the rest of my life has been a miserable failure."

She turned and found Nick's eyes on her again, wide with what looked like surprise. "Naturally, I can give a baby everything--money, education, a future. But most of all, I want to give my baby love. I want the experience of sharing my life with someone."

An unsettling compassion filled Nick's eyes. "Why don't you just get married again? Wouldn't that be better all the way around?"

Kelsey was shaking her head before he finished. "I'm a lousy wife, Nick. I already know that much. Ralph complained the entire time we were married. I'm a workaholic. My lifestyle is too hectic for husband and child. Obviously, I'm not cut out for marriage."

"Maybe he was a lousy husband. People can change. Couldn't you work it out with him?"

"I don't think so, we're not compatible."

"Did you love him?" His point blank question startled her. Although there was nothing in his expression to say so, he seemed very interested in her answer.

Kelsey was silent for a long while. She'd never really loved Ralph, although she'd tried endlessly to please him. He'd been too self-centered, too wrapped up in himself to care for anyone. "I don't think so. We were too young to know what love really is."

"And now, you've got all this love stored up, and no one to give it to, huh?" Nick probed.

The unshed tears threatened to overflow. Pushing them back she nodded, sharing the moment of truth with a virtual stranger. Could he possibly understand this biological clock ticking inside her like a time bomb about to explode?

"All right, why not?" he said suddenly. "It's not like the kid would want for anything, is it?" He looked away from her, his gaze scanning the Hudson once more as he stared out the patio door. His expression was guarded. He seemed to distance himself purposely from her and what she was saying. "You're a rich woman. You can afford to give a child the best. And you're willing to subject yourself to humiliation and degradation over not having a husband. Just see that you take care of our kid right. Teach her everything, not just the usual reading and writing. Love her, and don't be afraid to show it. Teach her about life. Don't leave nothin' out. Lovin' means giving of yourself, your time. You'll have to take the time. Believe me, I know. So don't hold back. That's all I ask. That is--unless I didn't check out with your detective."

"I think you'll check out just fine." She wasn't sure of this, but she did know Nick was the right man for this job. She faltered, as his eyes traveled her thoroughly. A heated rush surged through her. "And--I promise, Nick."

He stood up far too close to her, bringing an intimacy she hadn't expected. His nearness threw her off balance. The energy, the heat of the man seemed to surround her. Panicking, she backed away, knocking herself into a large bookcase. The books tumbled all around her.

Nick grabbed her against him, and Kelsey lost all thoughts as she came in contact with a rock hard man. He slipped a muscular arm about her waist to steady her. "Are you all right?" His voice was a smothered chuckle.

The firm contact took her breath away. She caught herself and smiled brightly, despite her rampaging heart. "I'm fine, thanks." Nick's smile sent her pulse roaring through her like a run-away freight train. And the funniest thing about it was the fact that he wasn't looking at her like she was a klutz but rather a very charming woman. As though her blunder was a ploy for his attention.

His eyes fastened on her with lazy appraisal.

"You agreeing to my request is wonderful. I guess we can get started at the clinic, Monday, unless you have other reservations." She moved away from his disturbing presence.

Composure, that's all she needed. And he seemed to be buying it. Never let them see you sweat, she thought to herself.

His gaze skimmed her; glancing down she saw that her breast jutted against the thin cotton. Belatedly she felt the electric shock a woman experiences when a man really notices her for the first time. Nick stared at her as though she had suddenly become naked--and interesting. For a moment, she thought she saw something more in his expression, but it was quickly squelched by some other emotion she couldn't define.

His glance gave her confidence.

"Just one thing," he said, clearing his throat. "I don't want any further contact with you."

She outwardly flinched and he stepped closer. "No--wait! Please don't be offended. I just don't want to make this any more personal than it already is. I-I like you. You're a little uptight, but I like you. I mean, you're a nice lady. But let's just keep it that way, okay?"

"Okay, Nick," she said tightly, looking away from him. She had the sinking feeling of losing something valuable and yet she didn't know what exactly it might be.

"Nah. You don't see." He shook his head and moved so that she had to look directly at him.

"Look." He took her hands in his for a second. Their warmth seeped into her chilling body. "If I stuck around, that's what I'd want to do. Stick around. Be here, with you and the baby. Our baby. I might latch onto you like a leach. You've made it clear you don't want a man. You've been up front from the start. I respect you for that. That's fair enough. I don't quite understand it, but at least you're honest. I want kids someday, too, Kelsey." His eyes found hers. "But I want the works. I want a wife. I can't see life any other way. Anyway, the less involved we are, the better, ya know?"

Our baby, stuck in her mind as she repeated the words.

"Y-yes, of course, you're absolutely right." She pulled her hands slowly from his and moved away, toward the entrance. The tingle from his touch still coursed through her.

The victory was hers, yet she felt numbed by it. What was wrong with her? She should be pleased with her success. "I'll get my checkbook."

"Nah. Just mail it."

"But ..."

"Okay, so, I'll go to the clinic Monday. Which clinic?" He smiled at her and moved toward the door, his eyes drifting to the shirt clinging to her breasts.

"University Medical Center. Do you know where it is?"

He nodded, his face a cool mask, all emotion gone.

"Thank you. I won't ever forget you, Nick Leonetti." She had the insane urge to kiss him good-bye, or at the very least say something that he might remember always. Wishing he'd do anything but extend that big warm hand of his for another impersonal shake, she withdrew mentally. Her strong reactions to him scared her. The longing to press her lips to his, to have his big hands hold her, touch her ... God! Had she lost her mind?

"Likewise," he said quietly, his eyes somber, as he slowly turned and walked out of her life.

Just like that.

She stared after him a long time, not moving, feeling strangely as though part of herself was going with him.

If she had met him on the street, he would never have given her a second glance. She might have admired his rugged good looks, but that would have been it. Yet, Kelsey felt an unexplainable loss. She resisted the urge to run after him.

She should be jumping for joy. She had just gotten what she wanted so badly. She should be ecstatic.

Thinking of her lost baby must be upsetting her--that was it! Tomorrow she could think of Nick Leonetti and not feel bereft. Yes, tomorrow she would celebrate. But not today ... No, today she'd simply miss Nick Leonetti.

She stared out onto the perfectly manicured lawns of her apartment complex. Even the beauty of the flowers on her windowsill didn't soothe her senses tonight. Only a silent sadness surrounded her.

If her baby had lived she would have been running across the lawn today. She would have fallen and scraped her knees on the concrete and Kelsey would have kissed



them better and murmured sweet things to her until she stopped crying. Kelsey's life would have been full of meaning--instead of empty.

My baby--my beautiful little baby! Oh God! Why did you take her from me? All I want is to fill the void within me. To share my love with another.

Her desire for a child had taught her a lot about herself. She was tired of corporate board meetings, and trying to prove herself in a man's world. She wanted to be a woman in the fullest sense. She wanted to be a mother.

Tears pent up for much too long spilled out and Kelsey wept openly, unmindful that Dorothy might hear or see.

She hadn't cried at the funeral. She'd been in some sort of numb trance, unable to feel anything, afraid to feel anything. Afraid to acknowledge her failure.

You have to be strong Kelsey. Her father had preached that all her life. She didn't want to be strong now. She wanted the world around her to soak up her tears and share its burden with her. She wanted to feel again--love again.

It didn't matter that she could no longer see through her glasses. All that mattered was to mourn. To finally mourn aloud, unashamed.

Finally she raised herself up from her chair, squared her shoulders and wiped her tears away. Her heart felt lighter. Dear God--had Nick Leonetti unleashed all these emotions? Had he opened the door to her freedom and her eyes to another life?

## Chapter Five

Nick flicked the magazine open and a full-page centerfold sailed to the floor, the edges of the paper worn, the colors faded. Not that he hadn't seen them before, but here? Somehow it seemed indecent in a doctor's office. They wanted him to do what, in where? He could watch what kind of videos? Were they serious? His gaze scanned the small room with its dimmed lights, and the soft jazz music filtering through the intercom. What had he gotten himself into?

"You're kidding, right?" He had asked the nurse when she brought the specimen jar along with a towel and washcloth.

"No, Mr. Leonetti. Just knock on the door when you're--through."

A couple of hours later the nurse informed Nick that everything went fine for now, and if they needed him they could reach him at the address he had given the receptionist. He could go home. That's all there was to it.

All there was to it? Who were they kidding? They hadn't sat in a cold, isolated room for fifty-five minutes trying to figure out how to get turned on enough to accomplish such a task. And it hadn't been their magazines and tapes that finally accomplished it either. It had been the very vivid pictures of Kelsey wandering through his mind.

Nick stared at the nurse for a moment, his brow shooting upward in question. Perhaps Kelsey wasn't the only one who took these things so lightly. It probably happened every day at these clinics. Every day maybe--but not with him! And as far as he was concerned, never again.

An emptiness filled him as he walked home. He often walked instead of driving, preferring the exercise and fresh air. But today he wasn't noticing the fresh air, wasn't enjoying the exercise. Today questions filled his mind, creating emotions he couldn't express to anyone. He felt wrong all along, agreeing to such an arrangement. Now he was sure of it.

As he strode into his apartment that evening he heard his mother calling.

"Nicky, you got mail today."

"Mail--not bills?"

"From that O'Sullivan girl, I think."

So Kelsey had kept her word about sending him her background information. Not that he'd doubted her. She might be a mystery, but it was obvious from the start that she was full of integrity. Nick fumbled with the papers, trying to decide whether he should read them. Finally, he sat down in his favorite chair, and studied the papers in hopes of figuring out what Kelsey O'Sullivan was all about. He told himself his interest was because she might very well be the mother of his child. Told himself more than once, but didn't convince himself. Deep down he began to suspect it was more than that, much more.

Inside the envelope was a smaller envelope, probably the check. He ignored it. He thought he'd find reassurance in this typed up history of Kelsey's life. He didn't. Words on a piece of white, starched paper wouldn't make his doubts go away. He'd had too long to think of questions.

Probably to anyone else everything looked fine on the outside with Kelsey. But Nick had a gut instinct that everything wasn't fine. Her home, although unpretentious, looked as though it belonged in one of those house magazines. It looked too perfect. Nothing out of place, as though no one really lived there.

Where were the unfinished books that should have been lying on her coffee table in her living room? Or the misplaced earring, that pinched too tightly, or a shoe that offended her all day. Where had all the personal pictures of her family gone? Surely she had some. Where was the real Kelsey?

She was a wound up lady who needed to be unwound--slowly. And he wouldn't mind being the gentleman to unwind her.

His eyes swept the letter again. She had graduated SMU, a magna cum laude, with a MBA. He wasn't surprised. A list of organizations she belonged to, filled one whole page. Some of which surprised him; she actively supported Junior Achievement, and Parents without Partners. Charities she endorsed filled another, one of which was CARE, Inc., Feed The Children, and Right to Life. He read every one of them, and with each one gained new respect for her.

According to the report, Kelsey spent very little time on the social scene, and when she did it was only with prominent businessmen. Must be the 'circles' she talked about, he mused. Nick wondered about the men in those circles. A tinge of jealousy lingered in his mind. Why hadn't some of her blue-blooded friends volunteered for this job?

"Wonder if she's ever ridden a Ferris wheel, or ate a hot dog smothered in kraut and onions."

"What was that dear?" Mama came into the room, her face sweaty from cooking all afternoon, her smile warm and comforting.

"Nothin' Mama."

His mother blew the hair from her face. "Must be somethin', you never read the mail."

Nick quickly set the papers aside, deciding not to indulge his mother's curiosity any further. He put the unopened envelope in his hip pocket. The less said about Kelsey O'Sullivan, the better.

As though his mother could read his mind, she popped off, "So, whatever happened between you and that Kelsey O'Sullivan girl?"

"Nothin' happened, Mama. I told you she was just an acquaintance."

"I liked her, Nicky. She was quite pretty, and a real lady. Seemed to have some brains, too. She's nothing like what you used to bring home."

"You liked her? You don't even know her, Mama. How can you like her when you only just met her? And she isn't pretty, Mama. Sophisticated maybe, but not pretty."

"It doesn't have to take a lifetime to recognize quality in a person, Nicky. She's a nice girl. A mother knows these things. Trust me. Such nice bone structure, she'd give you lots of fine children. And what, Nicky, are you blind? She is very pretty."

Mama's words struck a nerve Nick hadn't expected. He practically jumped out of the chair. Beautiful children? Pretty? All he needed was his mother singing Kelsey's praises.

Despite his effort not to give in to his mother, he smiled. "Now you're getting way ahead of yourself, Mama."

"Don't you like her, anymore?"

Nick threw the papers on the table by his chair and glanced indulgently at his mother. "Sure, she's--okay. She's a nice lady, like you said. But not for me."

"Why not?"

"Because she's not our kind of people, Mama."

"Oh, you mean because she's not Italian."

"That, and other things," Nick agreed, hoping that would deter his mother from her matchmaking.

"I liked her, Nicky, even if she isn't Italian. And usually I don't like the non-Italian girls you bring home. Doesn't that say something for her?"

Nick crossed his arms in front of himself, and stared his mother down, unable to shake this stubborn, opinionated woman. "Okay, so what did you like about her? The glasses, the tight hairdo, the fact that she's little?"

His mother was silent a moment, a frown puckering her forehead, "I don't know really. It's not something one might see on the outside. There's real quality in her Nicky. And something else. Something I can't explain. Except--I watched her facial expressions with you and Tony. For such a stranger, she seemed to really care, to be concerned. And she was very polite, not a talker, like some you've brought home. Didn't giggle every time she opened her mouth. She had such a quiet dignity about her. And a sadness I couldn't help but notice."

"That quiet dignity is called sophistication, Mama. Like I said, she's not our kind of people."

"Why, she got money or something?"

"Yes, she's got lots of money, Mama." How could he argue with his mother, when deep down, he agreed with her. Kelsey was different than any woman he'd ever been close to. At times she seemed so down to earth, he almost forgot she did have money.

"Ha," his mother huffed, "Since when does a Leonetti judge someone by the amount of money they have? At least this girl seemed to have a mind."

Nick sighed heavily. "Now how can you know what kinda mind she has, Mama? You don't understand. She's very rich. She's society. She lives in one world, we live in another. They don't mix."

His mother shook her head, throwing her hands into the air. "I never thought I'd see the day when a son of mine classed people."

"That's just it. She is class."

"And you're not?"

"Not her kind."

Still, Mama shook her head, again. "We're all just flesh and blood, Nicky. God made us all the same. We all need air to breathe, food to eat."

Nick was quickly losing ground. "I don't understand why you took such a liking to her. Why this girl?"

"I don't know." His mother gestured helplessly. "Like I said, she's very pretty, Nicky." Her voice softened.

"Did you see something, I didn't?" He saw, only he wasn't about to admit that behind those Coke bottle glasses, and starched linens suits was a woman to be desired. He'd only gotten a peek of high pouting breasts beneath a cotton pantsuit, and small rounded curves he'd like to tempt and tease. Control seemed to be slipping with Mama declaring her virtues too.

"Perhaps. Perhaps you saw it too, Nicky."

"Trust me, Mama, it would never work." Even though I can't keep her off my mind, even though I'm losing sleep, I know deep down it wouldn't work. Still, it was more than just Mama's words that had Nick thinking.

"What wouldn't?"

"Me and Miss Goody-Two-Shoes."

"Is that how you see her?"

Nick didn't want to discuss this with his mother. How could he expect her to understand? Besides, he'd done quite enough thinking about Kelsey. The less said the better.

"Yeah, Mama, that's how I see her."

"A pity. She's a diamond in the rough. My poor Nicky doesn't see that. When are you going to grow up and realize that those one night stands will never make you happy, Nicky?"

Where had his mother gotten such ideas? He hadn't been with a woman in a long, long time. Too long, in fact. Oh sure, he dated a few, here and there. But it never amounted to anything. If the truth be known, he could have had any number of one-night stands, if he was so inclined. Only, he wasn't. Somewhere, over the course of the past few years Nick had stopped being interested in dating for a night.

"Look, Mama, when I find a woman like you, I'll settle down and get married, okay?" He chuckled as he got up from his chair and kissed his mother lightly on top of her head, then strolled past her to his small bedroom.

He was about to close the door when Tina pranced through announcing proudly, "I have a date tonight, Mama."

"What?" Nick stormed towards her. "With whom?"

Tina didn't grovel! "Joe Giavanni. And I don't want to hear a word about him, Nick. He's a very nice guy."

Nick's blood pressure skyrocketed. "Guy is right. He's not a kid. And you are not getting mixed up with that creep."

"Creep? Look, you said the other day I was old enough to date. And he is coming here to pick me up, just like you said. What more do you want?"

Nick's face screwed up like a war cloud.

"You're not dating Joe, no matter what, young lady. He's a hoodlum. Find someone your own age."

"Everyone's a hoodlum, according to Nick Leonetti." Tina pouted.

"Why can't you date someone like Haskell Freeman, or Dino. Then I might be able to tolerate."

"You! You! Who made you the law around here, anyway? Why can't I date who I want, Mama?"

Mama watched them, indulging their argument, then quietly said, "I'm afraid Nick's right about this, Tina. Joe isn't right for you right now. He's much too old. He's been around too much. You're young and innocent. Your brother is overbearing at times, I'll agree. But this time, he's right."

"I am so tired of him trying to lead my life. He's not my father," Tina spouted.

"Enough. Go to your room, Tina." Mama frowned at her beautiful daughter. "And don't come out 'til you can apologize to your brother. Nick has sacrificed his own life so we can have things better around here. He is the breadwinner in this family, and don't you ever, ever forget it."

"How could I ever forget it, Mama?" She cast a contentious glance Nick's way, then stomped to her room and slammed the door.

A silence filled the room, as Mama glanced at her son, "She's right you know."

Nick turned stormy eyes on her.

"You can't lead her life, Nicky. Even when it's for her own good. Any more than I can tell you that your Miss Goody-Two-Shoes is right for you. Tina will rebel if we strangle her with our love. Perhaps you should go to Joe and talk with him about it. Even if he won't listen, you might make him see the responsibility of dating such a young, innocent girl."

"Like reasoning with a rattlesnake."

"You could try."

Nick's face turned beet red. "You're actually going to let her date him?"

"What? You want her running around behind our backs. Maybe if you talk to him, Nicky."

Nick shrugged with a low growl, and wiped his eyes, trying to clear his mind.

"This is exactly why we need to get out of here, Mama. Don't you see that? We don't belong here, anymore."

"Oh, and where do we belong, Nicky?"

"In Queens. I've been lookin' at a nice little place in Queens, Mama. A buddy of mine wants to sell it. All I need is the down payment, and we can move in, and the rent won't be any higher there than here. And you should see the neighborhood, Mama-- such a difference."

"And how will you go about getting this down payment, Nicky?"

He didn't answer. Nick thought of Kelsey again, and wished he could confide in his mother about Kelsey's offer. He needed someone else's input, to get a clearer picture. The check in his pocket burned his hip! Yet, he knew couldn't cash it. Couldn't even look at it.

No, he wouldn't sell his kid down the river.

\* \* \*

Nick found another job, working in construction again. Lousy hours, lousy pay, and a lot to put up with, but it was a job. Had it not been for his garage, Nick might have gone nuts, but he knew when he sank his teeth into an old classic '57 Chevy, he'd forget about his job and Miss Goody-Two-Shoes.

It worked until nearly quitting time on Friday, when his boss pulled him off the job for a phone call. Just what he needed. Nick gritted his teeth as he went to the phone; probably Mama wanting him to come home and rescue one of the kids. At the rate he was going he'd never keep a job.

"Nick?" came the sultry voice he thought he'd forgotten at the other end of the phone. Nick knew instantly it was Kelsey, and felt the same gut reaction to her voice, as other parts of his body reacted as well.

"How'd you get this number?"

"I looked it up in the phone book after I talked with your mother. She's a lovely woman, your mother. We've become good friends over the phone, Nick."

"My m-mother? You called my mother?"

She hesitated answering. "Yes, it was the only way I knew of reaching you."

Questions danced in Nick's head. How many times had she spoken with his mother, and why?

"Is everything going all right?"

"As far as I know. It takes a little time to be sure." She sounded as though she were smiling into the phone.

Nick tried to remember her smile, but he didn't recall her ever smiling. Not an out and out, get down kind of smile.

"Look, I thought we agreed not to have any contact," he began, feeling a turbulence of emotions swamping him. He glanced over his shoulder to see if anyone was watching, but the small office was empty.

"You're right, Nick, of course. But I became concerned when I realized you haven't cashed the check I gave you. Is something wrong with it? You didn't lose it, or misplace it, did you?"

Lose it? He hadn't even opened it. He just wasn't the kind of guy to take money for something like this. He doubted she'd understand, but he wanted to be honest with her. "Nah, I decided not to cash it, is all. I mean, it made me feel as though I'd be selling the kid. So, let's just say this one is on the house."

Kelsey paused so long to answer, Nick wondered if she hung up.

"Nick, you haven't even looked at the check, have you?"



He breathed a little heavier into the phone. "I'd rather not."

Again there was a silence. "But, I thought we had a deal, Nick. I thought you wanted to get your family out of that building before the landlord started forcing you out. He could cut off the electricity; he could tear up the place. I've read a few stories in the paper about what they're doing. You have no choice, Nick. You've got to get your family out of there."

She sounded as though she really cared about his family.

"I do, and I will. I'll just have to find another way. All I really need is a down payment for a house, anyway."

"I don't feel right about this, Nick. I mean, it isn't fair to you!"

Life wasn't fair, but that didn't make it right to sell a baby. Nick had made his decision and that was that. No check.

"Just take care of my kid." He smiled, warmed by the thought of creating a life.

"All right Nick. Rest assured she'll be well cared for, and thanks. It's been a pleasure, knowing you."

"Anytime, babe." Even through the phone, Nick felt an odd closeness with this woman he'd never held in his arms, never kissed, never shared a hotdog with.

But realizing he could never hold onto this woman, he hardened himself, once more. He couldn't let himself forget who and what she was. High society, big business, dressed in black-rimmed glasses, and starched linen suits.

Yet, it was how she looked the last time he'd seen her that stood firmly in his mind. He saw golden hair falling down from its pins, dislodged glasses on her face, and clothes hinting at her sexuality. Full, alluring breasts with hardened nipples, and a dainty waist. And even deeper, he saw a heart as gold as the sun.

She seemed vulnerable--and very alone.

Nick felt a surge of compassion--along with a rush of desire. He pushed them aside. Time to end this impossible situation.

"Goodbye," he said softly, and hung up.

Nick never felt so satisfied. He had done the right thing, not cashing the check, and he felt good about it. He worked the rest of the day with an eagerness that surprised him. Suddenly, this hot, physical labor was nothing. Not after he'd given a life to the world.

That night he was late getting home, because he stopped off at the garage to tinker with one of his favorite cars. He heard the echoes of Mama and Tony's snoring and smiled to himself as he shrugged off his shirt. Life didn't get much better than this, he told himself. Tiptoeing through the house, he disposed of his clothes. His muscles

ached, but he wasn't complaining about an honest day's work. A shower was just what he needed. Only the light didn't come on. Nick grimaced. The war had begun. The landlord had turned off the electricity. Damn, his family deserved better.

Later, as he lay in bed, he closed his eyes and immediately pictured Kelsey in a bathing suit, then in a maternity dress, then with a beautiful black-haired baby. His baby. He smiled contentedly.

Then suddenly, a gut wrenching feeling slammed him. What if this was the only child he ever fathered? How could he let her go so easily? Maybe he hadn't given this enough thought? Just because he signed a contract didn't mean he didn't have rights too.

Sleep evaded him. He tossed and turned several times but couldn't sleep. It didn't matter if he cashed the check or not. He was still creating a child, his child, and leaving it. Was he truly no better than his own father? He sat up straight in bed, a light sweat trickling his forehead. The realization that he would never be there for the child hit him square in the face again. He had abandoned his own child. Just like that. How could he have been so blinded? Money would buy the kid security. What would the child think in years to come, though-- that he'd abandoned her? God, he'd been so stupid. There is no security when you think you are unwanted, he knew that through Tony.

Worse still, the pictures of Kelsey danced in his mind, and not just her image, but thoughts of what he'd like to do with her slender body.

Okay, she wasn't a beauty, but something about the lady definitely attracted him. He didn't understand it.

Granted, she had beautiful eyes. But judging from her clothes she was too thin, and way too uptight about everything. Yet, he couldn't stop thinking about her. Perhaps his mother had been right. Kelsey had a different kind of beauty, if one looked deep enough; a beauty of the soul.

Realizing he had no chance of sleeping, he smoked a cigarette. He let the smoke billow above his head and watched it shape itself. Cigarettes were a luxury Nick seldom allowed, but they usually smoothed out the day for him--except tonight. With the air so thick, and the sweltering heat the cigarette wasn't working. He squashed it in the ashtray, watching the flames slowly fade away.

Upon impulse, he whipped out his wallet from his jeans lying on the floor. Kelsey's insistence that he look at the check had him curious. He dug it out, carefully unfolding it for the first time. He had plans for the check. He'd frame it, and hang it on the wall of the garage, so that every time he glanced at it, he'd think of the baby, his baby. Oh God, his baby--the one he was giving away.

No, he sighed heavily, it would never be his. It was Kelsey's baby. Could he live with that? He didn't like the way his mind was racing, but he couldn't channel it. He should have quizzed Kelsey more about her reasons for wanting the baby. He had signed the contract, damn!

Did she have any prior experience with babies? Would she be a good mother? Why did she see this need to have a child in this particular fashion?

His eyes fell like a rock on the check, but in the dim moonlight he couldn't quite make it out. At least he thought he couldn't. He went to the window and put the check up to the moonlight. He blinked heavily for a few seconds trying to adjust to the light. Perhaps his eyes were playing tricks on him. But no, it wasn't a mistake. It was real! Oh, God! He physically banged his flat palm against his forehead.

Who in their right mind would pay such a sum for a baby? The figures on the check stared at him. This made no sense.

"No, she can't do this to me!" he yelled out, then clamped his mouth tight. The anger built in him until he could no longer contain himself. "I won't let her do this!" he exploded. "What does she think this is, some kind of black market? This is all so damn wrong." He punched his pillow.

His voice woke Tony, and he ambled into the room, rubbing his eyes and yawning. "Something wrong, Nick?"

"Nah." Nick shook his head, pushing the check behind his pillow, and smiling at his brother. "Everything is okay, go on back to bed."

"Okay, I guess something woke me. They turned the electric off. But we got the candles out. See ya in the morning. Hey, stop worryin' so much about Tina. She got in real early."

"What? Do you mean she's still datin' Joe?" Nick ran his hands through his thick hair, trying to clear his mind, and unable to accomplish his task. More problems to deal with, would life ever smooth out?

"They went to the movies a couple of times. He's been extra nice since you talked to him."

"Great. You better get some sleep, you got school in the morning."

"Night, Nick."

"Night, Tony." Nick smiled at his brother and sat on the edge of his bed, glaring at the check from time to time. If the check could talk, it would tempt and tease him to put himself and his family out of their misery. This one little bit of paper could get his family out of Hell's Kitchen, and into Queens. It would stop the war with the skyscrapers for him and his family. He never was one to give up quickly. Just like his neighbors, he wanted to fight this and win.

Besides, how could he live with himself if he took the money? And could he live with the consequences if he didn't?

Kelsey told him she would pay well for his services, but he never guessed how well. They hadn't talked price. Nick refused to consider the issue. His intention hadn't been to take her money.

If he took it, his problems were over--right? Wrong! He couldn't live with himself, and damn her all to hell for subjecting him to such a temptation. It was bad enough fighting the landlord, the utilities, and the skin shops. Now, he battled a temptation.

With great purpose he jerked on his jeans, threw on a pale green shirt, and scrambled out of the apartment in the heat of the night, careful not to wake anyone else.

He had to rid himself of temptation, and end this problem now. At least this was one war he knew he could win.

His little Mazda wheeled through the streets with the power of a tiger, like his temper, short fused. A gentle rain blanketed the windshield. Switching on the wipers he grimaced at the drumming sound.

Her apartment wasn't that far away, in what she called a modest mid-income neighborhood that had shocked Nick when he first saw it. He expected a more glamorous setting from her. But whatever Kelsey was, she wasn't pretentious.

Pulling into her parking lot, he cut the engine and gripped the steering wheel for a long moment. It had taken forty-five minutes to get here, and his fury hadn't abated. He knew he should calm down, but if he did, he couldn't impress upon her what needed to be made clear.

Miss Moneybags, Miss Goody-Two-Shoes had a real shock coming. He strode to the lobby door, took the stairs, and then banged his fist against the thick hard wood of her apartment door. He banged so loudly that her neighbor opened their door, and dogs began to bark, but he simply didn't care.

A husky sounding voice called through the door. Nick didn't respond, and the door opened slightly. A big, middle-aged woman, with curlers in her hair, and a robe that didn't quite come together, stared at him.

"What do you want?"

"I'm looking for Ms. O'Sullivan," Nick answered, his voice tight with restraint.

"She's not available at this hour. She's--"

"Sleeping?" he finished for her. "Too bad," he muttered brushing past the woman, and striding into the hallway. Glancing about, he ignored the woman's loud objections. Instead, he began opening the doors down the narrow hallway. He found nothing but empty rooms until he came to the end of the hall. The last door was slightly ajar, and he flung it open with his foot.

There, in the dim moonlight he could only see a silhouetted figure on the bed. Storming up to the bed, he ripped the satin covers from the woman slumbering there, and waited.

A sleeping Kelsey searched numbly for the covers as the vent from the air conditioner came on. She squirmed slightly, slithering down further into the bed, and burying herself in the satin covers. She moaned softly.

Nick switched the light on. It was like turning on the light to Kelsey's soul. The room illuminated. A quick glance about revealed pictures on her dresser, a corner nook crammed with childhood mementos, books and jewelry scattered everywhere. The misplaced earring lay on Kelsey's nightstand, the offending shoes in front of her room-length closet.

Kelsey groaned and flopped onto her stomach, regaining Nick's attention. He took in the hip-length silk T-shirt and long, well-shaped legs with shock. His system went into overdrive, his body heated. Suddenly, he forgot his anger. Forgot why he stood menacingly over her. He forgot everything.

Gritting his teeth, he forced his gaze from Kelsey's lush body. He leaned over to shake her lightly. "Wake up, Kelsey. I think it's time we had a talk."

The housekeeper peeped her head inside the room. "Are you all right, Ms. Kelsey? Should I call the police?"

Kelsey squinted from the glare of the light and pulled the covers over her. Her eyes darted first to Nick, then to the housekeeper. "Y-yes, Dorothy, I'm fine. And there's no need for the police. But I think you better put some coffee on."

Dorothy left grudgingly.

The sweet scent of lilacs tickled Nick's nose. Kelsey's scent. His gaze swept the covers clutched under her chin, to the surprisingly brilliant blue eyes, to the luxurious mass of hair floating about her delicate shoulders and face.

Kelsey ran a quick hand through her thick, wayward hair, batting it from her eyes as golden waves tumbled over her shoulders. She faced Nick squarely, looking at least ten years younger without those ugly glasses.

Nick couldn't believe the sight before him. Could this be Kelsey O'Sullivan? How could this gorgeous body and hair belong to the same woman? And yet even when she appeared plain, he hadn't been able to erase her from his thoughts. He couldn't. Even without knowing how beautiful she was, he'd been attracted to Miss Goody-Two-Shoes.

He kicked himself for being taken in. What kind of fool had she played him for? He should have seen past the disguise to the real woman. Even his mother had noticed. Was this his Kelsey?

"Nick, I don't want to be rude, but this is my bedroom. If you'll be gracious enough to wait in the other room, I'll be glad to join you."

"Sorry. I don't feel very gracious right now, Kelsey. I feel tricked, fooled, used. I just got a look at that check. I guess I'm a dope for not getting all the facts."

"Oh, that." She acted as though she'd been expecting some other problem.

"Yeah, that! I think we have some talking to do."

Kelsey relaxed her hold of the blanket and it had slipped down against the tips of her breast. Nick's eyes followed. Her nipples hardened against the satin, as though responding to his glance.

His lower body went rigid, and a cold sweat broke over him. In that instant, he knew he wanted her. And from the way her body was responding to his presence, he guessed she wanted him, too. He wanted to forget his temper, forget his morals, and make mad passionate love to Kelsey. It seemed ludicrous, and yet fated. He wanted to bring his mouth against hers, and begin making a baby the right way, with love.

Love? Nah, he hadn't known her long enough for that.

"Give me a moment." She wet her lips nervously, a blush spreading over her face.

Nick tried not to look at those moistly parted lips, but still, he grew warmer. Finally, his legs moved away from the edge of the bed. As he walked toward the door, he cast her a quick frown over his shoulder.

"Why the disguise?"

"It's not really a disguise. I didn't want you getting any wrong impressions Nick. Besides, this is business, and I dress differently for business."

Business?

A slightly crooked smile invaded Nick's mouth.

"It only makes a man more curious," he responded his voice hoarse.

"I-I'll keep that in mind."

"Yeah, you do that, and get out here. We need to talk."

## Chapter Six

Nick sat on the edge of a tufted recliner in the living room, waiting, his anger festering. Restless, he bolted toward the sofa, gave it a once over then plopped himself in the middle.

He eyed the room, taking in the comfortable surroundings. It hosted an off-white leather couch, surrounded by king size recliners. Several plants accentuated by perfectly placed track lights, and a large fifty-five gallon fish tank enhanced the warm, cozy effect of the room. A comfortable room, he acknowledged and immaculate. Too immaculate--too sterile. This room had nothing of Kelsey in it. No character, no feeling. It was a picture perfect room, nothing more.

The large white bearskin rug hugging the bricked-in fireplace caught his eye. Suddenly he visualized holding Kelsey in his arms against that rug. How soft she would be. Her golden hair would fan across the fur and he would take her into his arms ...

Lord what was he thinking? How had anger turned his emotions upside down? No, anger hadn't done it, Kelsey had.

Beautiful. Kelsey O'Sullivan was beautiful. Exactly what his mother had been trying to tell him, only he hadn't realized it until now. He had come to think of her as attractive, but more on the inside than out. What else was he to think with the prim and proper Miss-Goody-Two-Shoes dressed in linen and thick black glasses?

But--how could he erase the image of her lying in that bed, in a tangle of sensuous blue silk. Yet, even as his body stirred, another part of him saw a lonely woman. That part of her he wanted to hold and comfort. He wanted to give her the child she so desperately needed.

No! He refused to become involved with Kelsey. The relationship wouldn't last past the giant screen TV and them on the rug. It was pure fantasy and he'd do well to remember that.

The housekeeper, Dorothy, interrupted his train of thought, bringing a tray of coffee and cups and offering Nick cream and sugar. Nick declined the cream and sugar, but accepted the coffee, grateful for the distraction. She also brought a small plate of sweet breads and placed them on the big round coffee table, careful not to get too close to Nick. Although Dorothy was polite, she was distant. Before she left the room she gave him a keen appraisal.

"Thanks Dorothy, but you didn't have to go to all the trouble," Nick insisted, casting her a charming smile.

"No trouble. It's my job."

Nick sank into the softness of the sofa. Reaching for the coffee, he leaned back. God, he was tired, frustrated, and mad. He was mad, wasn't he? Then why couldn't he get the picture of Kelsey lying in her nightshirt, her glorious head of hair going

everywhere, and a body that would make any man respond, out of his head?  
Beautiful! Tiny and perfect!

Not that this changed anything. It didn't. It just complicated things. Now he had to deal with his strong attraction towards her and the baby thing.

"I'm sorry, Nick, I'm really not my best this time of night. I'm a morning person and can barely keep awake after nine," Kelsey chattered aimlessly as she pattered into the room, wearing her big blue fuzzy house slippers. She smoothed the sleeves of her long cotton robe and avoided all eye contact.

Nick didn't like the way his body responded to hers the minute he laid eyes on her again. His jaw quivered, as his hands fisted. He didn't want to be attracted, he wanted to be angry.

"I'm sorry about the hour, Kelsey, but your call made me curious enough to look at that damn check, and that's why I'm here. I couldn't sleep. Not with that payoff staring me in the face."

"Payoff?" she murmured, as she stirred sugar into her coffee. The cup rattled and she stilled it with her other hand. Nick's eyes went to her hands. She smoothed her lips together.

His hands stretched then fisted again, anguishing with pent-up frustration. "Yeah, the little \$100,000 payoff."

"Oh, that!"

He wasn't buying it.

"I suppose we should have discussed it, in more detail. I got the distinct impression the less we discussed, the better," she added flippantly, still not giving him the benefit of a straight glance.

"Yeah, maybe we should discuss several things, while we're at it." He gritted his teeth, making a grinding noise that had her glancing at him.

Nick was determined to learn the truth, once and for all.

"Such as?"

She leaned back into the sofa, crossing her legs and pulling the robe over them. The sofa swallowed her. She looked tiny and delicate, almost vulnerable, and her eyes filled with an ever-present sadness.

"Such as, what is your story, Kelsey? The real story, the one you're not telling. Who are you, Kelsey O'Sullivan? Why are you so desperate for a child, and why this way? All the answers I should have gotten before I agreed to this."

She frowned as she sipped the hot coffee, then shot him a glance. Her blue eyes captured his with a jolt.



"You didn't get the report I sent you?" She yawned again. She was stalling and he knew it. "Sorry."

"Report? Oh, that. Yeah, I got that, but it doesn't say anything about who you really are and what you're really about, now does it?"

She shot him an uncertain glance. "I gave you the same information I required from you."

"I think I took most of that information for granted before I read it. You're from a rich family, used to putting business first. You do things in a strange way, Kelsey. I mean, who in their right mind, would advertise for a sperm donation."

She curled her legs beneath her, as though she knew this would be a lengthy conversation and wanted as much comfort as possible.

"Do I really seem so strange? In what way?"

"Nothing adds up around here. You come on as Plain Jane, while underneath there's a Cinderella waiting to come out. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were playing me for some kind of fool. You even disguise your house, hiding your life in one room, as though it were a secret. And the way you want to have this baby bothers me. Everything about you bothers me."

"So you find me--strange?" Obviously she thought this was funny. Her smile deflated his anger to some extent.

"Yeah, a little."

She chuckled at his remark, her eyes traveling him with lazy appreciation. Her blatant stare sent heat shooting through him. The woman was asking for trouble. A couple more glances like that and he'd have her in that bed of hers, or on the rug, it didn't matter at this point.

"And I find you very refreshing, Nick. I'm sorry if I seem flippant. I'm serious about having your baby, Nick. But I suppose there's an explanation for some of it. I dress rather plainly for the office, I've found that the more businesslike I present myself, the more seriously my associates take me. My apartment, well, that's my mother's interference, I'm afraid. When I moved here she insisted on having the place professionally decorated, and even went so far as to send a housekeeper. I didn't want to hurt her feelings, so after a while, I made my bedroom my sanctuary. I sent her housekeeper packing and got my own. Dorothy is a jewel." Nick was only half listening to her words--that husky note to her voice had him reacting in a very basic way. He grew even warmer. Voices had never attracted him before. A voice, a pair of sad eyes, and knowing gut deep this woman was still leaving a lot out. He bought the house routine, and even went so far as to understand the business end of it, but he knew people, and Kelsey was holding out on him.

"Okay I can buy that part, but I still don't get it. Why this way?"

"All right, Nick, if it's that important I'll tell you a little about myself." She paused, looking away from him. "I suppose you deserve that much. As I told you before, I was married, for a short while to a very prominent business man."

"Yeah, you mentioned him." Nick sipped his coffee, his eyes never leaving Kelsey.

"We practically grew up together, Ralph and I, so he was no stranger. It seemed perfectly natural to marry him at the time. I thought I knew him so well. We were business partners first. And that was one of the biggest problems."

Nick frowned.

"It was a cold marriage," she admitted, her voice hardening at the memory. "Too much business. We both grew tired of each other, quickly. I was very young, immature. A little too ambitious too. But I still wanted a real marriage, and maybe just a little romance. I think every woman must want that. He didn't. Not that I was in love with the man, I wasn't, nor was he. As I told you before, people in our circles rarely marry for love. But I don't take marriage lightly. I wanted it to work. I'm a good Catholic. I wanted us to have a real marriage, even though we were never married in the Church. I guess I had my head in the clouds. Ralph let me know right away that he wasn't interested in bonding with me, in a relationship."

Nick listened, his anger rising toward the stuffed shirt she'd married.

"So, I tried harder to make things work between us. But the strain grew. In public he was the perfect husband, attentive, respectful, almost loving. To make a long story short, we divorced two months after I caught him in bed with his secretary. Ralph always had a roving eye, and I was quite the novice in the bedroom."

"Damn," Nick muttered almost to himself as he put his cup on the coffee table. His arm went behind her on the sofa. "How could any decent man do that to his wife?"

"It happens. I've had one bad marriage, Nick. I don't want another. That's why I'm not looking for a husband. But I still want a child."

"I'm sorry about your marriage."

"It could have been worse." She shrugged nonchalantly, but Nick sensed the underlying pain. Still, the sadness he had seen and felt in her hadn't come from a bad marriage, he was sure of it. She hadn't told him anything he hadn't already assumed. He wanted to know more about her desperation to have a child.

"What makes you so sure this would be right for the child, having no father? I can't help wondering if you've thought this through completely, Kelsey. Children take a lot of time. Would you spare it? Would you take the time from your business to be a good parent?"

Kelsey bit her bottom lip.

"It's not right to some degree, to not have a father. I realize a child should have both parents."

Nick nodded.

"But realistically, I don't know if I have what it takes to make a successful marriage. I mean I really tried to make things work with Ralph. Even when I realized I wasn't looking at it realistically. I wanted us to work. It just didn't. But a baby--I can give the baby everything she could possibly need, including love and my time. I'd make time for a child." She looked at him curiously. "Why didn't you ask these questions at the interview?"

"I guess I was too shellshocked then to ask them. But, Kelsey, you're still leaving something out. Something important. What is it? Level with me."

Kelsey finally met his gaze. "You're very perceptive."

"Not really, I just know people. And your story probably isn't much different than others I've heard." He shrugged. "I've heard a lot in my time about pain and hurt and I recognize the symptoms. Where I come from, there is a lot of suffering. So, what hurt you, Kelsey? How'd you lose your baby? I've got to know if we're going any further with this."

She stood up, paced the area in front of the fireplace, then glanced at him again. Her expression changed, to one of pain and agony. Her eyes filled with emotion, her hands wouldn't be still. "I can't ..."

"Yes you can," Nick said standing up and coming towards her. He took her by the shoulders and looked her in the eyes. "You're asking me to go against everything I believe in to have a child with you. All I'm asking--is why?"

A tear slipped down her cheek, and Nick still held her at bay.

"It never dawned on me I might be pregnant. I mean who'd have thought after a year of trying to have a child that I would suddenly conceive? And after I'd practically accused Ralph of being impotent. I'd given up. It was too late to make amends for the marriage. It was over and we both accepted it as adults."

"Go on, what about the baby?" Nick prodded, his hands tightening on her shoulders.

Unable to look at Nick, she continued. "I moved, from Texas to New York. I set up my end of the business here. Alone. My family is in sheet metal. It's been a booming business since the Second World War. I've managed to expand it. I've been financially independent for several years."

"The baby--Kelsey. What happened to the baby?"

Her voice choked. Her shoulders slumped with resignation.

"You want everything, don't you Nick?" She cast a mournful glance.

"I want the truth."

"I-I lost it. No one knew about it, except Jackson. I was seven months pregnant. Everything was going fine--I thought," she choked, "b-but the baby was born dead, the cord was wrapped around ... " She stopped, unable to go on.

"My God--" Nick breathed heavier, throwing up a hand to stay her words, feeling her pain, her agony. It was worse than he expected, much worse. The bleakness in her voice ended his indecision; he wrapped his arms around her holding her. Her head fit perfectly beneath his chin. Her sweet lilac perfume drifted upward. Not only was she alone, but she had to face a death that was unbearable. How had she gone through such devastation?

"My parents never knew, and neither did Ralph. I wanted it that way. My life has been so incomplete ever since it happened. So void. I've felt such a failure."

"You faced all this alone?"

"Not totally." Her voice sounded muffled against his chest. "No. I had lots of friends. And Jackson."

"Jackson?" Nick wondered who this Jackson really was. He lightened his hold of her. A stab of jealousy went clear to his toes. Unfounded, he reminded himself, but no other emotion could describe what he felt.

"My secretary. Jackson was a Godsend during that time. My only confidant."

A secretary. Hell. That would be his last guess. Nick gathered her closer. He wished he could have been there for her. Foolish though it was. He hadn't even known her then. Hadn't shared anything with her. But this Jackson had. It had to be a man. "So why didn't you choose this Jackson as a sperm donor?"

Kelsey pulled away from his embrace. "I contemplated it. He's truly the most intelligent, well-bred and mannered man I know. But--I know this will sound strange, but--he's my friend. And believe it or not Nick, I'd never really had a friend before. I didn't want to ruin that. You see, had it not been for Jackson coming into my life when he did, this end of the company might not have survived. Don't get me wrong; I'm quite capable of taking care of the company today. But back then--it was debatable. I love him, and always will."

Nick looked puzzled. "So, because of Ralph, you're down on all men, except this Jackson fella?"

"No. Not all men, thanks to Jackson. I just don't think I'm good at personal relationships. I'll be the first to admit it was as much my fault as Ralph's."

Nick nodded, feeling a surge of respect for Kelsey's honesty. "You're a very strong woman for admitting it. Most people never do. Mama says a mistake isn't as bad as it seems if you learn something from it."

"A very wise woman, your mother." Kelsey smiled and wiped her eyes. "I liked her from the first moment I met her."

Mama liked Kelsey, too.

Silence filled the air between them. Kelsey turned away. Nick battled the urge to take her back into his arms.

"So, the check upset you?" she asked not bothering to look at him again.

Nick nodded slowly, regrouping his thoughts. Hadn't he been angry when he arrived? "Yeah, it upset me."

"Why? I told you I would pay you well, and I meant it. I thought you knew and understood this whole arrangement, Nick. I told you I didn't take this lightly. I don't go around asking men to donate sperm everyday."

Nick thought about that, and nodded again. He sat down and reached for his coffee again. The cup rattled against the saucer, and Dorothy came to pick up the dishes, her eyes straying to Nick more than once. She left without a word.

Nick sat on the edge of the couch. "Yeah, I guess I just never imagined how much we were talking about. Maybe a hundred thousand isn't much to you. I only expected a couple of hundred at the most. After all, I didn't do much to earn it."

Kelsey shook her head. "Oh, but you did, Nick. You earned it. I couldn't have a child without your help. And I suspect from your reaction tonight that it's hard for you that you can't have an active part in her life. But it's your sense of responsibility that drew me to you in the first place. One doesn't seem to compliment the other, though, does it? I guess it's ironic that I should choose a man that wants and likes children, against a man who is indifferent to them. Perhaps that might have been easier."

Nick felt the pangs of guilt inside him rise and choke him. Did she realize what she was doing to him, making him give up perhaps the only child he might ever have. If she were pregnant that is.

Still, he couldn't lay all the blame on her. He had agreed. Agreed? Hell, he signed a damned contract. Where had his mind gone? He should have thought this through instead of rushing into this agreement. He knew the consequences. Perhaps the clinical part of it blinded his reasoning.

"Yeah, well I guess this arrangement bothers me more than I thought it would."

Kelsey placed her hand over his, "I didn't realize just how seriously you were taking this 'til tonight, Nick. I really didn't know you that well. I thought the less we knew about each other the better. Like you suggested. I thought by the time you agreed to do this, you had come to grips with the reality of it all."

Nick glanced down at her hand on his. She quickly moved it. He stretched, then stood and paced the room. He wished the room would swallow him. He wished the whole thing could be swallowed up, and he and Kelsey could start fresh. "Yeah well, I thought, because it was so clinical, it would be easier to walk away from it. I thought I could just ignore the fact that we're talking about a real life here. But I can't. There

are too many things to consider, Kelsey. This is a real baby we are talking about. My baby!"

He stopped pacing and met her gaze. "You want no involvement, from me. I understand, I think. It's not like you didn't tell me up front. But it still doesn't sit any better, knowing it. There isn't a day goes by I don't think about it."

Kelsey extended a hand towards him, and Nick felt jolted by her compassion. Every touch sent him careening down a new path of awareness. He wanted so badly to know more about this woman. To probe deeper into the real person. He should be giving her what for. Instead, her heart-wrenching story had only drawn him to her more.

"Nick, I never meant to hurt you. Never meant to confound your morals. That's part of the reason I insisted this be done in a clinic. My intention isn't to hurt anyone. I simply want a child. And I can't do that by myself."

Nick let go of her hand.

"You know, it's funny. I took that check thinking I could save it as a memento." He smiled sadly at her. "But dammit, it rubs me the wrong way. My dad left us. Left my mother right after Tony was born, after he beat her. He came home drunk one time too many. I never forgave him. Not for that. Never. And I swore I'd never do that to my kid."

Kelsey's eyes shone with sympathy. "Nick, please, don't get upset about this. Don't make it something it isn't. You aren't your father."

"Yeah, I know. At least I never thought I'd be." He muttered miserably. He wanted her to understand what this child meant to him, that he didn't take creating life so nonchalantly. That no man should. "But it hits close to home, regardless. Too close. I swore I'd never leave a kid of mine. Never walk out on it. And look at me. I'm no better than my own father. It doesn't matter how much you white-coat it, it's still the same."

"You loved him very much, didn't you?"

"I hated him."

"Yes, I know," her voice softened, "but you also loved him, didn't you?"

Nick glanced out the big picture window toward the park and river, wishing she wasn't quite so understanding. Wishing he could hate her for what she was doing to him.

"Yeah," he admitted, gritting his teeth. "I loved him."

He thought these emotions were buried. He was wrong. They were gripping his heart and ripping it into shreds. He felt moisture sting his eye. God, a tear? After all these years? He blinked it back. The first and last tear he'd cry over his father, he vowed silently. How had she managed to dredge all this up?

Instead, he hardened himself, the way he always had when anything got too close to hurting.

"He used to beat the tar out of me." Nick tried to smile. "Whipped me with a belt. I remember once I stole something from a drug store. He found out, and marched me into that store, made me admit what I had done, and give the toothbrush back."

Kelsey's eyes rounded with surprise. "You stole a--toothbrush?"

"I guess that sounds pretty stupid to someone like you, doesn't it? But we didn't have toothbrushes." He saw the look of shock on her face. "Hell, we didn't know any better, we used a washcloth. I thought everyone did. Ignorant, huh?"

Kelsey's expression softened, and this time she couldn't stop a tear from rolling down one cheek. Her compassion unnerved him. He wanted no pity; he wasn't ashamed of being poor.

"No. I don't think so. Go on, tell me what happened?"

Nick shrugged. "Never bothered me that we were poor 'til I went to school and found out everyone had a toothbrush but me. Hell, 'til then, I thought we were rich. We had what a lot of kids didn't. We had each other. And that was a lot. So anyway, to make a long story short, I stole one. It seemed simple enough; a lot of kids stole things in my neck of the woods. I figured a toothbrush was pretty harmless. My dad was half drunk, unemployed, and madder than a hornet when he found out what I did. 'The Leonetti's weren't thieves,' he said."

"How'd he find out?"

"I was stupid. I told my older brother. My brother was as upset as my dad. Dad whipped the fire out of me, for that. But I never stole again. Funny, I guess he was the one that instilled all these guilt trips of mine."

Silence filled the room, then Nick admitted, looking at her with new understanding of his own feelings. "It wasn't the whipping that was so bad. I got my fair share of them. I could take that. I deserved most of them. It was admitting to that manager what I'd done that hurt. Dad made me do it. I had to work for that man for two weeks, and still didn't get the toothbrush. He thought I was just another hoodlum."

"Your father sounds harsh, as does the druggist, but your father must have been a very decent man once. He taught you lessons in life you've lived by as an adult. Not many, these days, can say that, Nick. I think you were fortunate in many ways, despite your financial situation. And from what I've seen, you were rich in one commodity at least--love."

Nick mumbled under his breath, "I don't know if that's the word I'd use to describe my father."

"You couldn't forgive him for leaving you."

"Leaving me, sure. I was grown. I didn't matter. For leaving me, yes, but not Mama, Tina and Tony. They loved him so; Mama still does. Still defends him 'til this day. She's says I'm a lot like him."

Sliding next to him, Kelsey placed her hand on his arm again. "Sometimes people aren't what they seem, Nick. And sometimes, things don't work out, no matter how hard you try to make them. Divorce is very common these days."

"My mama," Nick shook his head, "she married for life. One man. She's never looked at another man. Never considered another."

"Perhaps there were things in their marriage you just couldn't understand then." She squeezed his arm, and he glanced at her again, their eyes meeting.

"He lived with her for twenty-eight years. Twenty-eight years. She never knew anything about the other women. Us kids took care of that. Oh, he'd come home drunk, he'd get fired from his job. She knew all of that, and kept right on forgiving him for his weaknesses. They'd fight. Then one day he just up and walks out on all of us."

"Who knows what drives people apart? He must have had a reason for what he did. Have you asked him?"

Nick hit his fist into his palm. "I never saw him again after he left. Never wanted to. He never sent a dime to Mama for support. She worked like a dog for years in that damned dry cleaners. He never came back to see us." Nick shrugged and glanced at her, surprised to see such emotion in her eyes. "I guess he's the real reason I've never married. 'Fraid I'll be like him."

Kelsey shook her head. "No. I doubt that. I think you've been too busy being the 'father' of your family to marry anyone. You may be like your father in some ways, but there is a lot of your mother inside you, Nick."

Nick thought about that and smiled.

Had he been too busy for a relationship? He hadn't noticed. There had been women, the one-night stands his mother hadn't approved of. That was a few years back, when his hormones were still in overdrive. But no one girl stood out in his memory. He liked sex--women were great for that. But marriage, he wasn't sure there was anyone out there for him. No one had captured his heart, but then he'd held himself above emotional involvement. He had numerous lady friends, girls he grew up with, but most of them were married now with families.

"You have to forgive your father Nick, or you can't go forward with your own life."

Kelsey's comment struck a chord he didn't want to face, and yet it made sense too. For the first time in his life he saw things differently. Through someone else's eyes. How could a stranger walk into his life and tell him what was wrong with it? Hadn't he come here to tell her a few things?



Nick stood up to leave. "Look, I shouldn't have come here. But that check made me see red."

Kelsey rose, too. "I suppose we should have discussed it earlier. Had I known I was dealing with a man of such high integrity, I would have considered your feelings more, Nick. Please, take the money though. Otherwise, I'll be feeling guilty. Besides, I respect and admire your ambition to get your family out of the zoning wars. The rent will be outrageous. It's sad that progress has to do this kind of thing to people. Look, I can afford it. Sometimes, we have to bend a little, Nick. Take the money. Keep your promise to your mother, buy her a home."

Feeling like the devil himself offering candy to a child, Nick faced her with a frown. "But I can't just sell my kid," he began, fighting the temptation she offered. She looked beautiful standing there in that flimsy little cotton thing, with her eyes shining with emotion. God, he wanted her.

"You aren't selling anything, Nick. Look, this is a new day and age. We didn't make love and create a child from it. You went to a clinic and donated sperm. That's all. Like giving blood. Think of it as scientific. Lots of people do this. Can't you see that this is helping both of us? You get what you want, I get what I want."

Her words reminded Nick why he'd come here in the first place. That damned check. His anger returned, blotting out the odd camaraderie they'd just shared. His lips firmed; he regarded her closely, speculatively. "I guess you're used to getting what you want. Aren't you?" He moved closer, not liking her words, or his temptation. "It's still a kid--my kid. And I can't take it lightly. Do you think that just because we can both have what we want, it's okay? Just because it's clinical it makes it all right?"

Her mouth flew open, her eyes blazed angrily. "What is that supposed to mean?" she demanded her voice rising in instant anger.

He stepped away from her, trying to find some way of communicating. "I'm used to working my butt off for what I want or need. It doesn't just fall into my lap, because I want it. And if it does, I want to know why."

"You think this has been easy for me?"

"Yes. Yes I do." He glared at her, wanting her to realize the seriousness of their actions. "I think that's what is wrong with you!"

"I've dealt with my fair share of humiliation through this. It's cost a lot of--"

"Oh yeah, cost a lot of money. Everything costs money, doesn't it? You think just because you want a baby, and you've got the money, you can get one. Do you have any idea what you're asking of a person? You think you can just order anything you want. Kelsey wants a baby, Kelsey gets a baby, to hell with everyone else."

"How dare you?" She gasped her dismay, her eyes flashing with anger.

"Oh, I dare a great deal," he rasped, coming to stand just in front of her. He was so angry he shook. She held her ground, her eyes darkening with rage, her hair flowing

against her shoulders. And it was all Nick could stand. Reaching toward her he jerked her up against him. His big hands slid over her robe to her belly. He couldn't resist rubbing sensuously there where his child might soon grow. She let out a little unexpected whimper, as her eyes widened.

Without thinking he lowered his head, his lips clamping down on hers.

He meant to hurt her, scare her, shake her up. Something. Yet, when their lips met in a storm of emotions, he could no longer think. He wanted to kiss her, needed to, longed to. And now that he was, he gave it everything he had.

Hot scorching lips ran rampant over soft, melting ones. One breath became many, as he continued his blatant assault of her senses. She weakened, her hand clutching at him.

A fine wine, his mind decided, as he sipped the sweet nectar of her lips. Not too dry, not too wet, aged to perfection. He wanted more, and that realization stunned him.

The kiss deepened, strengthened, enriched of its own free will, like the wind taking control of a storm. Streaks of lightening ran down the center of him, homing in on him like an unsettling tidal wave.

His hands threaded through her hair, shaking her combs to the floor, as he pulled her against him tighter, savoring the feel of her. He growled in his throat at the excitement touching her elicited. She groaned in return.

He wanted to make her feel what he felt. Wanted her to feel all the raw emotions she had exposed in him. He wanted her to see him as a man, with feelings, desires, and guilt. To feel those same emotions. He moved his hands to her head, positioning her just right for each kiss.

Yet, all too soon she wrenched herself away from him, as though it took all her might, and yet, it took no physical effort at all, for he merely held her head and a full mass of her hair.

She flushed and flamed.

"I think you better leave," she muttered breathlessly, obviously rattled more than she cared to admit by the kiss. Her lips were swollen, and pouting, her chest heaving for air, and her eyes darkened with desire. She was, in that moment, the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen.

For a moment he didn't move, didn't breathe. He stood staring at her, as though really seeing her for the first time, and marveling at the beauty within her. How could he have not thought her beautiful?

Gaining composure, he nodded. "Maybe I better."

"I think you were right, Nick," she said, leaning against the fireplace for support suddenly, as Nick's eyes torched her. "No more contact."

Her voice was breathless, gasping, her body trembling. There was a wild woman inside her, and he had unleashed it. Still, she began forcing it away. The lady had control. Only he recognized it, in her eyes, in her soul, in her heart.

"Yeah, I guess so," he said roughly, not looking back at her. "So long, Kelsey!"

\* \* \*

Weeks passed and Nick heard nothing from Kelsey. He tried to put her out of his mind. Erase what was between them. He tried not to remember the satisfaction of her kiss, the fit of her body, the feel of his hand against her belly the one time he had touched her. He tried not to think about that belly swollen and growing with child. His child. It was useless.

Every waking moment was filled with her.

Determined to wipe her from his mind, he sank himself into his job, working long hours in record heat. A forty-hour week became sixty. He even worked late at the garage, sinking himself into another old classic car that would turn into nothing more than a kid's hotrod.

He hadn't cashed the check. He looked at it every night, kept it in a special place by his bed. He steadfastly refused to cash it.

That is, until he came home one evening and found half the kitchen ripped out. Making improvements the management had explained. Improvements hell, the kitchen was gone. The stove had to be turned off, and the icebox didn't work now. Nick smeared a hand across his face in anguish. "What next?"

He knew from that day forward that his goal to get his family out of this place had to come first. He'd deal with his conscience later. The landlord wasn't going to let up until every occupant of the building agreed to walk away, or sign a new lease on the new building going up.

Instead of cashing the check, Nick decided to talk to Mr. Gallagher at the bank about taking out a loan against the check. The loan officer was eager to talk to him once he realized the kind of money Nick was toting around with him. He quickly informed Nick that if the check was placed in the bank in a CD, Nick could borrow against it. As long as Nick paid the loan on time, the check would stay in tact. No one would lose anything, including, Kelsey O'Sullivan.

Within an hour, Nick had the money for the down payment on the house in Queens. He quickly called his buddy about the available house and arranged for Mama, Tony, and Tina to go with him to see it.

It was only right that the family see the house and approve it. They were going to be living there.

"But where did you get such money, Nicky?"

"It's a loan, Mama. Not to worry. I got a loan at the bank," Nick explained, hoping that would satisfy his mother's curiosity.

"How can you suddenly get a loan? In all these years, you've never gotten one before."

"I used the garage as collateral." Nick hated lying but it was a small sin, compared to others.

"Collateral? Who'd give you money on that garage? It's so run down, no one would have it."

"Mr. Gallagher, the loan officer, Mama. He's been wanting the property for a long time now. He wants to make a parking lot out of it. If I miss a payment, he'll do it, too. You know they're tearing down a lot of the older buildings. Putting up big skyscrapers. Well, they need parking spaces too. If I don't pay the note off, he'll have the land, Mama."

Mama frowned, as though she didn't believe a word of it, but she walked slowly around the yard, entranced by its beauty. Nick could tell she was trying her best not to agree with this move, out of stubbornness, and disbelief. But the house sold itself.

The house was in a well-developed neighborhood. It was an older home, but Mama liked it immediately.

"It's got trees, Nicky. Real trees."

"I know, Mama. It's a beautiful place. I know you're going to like it. Let's go inside and see what you think."

Tina and Tony were already in the house, wandering about. Tina hollered out to them several times. "My own room, look, Mama, my own room."

"Look, Mama, new carpet," she exclaimed moments later, her eyes wide with appreciation as her fingers delved into the plush carpeting. Mama nodded and smiled vaguely, but Nick knew he hadn't completely satisfied her curiosity. There would be more lying before this became a reality, and he knew it. But the central air and heat unit decided the matter. Mama was sold, despite all her other objections. No longer would she have to run two fans in the kitchen during the summer to cook, or thump the old radiator, and light the stove to heat the place. This was her heaven.

"What do you think, Tony?" Nick came to stand beside his brother.

"It's so big. Its gotta lot of room. And with that back porch, I could sleep out there and use it as my room."

"I got dibs on that, little brother. I'm the one that comes and goes around here. I'll sleep out there. You'll have your own room, and privacy," Nick decided. "You can hang posters and school banners on your walls. Paint it a different color if you want to."

"My own room?" Tony's deep-set brown eyes got bigger. "Did you hear that, Mama?"

"I heard, but I still don't think ..."

Nick went to grab his mother around the shoulders and pulled her into the kitchen, knowing this was another one of her weak spots. If it passed her inspection, the house was as good as theirs. "Look at this, Mama."

He showed her the refrigerator and her eyes widened. "It's beautiful, oh so beautiful. But ... "

"No buts, Mama. It's ours, if you like it."

"Nicky, you should be buying your own home, not a home for us," Mama protested. Even so, she leaned closer to examine the stove. Putting her hand over her mouth, she gasped when she realized it didn't require matches to light. "Oh, Nicky, it's so wonderful."

"Then it's ours."

"It's not right, I just feel it," Mama kept insisting, as she went from room to room, with exclamations of happiness and worry combined. Nick smiled to himself. Even if he had sacrificed his beliefs for their happiness, it was worth it to see the smiles on all their faces. And when he learned to live with his decision he'd be happy too. He prayed God understood.

Kelsey was right about one thing; sometimes sacrifices were worth it. He'd never forget her as long as he lived, and somehow, he'd see that his baby was properly taken care of. He didn't know how he'd do it, but he knew he would.

This much he promised himself as he turned to hug his family and welcome them to their new home.

## Chapter Seven

Rain pattered against the tin roof of the garage, a lulling sound that Nick tried to ignore, even though he found himself yawning incessantly. People should sleep when it rained

"You gonna shut this place down, Boss, now that you moved your family to Queens?" Jimmy said.

Nick slid out from under the '57 Chevy and glanced at him, his face screwed into a slight frown. Jimmy worked for peanuts, enjoying the job for what it was, a chance to tinker with classic automobiles. "What gave you that idea?"

"I dunno, I just thought you might--"

"Get outta here." Nick threw a greasy rag at him and continued at his task. "This is my heaven, right here, Jimmy. And you and everybody else that knows me, knows it. I'm not about to give it up. I just got less to worry about now," Nick explained as he reached for a wrench and went back under.

"I guess it's a good thing. The kids that hang out here on Tuesdays sure would miss you. Where would they go without you? They'd be little hoods again, that's where. But look, the word's out you've moved and everyone expects you to fold up."

Nick slid back out, disengaging himself from his task. "Then spread the word, Jimmy, I haven't left, and I don't intend to. This is where I belong. And those kids mean a lot to me. Make sure they know I'm here to stay. Let them know I'm not going anywhere."

"That's a relief. I like working here. I gotta admit, you had me worried. You know I thought the first time I saw you with them kids you were just showing off. But you're pretty dedicated to teaching them how to take care of themselves. I even learned a few karate moves by watchin'. And the kids, they look up to you. Ever thought about opening up one of those places-that teach karate professionally?" Jimmy buttoned his shirt, wiped a grease smudge from his face and stared in the small, cracked mirror on the far wall. His red hair and face full of freckles made him look younger than his twenty-two years.

"Nah. I'm just trying to help those kids stay straight and learn to defend themselves, Jimmy. You gotta know that kind of stuff these days. Bein' a cop's kid, you should know. It's important that they know how to handle themselves. Give them a little positive self-confidence."

Jimmy stopped what he was doing and looked at Nick. "They sure straightened their acts up since you've been fooling' with them, Boss. Dad said what you're doin' for the neighborhood is a good thing. He said if more guys like you would take an interest his job would be a lot simpler. I've stayed late a couple of times and watched you work with them. You're damned good. As good as I ever seen. I think it's great. I mean they really like you, and they are a scruffy bunch. I just don't think you see the potent-ah-you know what I'm sayin'."

Nick smiled crookedly. "Yeah, I know what you're sayin'. Goodnight Jimmy. See ya tomorrow."

"I'd stay and help ya, but I gotta date with Gloria."

"No worries, I can handle it, mate," Nick answered in a strange Australian accent that made both of them laugh. "I didn't know you were dating Gloria. Wonder why Tina never mentioned it. How long has that been going on?"

"'Bout a month. She's a nice girl. Don't blame me. It was Tina that introduced us to the idea. Catch ya later, then."

"Okay, Jimmy." Nick went back to his position under the car. He made a couple of adjustments and sailed out from under the Chevy with a frown.

Did he have potential? He wondered. He enjoyed his time with the kids. He knew every one of them by their first name, and most of their parents. Good kids, looking for a way to stay out of trouble.

He glanced about the place, seeing it for the first time as a stranger might. As Kelsey might. The garage could stand on its own merit if he wanted it to. Up until now, he had only used it as a diversion from his regular job. A getaway. He liked having his own little haven to go to. Still, he knew all along that if he really wanted to turn it into a profit-making business he probably could. But it had become his refuge. And refuge and business didn't mix.

He never considered himself a failure in life. He supposed being happy made a man less apt to aspire to greatness. He had more than some, and he was happy. Still, there was a growing urge in him to do better now. Maybe Goody-Two-Shoes had something to do with that.

He threw down the wrench and wiped at his face. He had to get that dame off his mind. Although calling her a dame, even to himself, left an aftertaste in his mouth. She was no dame. She was class. All class.

He glanced in the mirror, giving himself a karate chop for being so stupid. Why hadn't he been more ambitious? Did he want to rot in this hellhole forever? He ambled to the garage doorway, watching the silent rain. He stared out onto the older buildings, and the docks beyond, toward the Hudson. A rough neighborhood once was now turning into a metropolis. He hated the changes going on, but it was home, like Mama said so often.

Practicing his moves, his mind filtered to the boys who had one by one drifted into his shop late at night out of curiosity. As young as twelve, as old as nineteen, they had come to know and respect Nick.

Weekends of National Guard duty, and a drill Sergeant that liked to pick on him, had trained him well. He had been proud of that hitch, learned so much from it. So when a bunch of scraggly kids with a penchant for trouble wandered into Nick's garage one night Nick decided it was time to teach them some manners. So, it wasn't surprising

to him that he ended up teaching them karate in his spare time, late at night. Every Tuesday night they gathered here.

He smiled and nodded his satisfaction. Maybe he wasn't ambitious, but he liked his life. Yes, sir, he liked it a lot. He liked being important to his family and those kids. He liked coming here at night and tinkering until all hours of the night.

He smiled to himself, then walked back to the car that seemed determined to undermine his success. He sent it a mock karate chop.

"You're pretty good," came a sultry voice that always tied Nick in knots. He didn't have to turn around to know Kelsey was standing in the garage doorway, watching. He felt himself tense, and grow warm, and wished he could control his vacillating reaction.

"Thanks."

What was she doing here? He picked up a screwdriver and dove back under a car. Maybe if he ignored her, she'd go away. After all, she was just a mirage, wasn't she? Maybe.

Silence stretched forever.

Realizing she wasn't leaving, Nick sighed heavily and slid out from under the car minutes later, to find her at his heels. She stood there in a shiny yellow raincoat, with water dripping off the edges, staring at him. "So, what brings you slumming?"

"That's below you, Nick. You're not an insulting person," she returned, the only evidence that he hit a nerve in her darkening eyes. Eyes a man could get lost in. Eyes he needed to forget.

"Sorry, I guess I'm tired." He stood up, stretched and headed for the other side of the garage where he had a small hot plate of coffee simmering. Besides, distance helped. "Want some?"

"Sure." She smiled and proceeded to take the raincoat off.

"You didn't answer my question." He stirred four teaspoons of sugar into her coffee, then turned around and gaped. She was wearing a spaghetti strapped sundress, of bright blue and yellow. It resembled a thin cloud covering her.

"I'm not pregnant, Nick," she finally blurted out, her eyes never leaving him as he handed her the coffee.

He almost dropped the cup. It was the last kind of thing he expected to hear. His mouth flew open and he stood staring.

She took the cup from his hand.

She looked so different tonight than he had ever seen her, so fragile, so vulnerable, so sexy.



He stared at her for a long moment, his jaw working overtime at a grind. He needed a toothpick, or a cigarette. He'd never get over her bluntness. A lady that came to the point. His shoulders stiffened, as he slowly turned away, placing his coffee on the hood of another car. "I'm sorry. Is this my problem?"

Was that casual enough for her? He couldn't allow her to see how disturbed he was.

"You're short tempered, when you're tired."

"A little," he acknowledged, giving her a sideways glance.

She moved closer, as though trying to find something in his face or expression that might put her at her ease. She took a sip of the coffee, then set it beside his cup.

"I spoke to the doctors about it. At the clinic. They reassured me that they could keep trying, it might take time. But, I'm afraid I don't want to subject myself to this forever. I thought if I found a virile man, my troubles would be short-lived."

Nick pretended interest in his car. What was she doing here, in the middle of the night talking about virility? Had she walked? Nah, too far and surely not in the rain. Had she driven that car of hers around here? Hadn't he warned her? She had no business being here.

"Where's your car?"

"At home."

His eyes narrowed on her as he whipped around to stare at her. "Then how did you get here?"

"I took the subway, and walked the rest of the way, why?"

He came closer, close enough to smell the expensive perfume she wore. "Took the subway? Since when do you ride subways? Are you crazy?"

"You told me not to be driving my car around here. I took that as some kind of warning. And I thought riding a subway might be an experience. It was." Her eyes were filled with excitement. "There weren't many people out this time of night, and everyone seemed very friendly. At least I planned on the rain and came prepared." She glanced at the raincoat hanging on the edge of the hood.

He grabbed her upper arms and shook her a moment, then, realizing what he was doing, backed off. Staring blatantly at her, he marveled at her cool. The less he touched, the better. He wasn't cool, far from it. "You don't ride subways. You don't walk the streets around here, either. Anybody would know you weren't from around here. You've got a price tag written all over you." He glanced down at the small leather purse. "You may not realize it, but there are some that would knock you off just for the price of a bottle. Your purse cost more than some people's clothes."

She glanced down at the Coach on her arm and gently sat it on top of the hood of the '57 Chevy. She twirled around, her skirt flaring at the action. It was a wisp of a skirt, almost see through, and Nick's body was already responding in a familiar way. Not that he wanted it to, but he no longer had control. Not where Kelsey was concerned at least.

"I suppose it was careless of me, but I wanted to talk to you, and your mother said you'd be down here."

"My mother? Again. What? You got some mutual attraction for each other?" Nick came closer. "You talked to my mother?"

"Yes, of course. Is that against the law? I like her."

"How did you find her?"

"That wasn't easy." She blinked hard and Nick noticed the thickness of her long lashes against her creamy cheeks, and the way each breath she took made her breasts swell against her dress. "But it didn't take long to realize you moved. I'm so glad, Nick. At least one of us has what they want."

He gave her the once over, again.

"So, anyway, then I called information and got your phone number. Stop looking at me like that, it's not like it's unlisted." She turned away from him again.

A hand snaked out to pull her around to him, bringing her dangerously closer. "What do you want?"

"I want to-to get pregnant," she gasped as his other hand snaked through her hair. He wasn't hurting her. He'd never hurt her, or any other woman for that matter. Still, she had to realize that she was playing with fire.

Nick's eyes traveled downward, taking in the summer dress with renewed interest. The swell of her breasts seemed to brim against her dress. It was the first time she'd worn anything distracting around him. He couldn't help but wonder if she was playing at a seduction. If she was, he wanted to enjoy every moment of it.

Still, if he were honest, it wasn't the dress, or the sudden realization that she was beautiful. Hell no, it was that damn voice that had gotten to him. And she hadn't a clue about that. How could she know that it sent a strange thrill through him every time she spoke in that kitten soft voice? It seemed to slither up his spine like a feather. He'd never acted that way over a voice before. It made no sense.

He let her go, almost with a shove. "That's not my problem, anymore. I did my part."

Still imploring him, she walked straight up to him again.

"It's your job to get me pregnant," she stated, her voice husky, her eyes wide.

"My job? Excuse me." He nearly laughed in her face. He had to make her mad enough to leave, because if she didn't go soon, he wasn't going to be responsible. The decision was made, had been since the moment she walked in. His body could only take so much torture.

Every nerve tensed, and coiled into a tight ball. Never, had he wanted a woman so strongly in his entire life. His hands were shaking to keep from grabbing her and throwing her in the back seat of the Chevy. He wanted to relieve this tension, wanted to release himself of this misery she kept causing. Yet, it was more than that, and he knew it. He had started feeling things about her. Caring about her.

What was it about her that made him want her? Why did she, of all women, stand out in his mind as perfect? Her beautiful flawless skin, her long, graceful legs, her wild, unruly hair that she hadn't bothered pinning back tonight. Those pouting pink lips constantly begging his attention. Still, he had started falling for her long before she discarded those linen suits, and black glasses. It wasn't the beautiful woman standing before him that he wanted-- it was the entire package--body and soul. Perhaps if they made love just once, he'd rid himself of this hungering need for her. Perhaps it was some crazy kind of craving that once satiated, would go away. Sure, Leonetti. This woman intrigued him in every way, taunted him. He wanted her in the most basic way a man could want a woman, and yet he knew at this moment, that once would never be enough. She was like some kind of fever; once in the bloodstream, he was a goner.

His loins began to ache, cry out to him, his body tensed, his eyes wouldn't hold hers any longer, couldn't.

He lied to himself, a dozen times. What he wanted was all of Kelsey O'Sullivan, not just the flesh. He wanted her to open up and fly like an angel into his arms, to give everything of herself, risk everything on a chance at something real and binding between them. He wanted to see a real smile on those pink lips. He wanted to show her a life she'd obviously never realized. He wanted a commitment from her, like he already felt towards her. Feelings, yes, raw, unbound feelings; gut feelings.

"Look, you got what you wanted. You accomplished your goal, but I didn't. I still need your help. And I'm here to ask for it."

Bold. Just like that. Kelsey didn't get her way, so she was here to get it.

"Okay, so I'll go to the clinic again," he answered, turning away from the irresistible urge to move closer. That perfume was driving him nuts. Why did women have to wear perfume? To drive men crazy, he supposed. Everything about her drove him crazy. How many nights had he lain awake trying to exorcise the memory of her from his mind? Forget the kiss; forget the woman with the husky voice. Underneath all that sophistication was a girl who probably hadn't eaten a hot dog, hadn't flown a kite, hadn't watched a sunset. And secretly he wanted to do all those things with her. He wanted to see the expressions on her face when she enjoyed them.

"The doctors suggested I might try it the natural way."

Nick's eyes were on fire. He was on fire. Not only her voice, but now the very words she spoke. Damn! Why'd she have to say that? Why didn't she just go away, find herself a husband, and have all the kids she wanted? He wanted her so badly he was afraid his clothes had burned right off his body. He felt exposed. Why was she taunting him? Deliberately!

This was no way to have a child. A child should be conceived in love.

"The natural way?" His eyes got bigger, his body more taut, his mind exploding with possibilities. Her words drew pictures. Pictures he tried hard to blot away, and couldn't.

"Sex," she choked out the words.

"Sex," he repeated, wincing from the word. That cut lower than anything she'd said. It almost quenched the fire inside him, almost--but not quite. It hurt. How could a word like that sound so--so dirty?

She stared, unaware that her lips were moistly parted in invitation. That was the problem. She seemed totally unaware of the fact that she provoked all those feelings in him.

"You want to have--sex?"

"I did pay you."

Suddenly his heart plummeted to the ground, even though his body was still afire. Schnook! She doesn't want you; she wants what you can give her. He shook his head and threw down a rag he had wiped his hands on. "So, now I'm a stud service?"

"N-no, no Nick. But I paid you for your services. It's not working this way. Would it be so revolting to make love--I, I mean, to have sex with me?"

"Revolting? Try degrading!"

"I paid you. If you don't--don't do something, I'll sue you," she threatened.

"Sue me?" He laughed harshly, because his needs were strangling him--because what he felt for her seemed like more than what she suggested--much more. Couldn't she see what she was doing to him? It had to be obvious to her and anyone else who might wander in.

"Yes, sue you."

"What could you get?" He moved to close the garage door as the rain began to come down harder, and roll down the concrete floor of the garage. "You've stolen my dignity. What more do you want? How far you gotta take me down?"

"My money back," she cried, her voice going softer, as he moved to stand just in front of her, a hair's breath away.

Her money back?

"I can't give you, your money back, Kelsey," he choked out the words, his eyes ripping her to shreds. Why had he gotten himself into this mess?

"Why not?"

"It's tied up, in the bank. But you'll get every cent of it back, with interest. That's a promise." He answered swiftly, his eyes scorching her.

"I can't wait. I need the money to find--someone else."

She said it so matter-of-factly he had to blink. How could this goddess of a woman be so heartless? Suddenly his eyes were ablaze, his hands snaked around her upper arms. He wanted to shake some sense into her, into himself.

"I didn't think even you would play so dirty. You--a woman who has money, needs money. Come on," he ground at her.

"Dirty? Is having sex with me dirty?" Her voice grew hard. She dared to come closer. "Why are you making this so difficult, Nick? You've had plenty of one-night stands, according to your mother. Why should I be different? The only difference is I want something out of it, too. But I've been honest about that from the start."

Now, he was looking at her. She had no idea that same question kept popping up in his mind. What was different?

She was right. There could be no lasting relationship with her, so why was she different? The question haunted him.

He nodded. "Yeah, one night stands." He glanced around him, then seeing his weapon, he dipped his hands into the grease can on the counter and came at her. He'd run her off once and for all. He'd scare her so bad she'd never show her face in here again.

With quiet deliberation, he came at her. Once he backed her into the car, there was nowhere for her to go. Two fingers reached to dot her nose with the grease.

Her mouth opened with a gasp, but nothing escaped. Instead, she held her head higher, daring him.

"This isn't Fifth Avenue, Kelsey. The old Clinton DeWitt area is almost gone. Almost. Look around you. A long history is dying out there in the piles of rubble. The people are being forced out of their homes--in the name of progress. They're tearing it down, piece by piece. I'm sure you noticed--it's becoming an eyesore. An embarrassment to the better standing communities. Your communities."

His fingers barely grazed her nose, but the contact was lethal. He wanted her to smell it. Get dirty, baby, his mind screamed at her. Feel the dirt, and slime.

She stood rock still. She barely breathed.

"You better go home," he warned and turned away.

"Not until you reconsider or pay me back."

He turned back around, and moved towards her. His eyes lowered. Slowly, he reached out and dotted her neck with the grease. She still didn't move. God, but she was stubborn!

Dipping his hand in the grease once more, he deliberately smeared the grease across the hollow of her neck, and she took a deep breath. Her head fell back a little, and a tangle of lush curls danced over her shoulders. In a minute she was going to run out of the garage so fast he wouldn't know what hit her.

Her chest rose more slowly now, and he almost groaned with his need of her. Still, his intention to run her off had to work. It had to ...

But she didn't move.

Then, with sharpened accuracy, his fingers dipped into the front of her dress, around the small curves and deep into the valley. This time he did touch--he couldn't help himself. His hands shook as they slowly drifted over her, the needs and the wills battling. His fingertips grazed the tip of her breast and it hardened into a nub. He swore beneath his breath and backed away, realizing there would be no way to stop what was about to happen.

She lifted her head, then threw it back, and bared herself to his will. No woman ever looked so provocative, Nick was sure of it. Here she stood, in his garage, asking to be taken. If he wanted to plaster grease all over her, she was willing, obviously.

His fingers shook again, betraying him.

"You've got grit, babe, and I've got needs," he began, his voice gravelly. He held her around the waist now, pulling her to him, her flesh soft and yielding beneath his fingertips. Slowly his clean hand reached up to stroke the smoothness of her cheek. She moved against his caress like a kitten lapping at his attention.

"Do you know how much I want you?" His voice was husky. And then like magic their lips met, slowly, almost tentatively. Soft and pliant in his arms, her lips parted in generous invitation. Nick couldn't wait to slip his tongue inside and taste her once more. Like chocolate, to be devoured slowly, not missing a morsel.

Without further provocation, his hips sank in against hers, leaving no doubt as to his arousal, moving in a slow rhythm to some primitive beat. Hips seduced hips.

Neither seemed able to get enough of the other, and when they came up for air, they were breathless, gasping, needing to grope each other for strength.

His eyes searched hers as his fingers undid the tiny buttons of her dress, one by one. Given the green light, Nick's breath became labored. She still didn't move, and the slant of her lips seduced him.

"God, lady, I'm not made of stone!" he cried only to see her head come down to meet his blazing gaze, her hair a glorious riot of colors against the dim light of the shop. Their eyes locked onto each other hungrily, and suddenly she threw back her head, and gathered him to her.

"Neither am I."

The bodice of her dress slid open like a gentle wave of a breeze and with a groan he glanced down at the silky teddy she was wearing beneath. It was too much, too unexpected; his whole body lit like a fuse.

One side of his brain shouted, Goody-Two-Shoes doesn't wear sexy little teddies.

In one quick movement he swept her up into his arms and carried her to the backseat of his Chevy. He gently laid her down on the seat, and stared into her misty eyes. Did he have the courage or the ability to give up what she offered him?

"Make love to me, Nick," she begged when he hesitated.

"Oh babe," he groaned, wanting to hear those words over and over, and unable to stop the rush of adrenalin that came with the restlessness of his body.

This all felt so right to him. Just this one time he'd take her, and rid himself of desire.

Their lips met in a storm of passion that threatened to undo everything. He wanted to taste every nip and nook of her. "God, you taste good, even better than I remember," he whispered as his lips wandered over her face, touching, kissing, needing. This sudden wanting growing, festering, and unleashing. He wanted to be gentle, to take his time, to give her everything, to make her feel.

His hands went from her hair to the hem of her dress in one long caress, achingly slow. The grease he smeared earlier only quickened his movements and proved a stimulant to his probing hands. Hot, slick and strangely erotic. Without further thought, his hands strayed to her thigh and she uttered a soft guttural sound. A slow slithering hand found the velvet bud of her womanhood moments later, finding it hot and surprisingly moist as he slid the silk aside.

Silk? He groaned from deep within. Goody-Two-Shoes wore silk? How much could he take?

The smell of grease reminded him he was taking her in the backseat of a Chevy, but her guttural sounds urged him onward in his quest.

"Oh, yes," she cried as his fingers slid inside the silky teddy and began the rhythm of life. Still, he needed to slow down, to take his time, to show her what love could be like.

Suddenly his kisses became softer, more languid. His hand moved upward to cup her face. Their lips fused like hot glue, tongues mating slowly, lapping like kittens to

warm milk. His big rough hands crept slowly over her with incredible gentleness, reveling in her smallness.

He slid the thin strap of the ice blue teddy from her shoulders, and his hands glided over her as it slithered down her curves. He groaned. Where he'd smeared the grease only made her breast more pronounced.

He held her tight against him for one long moment, then moved away, just far enough to peel the teddy downward, slowly. Deliberately he slowed his actions; his desire to please her took over.

With unerring accuracy his kisses went lower, to the soft lobe of her ear where he whispered sweet nothings, to the sweet hollow of her throat, tasting, laving, demanding. Then finally he eased down to the swell of her small but perfect breast. With one hand he blotted the grease away so he could taste her there. The blotting made her breast grow hard and needy. He lost his breath for a moment as his eyes feasted on her. She was like no other woman he had known. So small, and yet so womanly. His hands cupped her like precious jewels. As her pearly breast grew and puckered, his tongue circled her, enticing a response from her that she was helpless to fight. His nose nudged the pink bud, his eyes glittering at her reactions, her soft moans of pleasure became his reward.

"You're so gorgeous," he whispered between kisses and nips.

He suckled her, lathering her with the moistness of his warm tongue and lips. His breath blew softly against her until she squirmed and moaned her pleasure.

Fireworks went off in his head, as he realized the specialness of this coming together. He coveted the moments, savoring them in his memory for later. If she had to get pregnant, if she had to have it this way, then he would love her so much, and so hard, that she would never be able to forget the father of her baby. And his baby would be born of love, he vowed, his love.

He wanted to shout out his emotions in some sort of release. He wanted to cry, for the love they would share but not keep. He wanted to kiss every part of her until she forgot who she was and where she came from. Yet, most of all, he wanted her to know that loving a man could be good, unforgettable. He wanted her to quit thinking, and just feel.

He wanted so much, so little.

When her small, perfect little body was on fire for him, when she squirmed to be closer, to feel him inside her, he urged himself down on top of her, and the last piece of silk joined the rest. How his clothes joined hers he wasn't sure, but he remembered hot and eager little hands pulling and snatching.

She reached for him, pulling him tighter, moaning softly against him as he let his fingers build the fire. He gloried in the way her legs encircled him, the soft guttural sounds in her throat urged him in his quest to conquer her.

"Oh, Nick," she whispered. "Please--"



Then unable to sustain the tension mounting in them both he entered her. For a moment, he closed his eyes and reveled in the feel of just being one with her. Nothing prepared him for the rightness of it. Only God could make them fit so perfectly.

Slowly he began the rhythm that swirled her into a tunnel of sensations. He wanted this to be so special, to wait until they could no longer wait.

It was a glorious high as they reached the highest plateau together, crying out for each other. "Oh, Nick, yes, love me," she cried out as her teeth sank into the hard flesh of his arm, his shoulder, as her fingernails dug into his hard fleshed back.

Nick didn't flinch as he savored her need of him. He wrapped his heart around her like a soft, warm blanket, his eyes meeting hers. He was lost in her happiness, in his.

Her skin was moist and hot, her eyes danced in the darkness, and a smile broke across her face as she lay cuddled into his arms moments later.

He couldn't let her go yet. He wasn't sure he could ever let her go again, not after loving her so thoroughly. He'd hoped he had been tender enough, slow enough, but his own wild passions had at long last overtaken the situation. He smiled at the memory of her reaching for him when they met each other with such equal force.

Thoughts of her leaving, made him hold her tighter, kiss the top of her head. How could he not want her over and over again? How could he ever get enough of her? She tasted sweeter than any woman he'd ever known. It was as though her very taste were made for him. She felt so right in his arms.

Nick didn't want to think of her leaving him, couldn't, so he erased it from his mind. He thought only of her, with him, loving him, nurturing this newfound feeling for all the moments he might have with her. Could she ever learn to trust the feeling of love?

Later she giggled joyously into his ear, "I never thought I'd be doing something like this in the back of a '57 Chevy."

"Sorry, but it's better than that cot I've got in the back room, believe me," he whispered, his lips still lingering against her heated skin. Yet, even as he spoke the words, his heart shouted with words of love, unexpressed.

"Is it morning yet?" she gasped when his lips captured one peak of her breast and suckled. She squirmed, and moaned and began touching him, as though he were a road-map and she needed to memorize her destination.

"Not quite, why?" he rasped, giving up the luscious nibble as she continued to delight him.

"Because I'm dead tired, but I still want you ..." she cried huskily and reached for him again.

"Have your way with me, then woman. I'm yours," he added, his lips finding hers once more. For as long as you want me, his mind cried. He didn't want to think about anything but making love to this beautiful creature in his arms.

When his lips left hers he sat up and stared down into her love-drugged eyes. "I want to kiss you," he whispered.

When she continued to stare, saying nothing, he moved downward slowly until his lips touched feather light against the moist heat of her.

He parted her legs, seeking her out. His lips surrounded her, sending her into wave after wave of emotional ecstasy. She moaned uncontrollably. He wanted to be gentle, tender, loving. He wanted to brand her with this special kind of loving, so that she would never forget him.

Finally, grasping his head, urging him onward in his quest she moved herself against him. She moaned and gasped, "I never dreamed ..."

He smiled contentedly against her, then when she could stand it no longer, and she pulled him upward, he made a hot, wet trail around her belly button and up over the hardened tips of her breast before she reached to grab him and guide him into her again.

This time she became the aggressor, and he laughed aloud as she rolled him over and straddled him.

He watched in heated fascination as she threw back her head and clutched him tightly. Her hips moved slowly at first, then at his lead, more quickly. It was as if all inhibitions were gone and she took the lead. He'd never seen anything quite so beautiful in his life. He bit back his words of love to her, because he feared she'd stop and wouldn't believe him. Yet here, in the backseat of a Chevy he vowed his love for her to his God.

Later, much later, he locked the garage door, then returned to her side. She was already asleep, curled deliciously on the seat with a smile on her face. A real smile, one that took his breath away as he stared down into her flushed face. She looked so young, so vulnerable, and the primitive need to take care of her surged through him.

He wondered how long she would be content to be with him. Wondered if there was the slightest chance of making this a permanent arrangement. He wasn't thinking rationally, but he didn't care. Getting a blanket out of the trunk, he sighed heavily, then covered her up. He curled up against her, careful not to wake her, but holding her possessively closer than he had before. Before his eyes closed he remembered thinking he wished dawn would never come.

## Chapter Eight

"What's the matter with you, Leonetti, your mind off in space or somethin'?"

"Sorry Dutch, it won't happen again." Nick glanced at his boss and wiped the sweat from his brow as he balanced himself once more and continued on his way with the heavy steel beam.

The yell from a nearby co-worker whom he nearly hit with the beam had brought him back to reality. He'd never been so careless.

Dutch was right. He'd been off in space ever since Kelsey had come to the garage that night. It'd been nearly a month and he hadn't heard a word from her. A month! Not a day went by that he didn't want to pick up the phone and call her. Just to hear her voice again. God, he hadn't let a woman get under his skin in years. Why'd it have to be her?

He couldn't get that night out of his mind. Making love to Kelsey had been beyond wonderful. There were no words to describe it. And afterwards, the love and protective feelings that surrounded his heart every time he looked at her curled in the backseat of that Chevy made his heart lurch in his chest. He was in love with Kelsey O'Sullivan. "Dummy," he murmured to himself. "She doesn't love you. She purposely seduced you. She got what she wanted. And that's the end of it."

Maybe he should have said something that next morning, instead of sitting on the floor of the garage staring at a busted engine. As if an engine was on his mind at a time like that. But what could he have said? There could be no real future between a guy like him and a woman like her. So he'd held his silence--and so had she.

Nah, the princess got what she came for, and left. End of story.

But it was more than just Kelsey walking out without a backward glance that got to him. It was more than her not saying anything about feelings, caring, loving. It was more than sex, too. Sex didn't begin to describe what they had shared. He'd never felt this strong, belonging pull with a woman.

But still, it was the prospect of having a kid out there somewhere that he might never see, never be with that tore his heart into a million pieces. He had lost so much with his silence, but would it have done any good to say what he felt? Kelsey had wanted a baby, not him! She'd set the rules, he'd abide.

He'd get over this whole mess in time. He had to!

\* \* \*

"You're a little sicker with this one, aren't you?" Jackson asked, a frown lining his forehead, his concern obvious in his voice. That same compassion she had seen from the very beginning was surfacing again, and for her benefit, Kelsey realized.

Memories of her first pregnancy washed over her and tears filled her eyes, her lips quivered as she wiped them with a tissue. "A little, yes."

"Perhaps we should cut down your working hours, and I can handle some of the load for you."

"Not just yet, but maybe you're right. I certainly don't want to take any chances with this child." She glanced up at Jackson and bit her lip. "We'll see. And thanks for all your support, Jackson. You make me almost sorry I didn't choose you."

"I'm glad you didn't. I'd be a nervous wreck," Jackson said, smiling at her. "So, why don't you go home for the day? You look piqued and I can handle the office. There's nothing pending now that the merger has been established. I'm sure Ralph will stick around to complete things, then be on his way."

"What would I do without you, Jackson? But please, not a word to Ralph about this."

"Never fear. The heel hasn't even inquired about you since he's been here." When she didn't react Jackson went on, "Naturally, your undying gratitude is always appreciated, now go home, I'll call you later."

"All right, but if you need me--" she began only to be cut off.

"I'll call, now go on."

Kelsey berated herself for being so weak, but she simply wasn't feeling well enough to argue with Jackson. Besides, she knew Jackson was totally capable of handling everything. "Jackson ..." she paused, "... remind me to discuss a full partnership with you, later. That is if you're interested."

Looking surprised, Jackson's brow raised, a sign he was very interested. "I'll remind you, if you're serious."

An hour later, she parked her car in the driveway and went inside. She told Dorothy she was going to lie down and didn't want any calls except from Jackson.

But sleep eluded her, she tossed and turned, her excitement and fear loomed now that she was alone. A sadness welled inside her. The word that haunted most of her life. She was still alone. Except for the tiny life growing inside her.

How silly to be sad, now of all times, she scolded herself. Isn't this exactly what she had wanted? Yes, a baby, at long last. Someone to share her love with. But not just any baby, Nick's baby. A very special baby.

How would Nick react if he knew she was pregnant? Should she call him? She wanted to, but his words kept echoing in her mind. He didn't want to know about the child. Keep it impersonal, she reminded herself. However, that night in Nick's garage had been anything but impersonal.

Nick had been so quiet the next morning at the garage, not mentioning their night of passionate lovemaking. He acted cool and indifferent, as if nothing had happened. But it had been earth shattering for her. Nick had awakened the real woman in her, made her realize what loving a man was all about.

Even in her marriage she never experienced such sensations from a man's touch. It hadn't been just the sex, either. She'd felt an emotional bond with Nick, feelings of warmth and caring she'd never shared with anyone, not even Ralph. If only she could have wrapped her arms around Nick the next morning and told him how she really felt. In that brief span of time she had never felt so cared for, so protected in her life--as though Nick's love might shield her from all the hurts of life.

But pride had kept her silent. That, and the fact that she had so brazenly used Nick for her own purposes. Well, she got what she came for all right, and that was the end of that.

God only knew what Nick thought of her now.

She ached to call him, to tell him about the child they had conceived in the back of that '57 Chevy. Maybe she was using the baby as an excuse to talk to him again. But she so needed to hear his voice. Just his voice.

Being pregnant seemed different this time. Carrying Nick's baby thrilled her beyond words, and yet, she felt anxious, too. She was terrified of being a mother. Yet, this was what she had dreamed about, had asked for, what she believed she wanted and needed from life.

Who would the baby look like? Would she be black-haired and dark-skinned like Nick, or blue-eyed and blonde or perhaps a mixture of both? Kelsey preferred the latter; otherwise she'd never get Nick out of her head. Although she feared this constant heartache would not go away. He had touched more than her flesh. He had touched her heart and soul.

Guilt riddled her. She had used Nick for her own means. Granted, she had paid him for his services but nonetheless she had used him--a man like Nick. She wondered if he hated her. He had every right. She had purposely and selfishly seduced him, seeking him out to have a child, regardless of cost. And the cost had been much higher than she could possibly anticipate. Sex hadn't made her fall in love with Nick; she'd been doing that ever since he walked into her office that morning so unsuspecting. It had been the reason she was so sure she wanted Nick to father her baby. His strong sense of family obligation, his loyalty, and the fact that he didn't bother to hide how much he cared for his family. Who wouldn't fall in love with a man like that?

And now she was going to have his baby!

Yet, something vital to herself and the baby was missing. She now realized that without Nick, the victory was shallow.

\* \* \*

"So, would it be out of line if I asked if you were pregnant?" Nick's voice sounded throaty, even to himself. He had waited for her to call, but she never did. It had been two months, long enough to know, he reasoned.

"I'm going to the doctor this afternoon. But, yes, I think I am."

Nick groaned inwardly. Pregnant with his child. Did Kelsey have any idea what this did to him? Feelings of joy mixed with anger surrounded Nick. Protectiveness squeezed in on him. He wanted to march over there and claim what was his.

But where was the exuberance in her voice? She didn't sound as happy as he expected her to. Was something wrong and she wasn't telling him? Shouldn't she be happier?

"Are you feeling okay?"

"I've got a bad case of morning sickness, actually. That's what makes me so sure I am pregnant, though. Some foods make me ill just smelling them."

"I'm sorry for that, but congratulations, I guess."

"Thanks."

"I hope you don't mind me calling, Kelsey." He cleared his throat again. "I had to know. Is there anything I can do? Do you need anything?"

"No, nothing. Everything is fine. Jackson has even offered to take over some of my work at the office until I'm feeling better."

"I'd like to have met this Jackson. He seems like a nice kind of guy. I can't imagine why you didn't pick him to father your child."

There was a soft chuckle at the other end. "Well, like I told you before, I almost did, actually. I mean he has all the right qualifications. He's sophisticated, educated, and he looks like a celebrity. I think you and Jackson would get along well."

"Maybe you should have picked him, then."

"No." She hesitated. "I picked the right man for the job. Because, despite all that, Jackson and I are just friends."

"Yeah, sure. Look, let me know if you need anything, Kelsey. Anything at all."

"Thanks, Nick. I won't be needing anything, but if you'd like to call from time to time, you can. I know we agreed on no contact, but it is your baby. And I can't in all good conscience keep everything to myself. I'm glad we have the contract behind us. But it wouldn't be fair not to share something with you, Nick."

Nick's throat tightened. There it was, a contract, about his kid. It always came back to that, an ironclad contract. The woman didn't deal in emotions. She needed a contract for everything. This was his kid. A kid he had vowed he'd never desert. Now he felt as though he deserted both Kelsey and the baby. "I'd like to come by, I mean. In the meantime, take care."

Nick hung up wondering why he felt so suddenly lost. He was going to be a father and yet he'd never be there to enjoy it. Damn! What a fool he'd been. The rain coming down outside seemed to echo his dark feelings. A sound all of New York was probably celebrating again.

When he got home from work late that night, he noticed that his house was dark, everyone was asleep. Somehow coming home would never be the same again. He felt as though he belonged somewhere else. But where?

Sitting in his car, he watched the big drops of rain that splashed musically against the windshield in some offbeat tune. He listened for a long while, hoping the rain might soothe his overwrought nerves, like it usually did, but it didn't.

Then it hit him. As though he suddenly had come in out of the dark, he had the spark of an idea. He banged his palm against his forehead and stared at himself in the rear-view mirror.

Suddenly jerking the transmission into drive once more and speeding off in the direction of Kelsey's apartment he cursed himself for not thinking of it sooner. He was a man with a mission. A mission he was sure Kelsey wouldn't like.

Just like before, letting his anger ferment before he barged in on her, he sat quietly staring at the complex. He needed to think it through before he put his plan in motion. It could work. It had to.

Minutes later, he stormed up the stairs to Kelsey's apartment door. The housekeeper let him in with malevolent reluctance.

"You again? Now see here, this isn't the time ..."

"No. It isn't, you're absolutely right about that, Dorothy, but will you be a doll and put the coffee on. And I'm sorry I had to wake you. This is important though. I'll just let myself into her room. We'll be fine."

"But you can't!"

"Look, trust me, on this one, will ya?" Nick smiled, and turned the housekeeper on her way to the kitchen. He was winning points with Dorothy. He saw that in her half smile.

Nick didn't barge in this time; instead he crept up to the side of the bed, staring down at the disheveled Kelsey. She was on her stomach, her hair was in her eyes, and her gown hunkered down over one shoulder. He feasted on her for a few seconds, letting the rush of adrenalin wash through him. He still wanted her, more than ever. His insides ached to hold her in his arms again, but on his terms this time. Yes, he'd have to take control, whether she liked it or not, and he'd have to be strong and resist the temptation she offered so innocently.

"Hey," Nick called to her softly, his voice lowering when his body refused to obey his mind.

She didn't move.

"Hey, babe," he called softly, scooting her body over so he could sit beside her on the bed.

At first she just rolled over and piled the pillows around her head. But he slowly reached to uncover her head, and turned the small lamp on beside her bed.

She whirled about, and nearly pounced on him, until her eyes opened and she realized who he was.

"N-Nick?" She gathered the covers about her at first, then must have realized how silly it was and relaxed her hold on them.

"Hello to you, too." He smiled.

Pulling the covers up slowly again, she adjusted her gown, and straightened her hair. She couldn't possibly know how gorgeous she looked at this moment, Nick thought to himself, steeling his emotions.

"What are you doing here, at this hour?" Her head nodded toward the bedside clock. It was twelve-thirty.

"We've got to talk," he said, not sure how far to take it at this moment.

"Talk? Again, and at this hour?" She grabbed the clock by her bedside and shoved it in his face. "Do you know what time it is? Don't you ever talk during the day?"

"Best time for talking is when things are clear in your head. Don't you think?"

"Well, I'm certainly not clear in the head at the moment. Honestly, Nick, don't you ever sleep?"

"No, not much anymore. That's why I'm over here, instead of home in bed. Now, sit up and let's talk." He had her at an disadvantage and he knew it. He'd have to keep her this way if his plan was going to work.

"I will not. Wait for me in the living room--"

"Not this time. This will do just fine. I don't want any rehearsed speeches you might throw at me. I just want to sit and talk sensibly."

"Sensibly, at this hour?" Her voice rose, her eyes burned into him. She must have realized he wasn't going to leave because she weakened almost instantly. "I'll need some coffee."

"Dorothy is already making some." Nick chuckled.

"Would you at least hand me my robe?" She gestured for her closet.

"No. You don't need one. Relax. I've seen you in less, remember?"



She turned scarlet and he laughed aloud.

"So what's on your mind?" She frowned at him.

"A lot. I've been doing some pretty heavy thinking as a matter of fact and there are some things still bothering me. I think we need to settle them." He tried to keep his mind on the issue, but every time her gown strap wandered, so did his mind. He tried to keep his eyes glued to her face.

"Things? What things?" She fumbled with her gown.

"When I first approached you, you said you wanted a baby. You told me about your marriage, your divorce, and your losing Ralph's baby. But, it occurred to me that we haven't discussed a few things."

"Such as?"

"Your qualifications."

"My qual--"

"Yes, your qualifications--as a mother." He smiled, enjoying the way her face turned such a bright red. She was instantly angry, as though he'd pushed some kind of button in her brain. Good. Angry people didn't always think straight, he was counting on that.

"What's to qualify? I'm a woman, aren't I?"

"That's not enough. Being a woman doesn't automatically make you good mother material. Especially these days, when a woman assumes the role of a man in business. I can count on my hand a number of bad mothers in my old neighborhood. They were women too. I don't want that for my kid."

"Nick--you're out of your mind. You can't possibly compare me to--to them." She sat up on her knees and looked at him.

"Am I? And can't I? Actually, I think I'm thinking very clearly. You were an only child, rich, spoiled, those papers told me that much, even if I hadn't gotten to know you a little. You've always gotten your way about things, one way or another, as you have this time, too. Your parents weren't around much. You said so yourself. Bad examples. It's not your fault. You haven't had much family life. How could you possibly know how to handle a baby by yourself? So, I've got some questions for you."

She unfolded her feet now and let them dangle on the edge of the bed as she eyed him carefully. "What kind of questions?"

"You want a job being a mother, don't you?"

She nodded numbly.

"Okay, so have you ever babysat?"

"Well, no, but ..."

He shook his head. "Not good. Have you ever carried that kind of responsibility around with you? Do you know what colic is, and how to treat it? Do you know how to change a diaper, when to burp the baby, lull her to sleep? The burping can be a real experience with a newborn. Mrs. Polasky's baby took nearly an hour sometimes and would cry all that time."

He watched Kelsey's brow go up skeptically.

"So, you think you know when to take it to the doctor, and when to simply rock it to sleep. Do you know the measles from the mumps? There's a lot to learn about kids, Kelsey."

Kelsey's face turned white, then red. "Now see here. Who do you think you are? I'll learn all those things. Every new mother has to learn things. I'll adapt."

"How? Who's going to teach you? How you gonna have time to adapt and work, too? I bet you don't even know a lullaby."

"I most certainly do!" she shouted, putting her hands on her hips and glaring at him. "And if I find it necessary, I'll take a class or something. But I'm sure I can manage just fine, thank you."

"That's not good enough for my kid." He saw her roll her eyes and her pert little nose go up an inch. He smiled with satisfaction. "Up 'til now, everything has been your way, hasn't it? You want a baby, so you hire a guy. A real dope of a guy. Because none of your high and mighty friends would be stupid enough to do something like this. Would they? No. But the truth is, you don't know one thing about being a mother, do you?"

Turning her hands together in her lap, she hesitated. "Well--no, but, no one does 'til they experience it. I can read up on it. In fact, I've already bought a couple of books on the subject. I just haven't gotten around to studying them yet."

"That's not good enough." He shook his head. "You told me the baby would be your first priority. Remember? That remains to be seen. Haven't read 'em yet, huh. You haven't gotten around to a lot of things. I'm afraid it isn't good enough, Kelsey."

Dorothy arrived in time to serve them both coffee and leave with a strange look of compliance on her ruggedly pleasant face.

Kelsey welcomed the reprieve.

Nick winked at Dorothy.

Kelsey seemed to recognize the fact that Nick had already won over her housekeeper. "Now look, Nick, I appreciate the fact that you're concerned about the baby. Really,

it's touching. It's commendable of you. But don't you think you're going a little overboard?"

"Nope!" He took a sip of coffee and smiled. "Not in the least. I'm here to tell you to your face, that I'm going to teach you how to take care of the baby."

"Well, thanks loads, but I don't need your help. Besides, what makes you think you're such an expert?"

"Nevertheless, you're gettin' it. And maybe I'm not an expert, but I've taken care of Tony, and babysat quite a few in my neighborhood. I've been through colic, teething, and earaches. Have you?"

She shook her head.

"It's no picnic. You don't get much sleep the first few months. Your nerves are on edge."

"I'm sure it isn't but--"

"You don't sound too happy about all of this, Kelsey. Is something wrong? I thought I'd find you on cloud nine. This is what you wanted, isn't it?"

"No. I mean, yes, of course it is," Kelsey responded with a heavy sigh. "But you have a habit of storming me. Of catching me unaware. I'm just a little tired. I've had a lot of morning sickness lately."

Nick chuckled to himself. She wanted sympathy, and in truth, he did feel sorry for her. He could tell by the circles under her eyes she'd been miserable, but he couldn't give in.

"I'm sorry. Maybe working is too much for you. Maybe you should take some time off. You need to conserve your energy more."

"Not just yet. The doctor said I'm healthy as a horse and should have no complications. Besides, working keeps my mind off feeling bad."

"So you've gone to the doctor? I mean you have a confirmation."

"Yes, I went today after I spoke with you on the phone. According to him, I'm two months pregnant. I'm healthy, the baby is fine and I'm taking vitamins."

Taking vitamins? Why? Was she lacking something? Why did she have to take anything? Two months! Two months, not six weeks. He hadn't realized it had been that long since he'd touched her, smelled the lilacs, and tasted her creamy skin. And he was hungry for more of her right now, but this time he was going to be strong and resist her.

The baby would be due in February, if that calculation were right. Seven more months of waiting. Of agony.

"I came here tonight to tell you, I'm not giving this kid up, yet."

"You what?" Kelsey gasped.

"That's right. Maybe never. I don't know. But I'm not butting out 'til I know you are capable of taking care of her."

"But we had an agreement!"

"Agreements are meant to be broken."

Kelsey sat up straight, obviously realizing Nick was serious.

"I can sue you for breach of promise."

"Go ahead. At this point I don't care if I lose the garage or not. This is more important. I've thought this through, Kelsey, and I'm not butting out. Not yet anyway. Take my garage; take everything I own. This is my kid too. I have a few rights left."

When she said nothing but stared open-mouthed at him, he smiled and asked, "So when can you start practicing with me?"

"Practicing?" Her voice raised an octave.

"Yes, to be a good mother."

"To be a good mother?" She repeated dully. Her eyes blazed with pure fury. Kelsey stood up now, and paced the floor in front of him. It no longer mattered that she wasn't dressed properly. "I can't believe what I'm hearing."

"I know, but we'll just have to start on a weekend, while you're not working."

"You're serious?" She glared at him.

"You thought I was joking?"

"Nick--"

"Saturday," he said, standing and coming close to her. He smelled the lilac. He inhaled slowly, savoring it for memory. "We'll start this Saturday, here," he announced, and suddenly pulled her into his arms, and kissed her fully on the lips. A kiss he would have liked to carry further, but didn't. Kelsey lips seemed to melt against his, despite her anger. But Nick wasn't wooing her. He broke the contact before it went too far. And he knew from her response, it could have gone a lot further.

She looked astonished.

He turned her loose and walked toward the door. "Don't forget, this Saturday, say two-ish."

And then he was gone.

Later in the week, he came home early and found his mother watching his every move.

"Nicky?" Mama's voice broke his reverie.

"Yeah Mama?"

"You're home so early. Is something wrong?" His mother eyed him with perception.

"No, Mama, nothing is wrong. I just didn't go to the garage today. How was your day?" he asked, grabbing a cold biscuit from the back of the stove and sitting at the kitchen table as he watched her prepare supper. He'd never tire of the ritual.

He should be watching Kelsey prepare supper, he thought as his mind drifted while Mama went on and on about Mrs. Peabody. Did Kelsey ever fix her own supper? Could she cook? She'd have to learn. Kids needed a good family atmosphere at mealtime, and nothing was as good as sitting around a table watching supper being prepared. He should know.

"Do you think so, Nicky?"

"Yes, Mama, of course," Nick answered, not knowing what he was agreeing with.

"I think some girl has you tied in knots, Nicky," Mama said, turning away from him as she placed bacon in the skillet.

"Girl?"

"You have all the classic symptoms. You never hear me anymore. Never see me, either. You don't eat right. You work too much. Why don't you tell your mama about it? You know I'm always here for you, Nicky. You've always confided in me."

Nick stood up, whirled his mama around and stared at her, enjoying the peace in her face at last. Yes, this move had done wonders for her. Years of worry had been erased; she looked younger, more vibrant. For that he was glad. He kissed her forehead. "I love you, Mama, and I'd like to. I really would, but I'm afraid I can't just yet. Maybe some other time."

"Is it the O'Sullivan girl?"

"Yes, I might as well admit that much to you, or you'll bug me forever." He smiled at her.

"My poor Nicky," she fretted, her eyes going serious as she patted him on the cheek. "You're in love, aren't you?"

"Don't start, Mama--"

"Start?" Her eyes danced as she moved about the kitchen in a lively step. "I'm not starting, as you put it. But it's written all over your face to read. Can I help it? I'm so happy for you, Nicky. For you and for her."

"No, Mama, you can't ever help that vivid imagination of yours. So let's leave it for now."

"But you always confide in me, Nicky." His mama made a mock frown. "You know I like her. There's something about her. She will make fine children for you, Nicky, I can see that much."

"No more, Mama, please. We'll have a long talk, soon. I promise," Nick begged her and strolled out of the kitchen and into the living room where Tina was helping Tony with his lessons.

"Well, this is what I like to see. Big sister helping with homework. Nice, I like it." Nick smiled at the two of them as he eyed them with idle curiosity.

"She's been helping me with my English so I can stay on the team, Nick." Tony beamed up at him, brushing a strand of his black hair from his face.

Tina cast Nick a quick smirk, pretending an indifference she obviously didn't feel. "Well, someone has to see this kid gets off to the right start. I don't want everyone asking me if I'm related to the English flunky. Besides, we've got a chance at the pennant, for the first time in over five years they say, and Tony's irreplaceable on the team." Her voice beamed with pride.

Nick smiled, messed Tony's hair, and winked at his sister. As he sat watching them, he realized the move had done a lot of things for the family. Mama was less tense, and actually enjoying her life. Tony was getting interested in doing better in school. And Tina was already very popular and asked out by some of the boys in her class. She was dating boys her age now, even though it had taken a while to shake her away from Hell's Kitchen and Joe Giavanni.

So why couldn't he feel good about everything? Kelsey got what she wanted, but so did he. Until he met Kelsey his only thought had been to get his family into a reasonable neighborhood. Now, he had moved his family into a real home. In fact, they were self-sufficient. Everything should be hunky-dory. It just wasn't. He was going to have to work on it hard.

After a big supper, and a lot of catching up on family gossip, Nick went to bed early, feeling for the first time that things might work out in his favor. But sleep evaded him.

He had clipped a picture of Kelsey from a morning paper, and stashed it under his pillow. He pulled it out. It showed her and Ralph signing a big merger. Ralph was a nice looking, well-dressed man, but he wore a smug expression. Just from the picture, Nick could tell this man was a cold fish and had no business with Kelsey.

Nick sat up in bed, staring at the picture. Kelsey looked a little gaunt. Perhaps the morning sickness played havoc with her makeup that day, but she was still his

beautiful Kelsey. He only hoped his idea worked. But what fascinated him about this particular picture was that her secretary stood between her and Ralph. So this was Jackson. He looked a little like Nat King Cole, obviously the celebrity she was talking about. And yet, this Jackson looked more in control of the entire situation than either Kelsey or Ralph. He was the brain and Nick knew it. This was a character Nick would like to meet--and thank.

He wanted to thank him for being there for Kelsey, standing by her in her times of need. A good man, this Jackson.

So he and Kelsey had something new in common, a friend, Jackson!

## Chapter Nine

Saturday at two, Nick knocked on Kelsey's door. Casually dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, Kelsey greeted him with a shy, questioning smile. She couldn't hide her surprise.

"Nick, I don't really think ..."

"That it's necessary, I know. But it is, to me." He smiled and went straight for the living room, as though it were old habit.

Kelsey followed him hesitantly, trying to figure an angle to get rid of him. Although it was the last thing she wanted to do, she knew she had to. She didn't want more contact with Nick at this point, knowing it was to no avail. Just seeing him made her heart pound harder, her palms sweat, her pulse race. "What exactly did you have in mind?"

Nick glanced around the room and then at her. His sexy grin warmed her. "I thought we'd start with the room."

"The room?" Kelsey repeated his words, not having a clue as to what he was talking about. She glanced about and then at him.

"Yeah, which room have you set aside for the baby?" He asked starting down the hallway.

"Well." She jumped ahead of him, but trying to dissuade him would be futile from the determined look on his face. She'd have to pick a different angle with him. "I hadn't gotten that far yet. But ... I suppose the middle room. The one closest to mine."

He nodded and went directly to it, as though he'd lived there all his life. "The middle room. Yes, that's a good choice. It's close to your bedroom and smaller. Good choice. He said pausing to tip her chin up to him. Kelsey held her breath for a second, sure he was going to kiss her, but he didn't. Disappointment speared through her. Instead he scrutinized her with a slow burning smile and said, "I never believed that old saying that pregnant women had a glow, 'til now." He cleared his throat and moved away. "We're making progress."

A glow? She had a glow? Somehow she had to stop Nick from going any further. He was purposely distracting her from getting rid of him. "I think it's wonderful that your taking an active interest, really, but don't you think it's a little presumptuous? I mean we agreed not to have contact, and here you are ..."

He shrugged indifferently. "I know, I've thought about that. And I've decided if you're going to pay me an outrageous sum of money for what I did, then I think I should do something to earn it. And it is my kid, too, Kelsey. Bear with me a little. Besides, I want to set the kid up right," he began, his eyes scanning the room thoroughly before he looked at her again.

"Set the kid up right?" She questioned barely able to control her mounting frustration.



"There's more to having a kid than sex, Kelsey. Now, we're going to have to make a trip to the paint store. Naturally, I'll do all the painting, since you're in no condition. It isn't a good idea for you to be exposed to paint fumes. It's your apartment, so you can pay for it. Besides, we can't expect Dorothy, or Jackson to do this kind of thing, now can we? And I think doing it together is a good idea. Stop fretting, everything is going to be fine."

"Nick, I don't ..."

"Okay, now, what color do you like?" He ignored her puny attempts to stay him.

"I could hire a contractor."

"Now, why would you want to, in the first place? No use wasting money. They charge a lot for something that's easily taken care of. I'm a good painter, you'll see. Besides, I want to contribute something to little Flora."

"Excuse me--little--Flora?"

"Nice, huh?" He didn't wait to see her reaction, but moved about quickly, ignoring her facial expressions. "She was the Roman goddess of flowers. Pretty isn't it? Perfect for our little girl. I did a lot of looking in those books at the library for just the right name. Her name should stand for something, don't you think?"

"Nick, you're going way too fast, here. I think we should talk." He had to listen to reason. The man was insufferable. Didn't he know he couldn't become involved? Hadn't she explained that often enough? Hadn't he read the contract he signed?

"Oh, I know, this is all too much for you." He guided her to a comfortable chair. "Why don't you sit down? Stop fretting. You're a lot like Mama, always fretting. I've got to measure the room anyway, and figure how much paint we'll need. Would you like a border at the top of the walls? I think that would be nice. Gives it a dressed up look. I discussed it with Mama and she said borders give it a custom look. What do you think?"

"Nick, I ..." She couldn't believe this was happening. Couldn't believe he had spoken with his mother about the baby. Who else had he told? And why? "You've told your mother?" He was taking over, and she couldn't stop him. Why had he told his mother? She never contemplated others knowing about it.

"Naturally, she has a right to know she's going to have a grandchild, don't you think? She's so excited. Now, you haven't said which color you like best?"

She started to contemplate his question, then realized he was winning this game too easily. How dare he barge in like this? But the innocent look on his face kept her temper at bay. "I thought about a pale mauve and blue. But, Nick, we had an agreement. You signed a contract."

Nick deliberately ignored the last jab and moved away again. "Too sophisticated. Too basic. Our kid needs better than that. Something bright, something cute. Yeah, I know what you're thinking, pink and blue, but I think yellow. Yellow is bright and

sunny, gives the baby a much brighter point of view, they say. I read that in the library too. What's the matter? You don't think I can read?"

Kelsey stammered for an explanation for her confused thoughts but she never dreamed Nick would react this way. Never dreamed Nick would go to the trouble of researching anything about babies.

"Granted, the library isn't my favorite hangout, but when I need to know something, that's where I usually go. Don't you?"

His question sounded so sincere, but there was a teasing glint to his Italian eyes. Eyes that melted her last reserve.

"I haven't read so much in my life. This baby is definitely a good influence on me. Mama is so excited."

"Who says yellow is bright and sunny?"

"They, the experts. Yes, yellow would be great. That way if we're wrong, and it's a boy, it won't matter."

"All right, yellow," she agreed with a frown. How had she lost this argument?

"Great, now why don't you go slip into some comfortable shoes and we'll go get the paint and border at the paint store. Go on, so I can get started," he insisted, pushing her from the room.

"But--"

"Go on, I'll only be a minute."

Kelsey went to her bedroom and obediently slipped into a pair of loafers. She needed to find a way to brush Nick off, but it wouldn't be easy. He was so insistent. How could she tell him this would never work?

Before she could contemplate what she was going to say to him, he was pushing her gently into his car and they were on their way to the paint store.

About a mile down the road, she grabbed at his arm. "Nick, pull over! I'm going to be sick."

Nick didn't hesitate. He came to a full stop, got out of the car and came over to pull her out of her seat. On one side of the road was a long row of apartment buildings, on the other a park. Not the kind of park a woman should get sick in, too manicured, too perfect.

Nick held her gently by the shoulders while she fought her nausea. Afterwards Nick offered his handkerchief and held her close until she felt better. He kissed the top of her head and she inhaled the soft scent of his after-shave. His muscles were tensed against her arms, but warm and inviting too. He smiled tenderly at her when she looked up at him.

Kelsey felt protected for the first time in a long time and there was a great need in her for comfort. It wouldn't hurt to give in just this once, she reasoned. Had Ralph ever been this gentle, they might have made a go of their marriage. But there was no soft side to Ralph. And the last thing she wanted to think about when in Nick's arms was Ralph.

Nick's lips pressed against her forehead as he held her in his arms, and she felt the heat rise between them. Somehow he seemed stronger than ever, although he didn't exert that strength on her. His need of her was obvious from the slight brush of his hips. He seemed to ignore it but Kelsey couldn't stop reacting to his nearness. She snuggled closer, needing his arms around her, needing his sweet words of comfort. She was so absorbed in his presence she almost didn't hear him.

"Better?" he asked in a lowered voice.

Kelsey nodded mutely. No! Worse. She wanted to scream aloud. She wanted--needed--so much more right now. Never had she felt so vulnerable, so helpless.

She quickly realized that leaning on a man like Nick could be lethal.

In an hour they had picked out pale yellow paint, and a pale yellow and brown teddy bear border in the store, and returned to Kelsey's apartment.

Insisting that she take it easy, Nick propped her up in an easy chair and laid her feet on an ottoman. His gaze searched hers, his mobile mouth twitching with amusement. Satisfied that she was resting comfortably, he returned to the task in the middle room.

Kelsey relaxed despite the growing tensions within her.

The kiss had taken her by surprise, as had his whole visit. She had no idea why he had decided to do this for her and the baby, but today she couldn't fight it. Today, she would indulge him, just a little, she decided as she drifted off to sleep. After all, what real harm was there?

Two hours later, she woke to find Nick pouring her a cup of tea and staring down at her intently. "Feeling better?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I am." She yawned and stretched like a fat cat.

"Good. Listen, I'm nearly finished with the painting. Jackson called. He's coming over with pizza and sodas. You don't mind do you?"

"Jackson?" She sat straight in her chair. Had Jackson joined Nick's side now?

"Yeah, he called. I told him what we were doing and he asked if he could help. I told him the painting was nearly finished but that we could use some grub if he cared to pick something up. He said he'd be over about six-ish. That's okay with you, isn't it?"

Kelsey sat very still, eyeing Nick with new perception. What was he really up to? "Look Nick, I appreciate what you're doing, really. It's very sweet of you, but I don't think ..."

"I know, you think I should butt out, and I will, when everything is set up, and I know you can handle things on your own. I just can't leave you in the lurch and live with myself. You can understand that, can't you?"

"I suppose. But I could have had a contractor come in," she insisted, trying to find a way to stop him and not hurt his feelings.

"Yeah, you could, but what's the use of that? Why waste all that money just to get someone to paint the room, and set the furniture up. It's a waste when I can do the work for you for nothing. Look Kelsey, it's as simple as this, I am the father of this child, and I want an active part." When she threw up a hand he nodded. "At least 'til the baby is born."

"Furniture?" He was sidetracking her again. If she didn't stop him soon he'd be moving in with the baby.

"Sure, we've got to pick out some furniture for the kid. We'll need a bed, a changing table, a dresser, some toys, bedding and infant clothes. Mama made a list for me earlier."

"I still can't believe you talked this over with your mother. You didn't even consult me before you told her. What will she think of me? I can't believe any of this. I can't believe I've let you go so far. Look, I didn't want to hurt your feelings. Obviously you've let things get out of hand because you're emotionally involved with the thought of having a baby, but, Nick, it has to stop. I can take care of all that later." She felt control slipping away again and was determined she wouldn't let him push her too far. Even if his pushing was gentle, his voice soft, his eyes caressing.

"Sure, you could order it all from a catalog, too. But I got to thinking about all that, and Kelsey, this baby is going to be born differently. We're going to go together and pick out the furniture, and set the kid up right, with love. I mean, just because you and I can't make it together doesn't mean we can't both love the kid, does it?" Nick's face twisted into a strange frown, filled with emotion.

Couldn't make it? It was probably the first thing Nick had said that made real sense, but why was Kelsey rejecting that statement in her mind. Couldn't make it? Is that what he thought? "No, of course not, but Nick, I don't want to see you get hurt. You can't be a part of the baby's life. You've got to understand this, now," Kelsey demanded, taking the tea he offered her.

"We'll talk about that later," Nick said quietly. "You should learn to accept help when you can get it."

"I'm only thinking of you," she began. "I don't want you to be hurt by this, Nick. You've done your part, it's over."

"Thanks, but don't worry about me so much, babe. I'm a big boy."

Nick returned to his painting a few minutes later, whistling all the while he worked, and Kelsey tried to look at some paperwork from her office, but her eyes kept straying to the middle bedroom, her thoughts to Nick--and their baby. Dear sweet Nick, the father of her baby. How could she be cruel and not let him do this? And how could she let him?

He acted as though he were enjoying every minute of it. The problem was he was enjoying it. But he was right--he was a big boy. At least she warned him. If he got hurt in the end, it was his doing. So why didn't that thought make her feel better?

An hour passed and Kelsey couldn't stop herself from checking out the room. She was very pleased with the job Nick had done, she decided, as she peeked inside. Tears stung the back of her eyes, but she blinked them away quickly.

Pregnant women often cried, she told herself defensively.

At six, Jackson knocked on the door and she opened it in time to see him juggling the pizza and cokes in his arms. "Nick said you'd be famished. I hope so, because I think I bought the store out of pizza."

"Jackson." Kelsey laughed, not used to seeing him in such a predicament. She took the cokes from him. "How sweet of you. Come on in. Nick's almost finished with the room, and it's beautiful. I can't believe it looks so professional."

"I'm rather anxious to meet this man, I must admit. He sounded so--friendly on the phone, I couldn't refuse his invitation, and I got the strangest feeling he wanted a chaperone."

"Really?" Kelsey blushed, remembering the kiss they had shared earlier and wondering if it had upset Nick. She knew he'd been aroused, but he managed to squelch it quick enough. "He's in the spare room, painting."

"Painting? Oh yes, painting."

"The baby's room." Kelsey glanced at Jackson and a slow smile spread over Jackson's face. Kelsey introduced them as Jackson stuck his head inside the room and glanced about. "Jackson, this is Nick Leonetti."

"Great color," Jackson said.

"Why thanks, Jackson, glad you like it. I had a time selling Kelsey on it though. I'll be through here in a jiffy." Nick smiled and nodded.

Kelsey and Jackson went into the living room, and Dorothy brought out paper plates and TV trays. Even Dorothy seemed in a great mood.

As Nick finally joined them, he glanced at Dorothy's retreating figure. "Won't you join us Dorothy? I'm sure there's more than enough."

Dorothy hesitated, glanced at Kelsey and shrugged. "All right, if you like. It smells delicious. I'm a pushover for pizza."

Nick smiled. "Have you seen the room Dorothy?"

The big woman gave a slight nod. "I peeked in a time or two. It looks very sunny and bright. I like yellow myself. It links with their disposition you know. They've done a number of studies on color and atmosphere for children."

There it went again - the word they. Who was they? Kelsey hadn't told Dorothy about the baby yet, but Nick had no problem with telling anyone. In fact, Kelsey was wondering if Nick ever met a stranger the way he invited everyone to join them.

"Jackson," Nick smiled taking the first piece of pizza, "now this is a pizza, with everything on it."

Jackson smiled comfortably, loosening his tie and sitting in the other recliner. "Yes, it's their special."

"It's great, almost as good as my mama's, and that's saying something."

"That's right, you're Italian aren't you," Dorothy speculated, helping herself to a slice.

"Yeah." Nick chuckled, "But you know pizza is an American dish, and I've got to admit, it's as good as anything Italian."

"I'm German myself, but I love a good pizza now and then." She chuckled, leaning back on the other side of the sofa from Nick.

German? Kelsey never knew. Never asked.

"Say, do you guys watch 'Wheel of Fortune'?" Nick suddenly asked grabbing the remote and flipping until he found the program.

Dorothy reared her head up instantly, her gray eyes lighting, and nodded. "Almost every night, and I'm pretty good at it, too."

"How about you, Jackson?" Nick asked.

"I've caught the game a couple of times," he admitted, giving Kelsey a close look.

For the first time in Kelsey's life, she was sitting in her living room, sharing a pizza with her secretary, her housekeeper and Nick, watching a game show and feeling more relaxed than she ever felt alone. She had a lot to learn about people.

What was it about Nick that brought out this warm kindred feeling? God, she was beginning to really care about this man. He had everyone wrapped around his finger, including her. And Kelsey knew it was no act, Nick was simply a nice guy and everyone responded. She liked him, and Kelsey hadn't liked many men, except maybe Jackson.

"R--"

"No, S," shouted Dorothy.

Jackson shook his head. "No, it's an L."

Kelsey glanced at the words on the screen but she couldn't make anything of them. She had never been good at games, never watched one all the way through. She hadn't played any!

"Well, I'll be damned," shouted Dorothy. Then she covered her mouth and glanced at them with a little chuckle.

"You are good at this, Dorothy," Jackson said, smiling warmly.

"It's been a secret dream of mine to go to Hollywood and play this game," she admitted.

"And I bet you'd win." Nick laughed. "You know, Dorothy, a person should follow up on their dreams."

"Yeah, but it costs money," Dorothy added.

"Doesn't Kelsey pay you enough? She certainly can afford to."

"Well, yes, of course, but ..."

"Maybe you should ask for a raise, Dorothy. How long you been working for her?"

"Three years." Dorothy was obviously afraid to look at Kelsey during this conversation, but Nick didn't mind. From the glances he'd been giving her all evening, he liked looking at her. He liked shocking her.

"I suppose it is time I gave you one, Dorothy, you should have spoken up sooner."

"Oh, no, ma'am," Dorothy began.

Nick waved her down. "Take it, Dorothy. Kelsey can afford it. See how easy it was. You should try it more often."

Jackson sat back, seeming to be enjoying this conversation, a look of contentment on his face.

"You know, we'll have to do this more often. I mean you are the people that mean the most to Kelsey, and you should be in on the arrangements for the baby. I'm sure she'd appreciate any advice you care to offer. She hasn't much experience with babies," Nick said with a smile.

How dare he say such a thing about her to them. How could she maintain respect if they thought her incapable? She could handle a baby. How hard could it be?

The chatter went on aimlessly, for what seemed like hours, everyone in a jovial mood, except Kelsey.

Then Jackson finally excused himself and left, and Dorothy gathered up the mess and quietly retired, leaving Kelsey and Nick alone.

Alone. Now what would she do with him? She should say goodnight and send him on his way, but the day had been very enjoyable, thanks to Nick. She wanted his company, especially now that they were alone.

Nick had other ideas. He took Kelsey in his arms and hugged her. She felt the immediate tension in his body, or was that hers? "I enjoyed the evening, Kelsey. I'm going to be tied up next weekend, but the following we'll get together and start picking out furniture, okay?"

"Nick, I really ..."

But just then, Nick pulled her closer and kissed her tenderly on the lips. It was just enough to tantalize, not satiate, Kelsey's mind noted. And then he was gone.

The next week flew by in a blur with business as usual at the office, and a phone call from Kelsey's mom. She was going to be in town next weekend. Jackson hadn't screened her calls, hadn't even been around to. It was like some sort of conspiracy, Kelsey decided.

Oh, dear, Nick would have to be put off, she decided with a little frown. As much as she didn't want him interfering in her life, she missed him already, and was looking forward to their next weekend together.

"Nick, look, this is Kelsey," she said in a low voice, through the phone. "My mother is coming into town next weekend, so I'm afraid we'll have to reschedule the furniture trip."

Kelsey had found herself agreeing to his shopping spree despite all her better intentions. Agreeing and looking forward to it.

"Your mother? That's great. I'd like to meet her. This is great, babe. I'll see you Saturday then. Bye."

Kelsey bit her lip. Jackson walked into her office, obviously noting the instant frown weaving across Kelsey's face. "Something wrong?"

"Yes, something is wrong." She puckered her lips and knitted her brows. "Mother's coming to town, and Nick wants to meet her."

"So, is that a real problem?"

"Jackson?" Kelsey bellowed, unable to fathom what Jackson might be thinking these days. "Nick has got to get out of my life. Mother doesn't know about the baby yet. And besides, I don't want her putting it all together or hurting Nick's feelings."



"You can't hide a thing like this forever, Kelsey. She's going to find out, and she might as well meet Nick. At least she'll know the father and maybe it won't be so bad. Babies have a way of bringing people together."

"You've got to be out of your mind, Jackson. Mother wants me to marry money. Not get pregnant by some--some ..."

What could she call Nick?

"Nice person?" Jackson finished the sentence for her.

"Exactly." Kelsey fumed at her inability to make anyone see her point of view.

"Well, maybe if she meets Nick, she won't try to marry you off to someone else."

"Oh, Jackson, I thought you'd understand, of all people. I thought I could count on you as an ally."

"You can, but I like Nick. And I don't think it would be so bad if the two of you ..."

"Oh, I knew that was how everyone would react. I can't let this go on any longer. Nick has to stop this."

"It's his child too, Kelsey. He's only making sure you get off on the right foot. At least he isn't stranding you with a child, alone. He's shown more compassion over this baby than Ralph has shown in an entire marriage. How can you deny him the satisfaction of knowing he at least tried to make things right for the child's sake?"

"Oh I don't know what to do ..." She twisted her hands in her lap.

Jackson must have seen the tears coming. He stood up and put his arm around her shoulders. "Maybe a good cry is exactly what you need."

Emotion was the last thing she wanted to give in to at the moment, but lately, she couldn't control that either. Tears seemed to come by the bucketful, and for no reason. Being pregnant sure took the starch out of her, she admitted.

The next weekend Kelsey was about to bite into a sandwich when Nick walked in. Dorothy led him to the living room. Nick was all smiles as he approached Kelsey.

Kelsey glanced at him, her anger fermenting. "Nick, I thought we cancelled this. My mother is due here any minute and I--"

About that time, Dorothy showed Mrs. O'Sullivan in, too.

"Kelsey, I--"

"And you must be Mrs. O'Sullivan." Nick took her pale hand in his and brought it to his lips. The lovely older woman smiled at him, despite her obvious confusion. "I'm Nick Leonetti. You're just in time to go shopping with us, Mrs. O'Sullivan."

"The man in concrete? Of course, Jackson mentioned you. Shopping. You're going shopping?"

Kelsey opened her mouth to rephrase that statement, but Nick went on, "Yes, of course we are. For baby furniture."

Kelsey swallowed hard, it was too late. She didn't dare look at either of them. She knew her face was hot, her hands were sweating, and her nerves were close to breaking point.

"Baby furn--" Then it must have dawned on Mrs. O'Sullivan for she smiled brightly and immediately went to Kelsey's side. "Kelsey, you're pregnant?"

"Yes, mother," Kelsey responded dully, shooting Nick an acid smile.

"But when, I mean how? I mean--"

"She's going on the third month. Isn't she lovely, Mrs. O'Sullivan? Look at her beautiful face. I think pregnant women are the most beautiful women in the world, don't you agree? We couldn't be happier."

"You're the man in concrete?" Mrs. O'Sullivan repeated just before she looked at her hand, then smiled into his face.

"Concrete?" Nick questioned. "No, ma'am. Construction."

"Oh, dear, Kelsey, do you want to explain all this?" Mrs. O'Sullivan plopped into the nearest chair and looked from one to the other. But even the elder Mrs. O'Sullivan found it hard not to respond to Nick's warm regard. He could be charming, Kelsey admitted to herself.

"We don't have time, right now, but I'll explain as much as I can on the way to the furniture store," Nick insisted, taking her hand and guiding her back to her feet and towards the front door.

Kelsey slipped into her shoes, grabbed her jacket and followed them out the door. What kind of game was Nick playing, she wondered. Oh, she never should have let things get so out of hand. Now everything was out of her control.

But again she was surprised at how easily Nick handled the entire afternoon. Before she knew it, her mother was laughing and agreeing with practically everything Nick said.

Kelsey was speechless.

"Now, what do you think, Mrs. O'Sullivan? We've painted the baby's room yellow. Which goes better? Maple, cherry, or plain white?"

"Oh, I've always liked white in a baby's room, it looks so much more sanitary and easier to see where the dirt is."

"You're so right. I'm so glad you came with us. You're great at picking out furniture. And a grandmother should be involved in these things, too. Now, we'll need several things. Bumper pads, blankets, crib mobiles, sheets, the works. Would you mind picking something out for us? We can't make up our minds, and a grandmother should have some choices in this too, don't you agree?"

"I most certainly do, young man. And thank you for being so perceptive. Kelsey, I like your young man. Yes, I do. He's got grit." Mrs. O'Sullivan was laughing as she rummaged through the stack of quilts and blankets. Kelsey had never seen her mother so happy.

After loading the car with baby supplies they headed back to Kelsey's.

Kelsey was about to find a way to get rid of Nick, but he beat her to the punch. "Now, we're going to our house for supper, and I want no argument. Mama has cooked one of her specialties and is anxious to meet you, Mrs. O'Sullivan."

Kelsey was agape. What could she say now? He had taken control again, and her mother was loving it.

This would never do. She couldn't let him get away with this again.

"Oh, please, Nick, I hate for your mother to go to so much trouble for us. We can eat out tonight."

"Nonsense, Mama's expecting us in an hour. Why don't the two of you go wash up and we'll go right over?" Nick insisted with a smile.

"But--"

"I'd love to, Nick, and thank you so much for inviting us," Mrs. O'Sullivan was saying. "Come along, dear. I'm anxious to meet his mother. It's so nice for him to invite us."

Kelsey went to her bedroom and closed the door, unable to do anything but throw pillows at the bed. He was doing it again.

Mrs. O'Sullivan barged in on her with a big smile and hug for her. Kelsey hadn't expected or wanted her smile, but she liked the hug and gave in. How many times had she longed for a hug and not received one?

"What a lovely man! Where ever did you find him, Kelsey?"

"I put an ad in the paper," Kelsey stated simply.

"Honestly, darling, I'm serious. He's fabulous. Oh, I'm so excited about the baby. Wait 'til your father hears. You've wanted children so long; you must be ecstatic. And your Nick is absolutely divine. And so-o handsome."

"Yes, mother, he is, but--"

"I never thought I'd like a common man, but this Nick of yours is a darling. He's got a head on his shoulders, too, and so thoughtful of others. Oh, Charles will be so delighted you've married someone with such common sense. Your father never liked the stuffy sort, you know."

"But we're not--"

"Oh now, don't be so timid about all this, darling. I can see you haven't legally married yet, but that's merely a matter of time. You youngsters these days just don't do things in the right order, but not to worry. That man loves you, I can see it every time he looks at you. Charles will love him, too. I love him. Oh, you've made me so happy, Kelsey."

Her mother cried and grabbed her again.

Happy? Her mother was happy about Nick? What could she do? She said nothing. Because if she opened her mouth right now, the wrong thing would come out.

Two hours later, Nick, Kelsey and her mother arrived at Nick's house. Kelsey said very little, but let the two of them manage conversation on their own.

But when Mama Leonetti welcomed Kelsey, she finally began to relax a little. How could she not love Nick's mother who opened her arms and her heart to her?

"Don't be afraid, little one, I'm very happy for you and my Nicky. And at last, I'll be a grandmother."

Tina and Tony came in, and all the introductions were made. Tina hugged Kelsey and smiled. "I'm so happy for you. I'm going to be an aunt. And this makes you an uncle, little brother."

Mama glanced at Mrs. O'Sullivan and pulled her aside. "My house is not elegant, but it's a good neighborhood, and I have plenty of food on the table. And all thanks to my son, Nicky."

"It's lovely, so homey. I feel right at home, Rosa. And you have such lovely children." Mrs. O'Sullivan smiled.

Everyone was getting along famously, except Kelsey. So, when dinner was done, and Nick and Mrs. O'Sullivan went to sit on the front porch, Kelsey helped Tina and Mama Rosa with the dishes.

"Don't fret so much, Kelsey. It will all work out."

"I didn't expect this," Kelsey started to explain.

"No one does, it just sorta happens. Life is in the hands of the Creator, Kelsey. You have a Leonetti inside you now, and we take care of our own. Your mother is a fine woman."

"I've never seen her like this," Kelsey began, her own astonishment fogging her mind from what she wanted to tell Nick's mother.

"She loves you very much, and she's happy about the baby. What more can you want from her?"

"Mother's usually such a stuffed shirt," Kelsey began.

"Becoming a grandmother can take the stuff right out of the shirt," Mama Rosa chuckled.

"You think that's it?"

"I know it is."

"Mama Rosa, I don't think it's fair to delude you ..."

"I know you and my Nicky have some problems to work out. What young couple doesn't? I'm praying they work out in my favor. I so love big weddings."

"But, Mama ..."

Tina smiled. "It must be heaven to be so in love."

"In love?" Kelsey nearly choked. Yes, she was in love with Nick, but that wasn't enough, and she knew it. The fact that she could admit it so easily to herself scared her witless.

How could she make them understand that Nick wanted his baby, not her? She couldn't hurt their feelings after they had been so wonderful to her, so welcoming, so accepting.

She needed to make things clear, so they would understand, and she was on the verge of explaining the whole thing to them when Nick walked in.

"Hate to break this up girls, but your mother is wearing herself thin, Kelsey. She's so keyed up about the baby and ... us... that she's worn herself to a frazzle. Maybe I should take you home now."

"Well I ..." Kelsey needed to finish explaining. "I was just telling--"

"That can wait, babe." Nick directed her from the kitchen with a firm hold on her elbow.

Nick drove them home, talking with the senior Mrs. O'Sullivan and occasionally glancing at Kelsey.

When he said goodnight, he pulled Kelsey to one side. "We'll set up a few more practice runs on the doll in a couple of weeks."

"Practice runs?"

"Sure, you know, practice bathing, diapering, burping the baby. There is still a lot to buy; toys, books. I want us to read to the kid, too. We don't need to wait. They say the baby can hear and comprehend many things before it's even born. And I think we should join one of those Lamaze classes. What do you think?"

"Now, Nick ..."

"I'm only thinking of what's best for our baby. You can't deny me that, Kel."

The way he said Kel made her shiver. It sounded so intimate. But he was still trying to distract her. "Nick, I think this has gone on long enough."

"Kelsey, indulge me a little longer, will ya? I don't want to worry about the kid. I want to know you can handle this. And I'm not leaving you in the lurch. You can't ask me to do that. If it's alright with you, I want to be there, when it's born."

"Nick ..." she gasped, and he covered her lips with a kiss that smothered her protest and enlightened her heart. Hungry for his touch, she let him sweep her away, opening her mouth to his and reveling in his conquest. His hands felt hot all over her. She groaned.

But all too soon he let her go. His eyes searched hers.

"You're quite a woman, Kelsey. And you're not going to like this either, but I think we should get married."

## Chapter Ten

"What?" Kelsey's voice caught in her throat. Had he actually proposed to her?

"I said, I think we should get married. You know, do it right. Let's face it Kelsey, you need me, the baby needs me. We haven't made much progress this way. And I'm afraid you're going to be a nervous wreck by the time the baby gets here."

"No, it won't work, Nick. You don't marry someone just because they can't diaper a baby ..."

"That too, yes. But I've given this a lot of thought, Kel. You'd love the baby, I'm sure of that, and you'd care for it to the best of your ability. But I'm not sure you'll be ready in time. And I certainly don't want to have to hire a nanny," he scolded. "No, you need help. And this isn't something you are going to learn in a day or two. Besides, I'd kinda like to give the baby my name. I know how stuck on O'Sullivan you were, but it has your blood, and that's the important thing. And if we got married we could explain the circumstances a lot easier. We could say we just didn't get along, and had to divorce, or something. If it comes to that."

If it comes to that?

"Now look, Nick." Kelsey's face turned red, her temper festering. How had this caring man suddenly turned into some nut with a marriage license? "I've been pretty nice about this, so far, but I think this has gone on long enough. Just because I can't put a diaper on straight doesn't mean..."

"No, it doesn't mean you'll be a bad mother. I agree. But it does mean you're going to need help. Let's face it, Kel, you've done nothing to lighten the workload at the office since I've been coming over. You haven't got the hang of diapering or burping and you are a nervous wreck around the doll. What would you be like around our baby? Face it Kel, the baby needs both of us. I've already taken the liberty of speaking with your parents, by phone, and they are in complete agreement with me, about this. Your father especially. Your mother wants a beautiful Catholic wedding. Naturally, because you've been married, we'll have to speak to the priest about it. I doubt we'll have any trouble. You and Ralph weren't married in the church. We'll be married in two weeks."

Then he started to leave. Without another word, as though the entire conversation was closed. But she knew what he was doing.

"Now, wait just a minute," Kelsey began, then stopped as though someone had hit her in the stomach. Her face paled a little, then she smiled slowly.

It was almost as if the child was having her say, too.

"What's wrong? The baby?" He quickly turned to see her face. Instantly his face mirrored his concern.

"I-I think it just kicked me. I can't be sure, but I think it did. You know the first kick is like butterfly wings stirring in your stomach. I remember that much."

"Oh, God, let me feel." Nick came closer, put his hand on her jumper, and waited. His eyes were full of delight at the prospect of actually feeling his child growing inside her, and for a moment, Kelsey forgot her anger and enjoyed the feel of his hand on her tummy. It was one of their first shared moments as parents, and nothing could replace its magic. Not even the fact that he wouldn't be able to feel the gentle kicking yet.

Still, she couldn't let sentiment rule the moment. He wanted her to agree to a marriage, but what kind of marriage would they have? And how could she contemplate marrying anyone under these circumstances? She'd faced a loveless marriage before. She couldn't endure another one, especially with Nick, the man she loved.

She was about to explode at him when another butterfly feeling zapped across her tummy and he nodded. "I felt it Kel, I felt it. Not much, but like a little electrical buzz. She's healthy, I'd bet on that. She's kicking early. You're barely four months. That's a good sign she's healthy. She'll probably pack a punch. What a miracle we've created, Kel."

His finger dotted her nose, his eyes sparkled into hers, and they seized the moment. Their lips met in a passionate storm. Exquisite pleasure melted all of Kelsey's better judgment. She made a little guttural sound in her throat as she opened her mouth to his. Nick's kisses felt as though he'd saved them for an eternity, just for her.

"Ah, Kel," he groaned as he lifted her loose blouse and his hands searched for the round fullness of her breast.

"Don't leave me like this, Nick," Kelsey panted, as she barely pulled away from him enough to speak. Could he possibly know what those precious hands of his were doing to her? Did he know she was like a walking time bomb, waiting for his touch?

"You've caught me in a weak moment. I can't. But the baby--I mean, will it be okay? I don't want to hurt you, Kel. I don't ever want to hurt you."

"I'm not far enough along to worry," she gasped as her own hands pulled at his shirt eagerly. He stopped and clasped her hands in his. Kissing them slowly, he sent her a burning smile and then lifted Kelsey to carry her to her bedroom.

He kicked the door open, then kicked it again to close it. He crossed the room, laid her gently upon the bed, then smiled into her love kissed face. "I never knew pregnant women could be so adorably sexy."

"You're too far away," she purred, and pulled him down against her.

In a hot frenzy they disposed of the clothes between them as he continued his love-chants against her warm moist body.

She'd never been on fire for a man in her life, but Nick seemed to know all the right buttons to push. Lovemaking had never been this sweet, this fulfilling. She melted into Nick as he came down beside her on the bed.



Her lips sought his, her body fit against him like a light bulb finding a socket. She wanted, and needed, to love this man without regard for the consequences. Just once she would love for the sheer joy of it, she vowed silently.

His hands were incredibly gentle as they wove a spell over her body, making her respond to his every whim. His eyes roved over her in the silent of the night, stealing her heart and soul and he buried himself into her once more and they became one.

"Oh, Nick," she gasped, and her hands clamped about him with a heated calm. Words of love throttled through her body and mind as he took her to the heaven only he could build for her. Her tongue ached to cry them aloud.

He looked down at her and her small high breasts puckered. He groaned and bent to cover them each with long languid strokes of his tongue. Her body stretched lazily at first against him, then thrust to meet him, as he entered her over and over again.

"Oh, Kel, I can't wait any longer, babe. I've got to take you. You're so beautiful, so much woman."

"Yes, now," she pleaded and met him at the peak.

Collapsing in unison moments later, they both laughed breathlessly, and kissed each other joyously.

Kelsey smiled as he cradled her against him, his hand resting gently about her ribs. Sighing contentedly, she relaxed. Unlike the negative feelings Ralph had always inspired with his one-sided love affair, Kelsey saw for the first time what being loved meant. And the satisfied smile on Nick's lips left her in no doubt that she had put it there.

Minutes later, they fell asleep, curled into each other's arms. Sometime in the night she reached for him, but he was gone.

Gone! He had left her after such an incredible night? How could he? How could he walk away from all she offered him without a word? He wanted to marry her and still hadn't said a word about loving her.

Her confidence waned.

The next day Kelsey was excited, elated, and downhearted all at the same time. How could she possibly marry Nick? Yes, his lovemaking was everything she'd ever hoped for, but he didn't love her, if he did he would have surely said something last night. He didn't. She knew from her first marriage that love was the most important ingredient in a relationship. That the lack of it would crush a marriage. She couldn't condemn herself to the same loneliness again. Even with a baby.

Still, when her mother called that evening, she found herself caught up in the talk about a wedding dress, and flowers and bridesmaids. Just the prospect of getting married seemed like a fantasy every woman dreamed of. When she and Ralph were married at the courthouse, it broke her mother's heart, but he wasn't Catholic.

She'd have a talk with Nick on Saturday, she promised herself as she continued to let her mother go on and on about arrangements. She'd never heard such excitement in her mother's voice before, and their relationship had improved with Nick's help.

Things looked different the next day at the office when she told Jackson. She had time to sleep on it, and realize her foolishness.

"Naturally, it'll never work. I can't marry him, Jackson."

"You don't love him?" Jackson eyed her closely.

"Of course I love him. Who doesn't? I mean--oh, Jackson, I don't know what I mean, or feel these days. Everything is in such a state of confusion. Nick has practically taken over the chore of thinking for me. I've never been so dependent in my life, and I don't like the feeling. And yet he's done more for my confidence than I could imagine. He's restored my faith in myself. But, I'm scared."

"I've never heard you sound so despondent. What are you afraid of?"

"All women fantasize about weddings, Jackson. It's romantic. But Nick doesn't love me, that's why it won't work. Nick's in love with the prospect of being a father. Right now he's living in some kind of dream world, but believe me, he's going to snap out of it. And then it will be just like Ralph."

"How do you know? Nick isn't Ralph. He's ten times the man Ralph was. He'd never let you hurt or see you lonely."

"No, he's too much of a gentleman. He'd try, but I won't do that to him, or myself. He simply thinks I can't handle being a mother, alone. I think Nick is suffering from a bad case of too much responsibility."

"He's certainly had his share. But, when he talks about you, his eyes light up, and the way he looks at you. Are you sure how he feels?"

Kelsey sighed. "He loves the thought of having a baby. He's an incurable romantic. Yet, he hasn't said one word about love. What should I do, Jackson? I don't want to hurt him. But I've got to get him to listen to reason. Oh, Jackson, what am I going to do?"

"You've got the contract, it'll hold up in court, if that's necessary. But Kelsey, maybe you should marry him."

"Jackson! How can you say that?"

"Because he's good for you. He brings out the best in you. I like him. And so does your mother. And look at yourself. You aren't the same insecure little girl you were when you were married to Ralph. Besides, he and your mother have started all the plans. I spoke with her on the phone before you arrived. She has everything arranged. I've never heard her talk like that before. She's doing this up big. Probably

because it's the first time she's had the chance to. For some reason, I think she likes Nick. We all like him. Which is something I hadn't expected. She's acting like a--"

"Like a what?"

"Like a grandmother, like a proud mother."

How many times had she wished for her mother to act that way? And she had Nick to thank for it.

"I've got to stop this. He's coming over this Saturday. I'll talk with him then."

"Are you sure you want to?" Jackson's brow shot up. "I hate to keep harping on it, but I think you should give this a long hard look before you stop anything. It could work out, if you work on it."

"That's the same thing I thought about Ralph. Work on it." She hung her head.

"Nick isn't Ralph. How can you begin to compare the two of them? Even I can see the difference. Ralph was a cold, unfeeling fish--a weasel. The fact that he once hit you for making a mistake at a dinner party is enough for me to say that. Don't compare them, Kelsey, it's not the same. Is it the money differences?"

"Strangely, no. Money seems to be the least of our worries. I'm afraid to trust my feelings. I don't want another mistake. And I'd be involving another life in this one--the baby."

"My loyalty remains with you, you know that. However, I must tell you, Kelsey, I think not marrying Nick would be the mistake. Does he know you love him?"

Kelsey sat down quietly in her big leather chair, glanced up at Jackson and sighed. "No. I'm afraid to say anything like that to him."

"It may be all he's waiting to hear."

Kelsey's shoulders slumped, one tear escaped. "Isn't the man suppose to say it first?"

"Most of the time, yes. There are no set rules on the subject. But you are a rich woman, have you considered that aspect? I mean perhaps Nick feels as though he has nothing to offer you."

"Oh, but that's not true. He has everything to offer. He's honest, kind, hard working--and he's a happy man, at least until I came along. I've never considered him anything but an equal."

"And I agree. But look at it from his point of view. You are a woman of power. Nick is an ordinary construction worker. What can he offer you but his love?"

"That would be enough, if he offered it."

"Perhaps he needs to know that."

"I can't see Nick letting social position stand in the way. He doesn't think in terms of social positions, he thinks in terms of people. And honestly, I believe Nick Leonetti is one of the richest men alive. And if you're right, if the time ever comes, I'll tell him. If it doesn't, I'll live with it."

Jackson frowned, took up the papers from her desk and walked towards the door. Adjusting the lapel of his jacket, he shook his head emphatically and added, "You're thinking of yourself, Kelsey. Not what's best for the baby."

Was he right? Was she giving in to her own selfish pride by wanting an admission of love from Nick? She had never realized when she fell in love with him, what it might entail. It just happened.

Yet, two weeks passed in a haze and Kelsey still hadn't said anything to Nick. She tried working up the courage but she couldn't go through with it. He changed the subject whenever she broached it.

Nick and her mother didn't have ears anymore. They went around agreeing or disagreeing and doing whatever they pleased. They weren't listening to her. They were too busy making plans. Her father was completely unavailable to talk to. It seemed as though the whole world was ignoring her lately.

The priest came to visit. She was informed she had to take several classes in the church, and Nick had to attend.

Reluctantly, she had accompanied her mother to the bridal shops. She tried on dress after dress until she found one that she fell in love with. The dress was beautiful, layered in pearls and lace, with big puffy sleeves at the shoulders, and a full skirt with a long train. Four and a half months pregnant and she was barely showing, thank God.

She still waited to tell Nick.

The night before the wedding Nick came over with his mother. Kelsey was sure he merely wanted to reassure himself she would be at the church. But Nick kept quiet most of the evening.

Tina had given Kelsey a blue garter. When they were alone for a moment, she explained she had bought it on a whim, and was secretly dreaming of the day she could wear one. "But you needed something blue," she explained, hugging Kelsey to her.

They laughed together, even though Kelsey didn't feel like laughing. How could she? She was about to break Nick's heart.

Mama Rosa insisted Kelsey wear her antique pearl necklace, handed down through the Leonetti family. It was perhaps the most precious piece of jewelry the woman owned and she was letting Kelsey borrow it. Kelsey felt hot tears sting her eyes. Such a warm gesture endeared his mother in her heart. Something borrowed, something blue. Mama Rosa cried openly, then laughed when she put it around her neck, and

told her how glad she was to have another daughter. How could she tell this beautiful woman she couldn't marry her son?

The rehearsal had gone smoothly, Kelsey barely remembered saying "I do." It was just a dry run, she told herself.

They spoke with the priest several times, and each time Kelsey tried to get a word in edgewise, Nick interrupted. They took the lessons together. Nick seemed happy to go to any lengths. They were prepared, the priest said happily.

The caterers finally got everything straight for the huge reception, planned at a local hotel. As big as the wedding was turning out to be, things were beginning to fall into place. The flowers arrived on time. Not one thing to delay the inevitable.

But later that same evening Kelsey held the phone to her ear and spoke to Nick very quietly from her apartment. "I'm sorry, Nick. Sorry I let this go so far. I can't go through with the wedding. I just can't. And I must hold you to the contract, Nick. I'm sorry."

"Kelsey, don't do this," Nick shouted into the phone.

"I should have stopped it sooner. But, it's got to stop. I can't go through with this-- this farce. I won't live like that again!"

"But Kel--"

The phone went dead.

She hung up as the tears began to fall. She couldn't wait for a reply; it was too painful.

Her mother, who was standing by the closet, putting the protective plastic over the wedding dress turned to her, her face mirroring concern.

"Kelsey, what have you done?" she asked in a breathless murmur.

"I've stopped the wedding, Mother. I had to. Nick's not in love with me. He's in love with being a father. He's a wonderful man, and I had to do it for his sake as much as mine."

Mrs. O'Sullivan came to sit on the edge of the bed as Kelsey put the phone down. Slowly she wrapped an arm around her. "Are you so sure of that?"

"Yes, I am."

"I see." She was saying in that detached voice she used so often with Kelsey, but almost as soon as she said it, she shook her head. "I had such hopes for the two of you."

"Hopes? For me and Nick? I don't understand you, Mother. I really don't. I thought I knew you all these years. You are like a stranger, these past few weeks. Have I

misjudged you somewhere along the line?" She got off the bed and looked down into her mother's somber face. "You've always wanted me to marry money. You and Daddy made no secret of it. Nick has none. He's not into concrete. He's a construction worker from a poor family, surely you've known that all along. Why are you so infatuated with him?"

Mrs. O'Sullivan smiled sadly. "It's true, at least it was. I wanted you to marry money because I thought at one time that would make you happy. I mean your ambition seemed to drive you to be rich, and successful. I knew nothing less would satisfy you. Perhaps Ralph wasn't right for you darling, but he did teach you how to feel, how to hurt. And I think you've finally learned how to love a man, because you learned how to hurt first. You are so like your father. So busy. Always working. And yet, the two of you are the loneliness people in the world. When Nick came into your life you seemed to come to life again. Like before Ralph. You've changed, Kelsey. Right in front of me. And for the better."

"Father lonely? What are you talking about?"

"Of course he is. And has been for years. Only he doesn't know it." When she saw the confused look on her daughter's face she smiled again patiently. "We've never talked much before, Kelsey. Nick has helped us in that regard, too. Oh, what a breath of fresh air he is. Like your father was to me."

Kelsey looked stunned.

"It's time for us to talk like a real mother and daughter. It's time someone in this family opened up." Her mother took her hand. "Never be afraid to love unconditionally, Kelsey. Never be afraid to open your heart. When your father and I first met, I was from a very rich, and old southern family. I'm sure you already know this. You're grandparents never made a secret of it. I've never told you--but your father, however, was not a rich man. At least not then."

Kelsey interrupted. "He wasn't? I don't understand. I always thought--"

"That's my fault. You assumed we were both rich. We've never discussed it. You so admired your father--and so you should. Let me tell you what a really fine man he is. You barely knew your father's folks; they died so early in your life. He was from such a warm and loving family, like Nick." She squeezed Kelsey's hand. "But he was just graduating from College when we decided we were in love, and he had this dream of an empire he wanted to build."

Mrs. O'Sullivan's eyes glazed over in fond remembrance. "I took one look at those dreamy blue eyes of your father's and his dream became mine. I was head over heels in love with him. But my father harshly disapproved of our getting married. He said we'd live in squalor."

Kelsey's eyes widened. "How cruel. Poor father."

"Yes, poor father. Your father was a very proud man. Perhaps too proud. From that day on he was determined to prove my father wrong. Our love sort of took a backseat to that proof. Oh, he didn't mean it to, of course. He worked hard, very hard. And he

made something of himself. But somewhere along the way, he forgot how to just live."

Kelsey embraced her mother. "Oh, mother, how lonely for you. Why in all this time haven't you said something?"

"Lonely, yes, to some degree it was. I loved him so, all I ever really wanted was his love. But I never competed with another woman, only his work. Not many women can say that. I could live with that. And it was all for me, Kelsey, I knew that. And it meant so much for him to make good on his own. So, when he lost himself in his work, I decided to lose myself in my interests."

Kelsey nodded her understanding.

"So, I devoted myself to charity work. I suppose somewhere down the line, I kind of threw myself into that, instead of making a proper home for my daughter and husband."

She glanced at Kelsey and squeezed her hand. "But it hurt so, for him to see me, and yet not see me at all. And then you and I drifted apart. Mainly because neither of us could talk to the other. I'll never understand why. Nick makes it look so easy. I was so afraid of losing the two of you I couldn't just talk to you. So, we sort of became a bunch of disassociated people, your father, me, and you. But I've never really regretted it, because your father is the only man I've ever loved, and you were our only child."

Kelsey hugged her mother to her, and cried. "Oh, Mother, I wish you had come to me sooner."

"So do I child. I suppose pride kept me at bay. I wronged you most of all dear. But if you'll give me a chance I'd like to make up for that," she said smiling into Kelsey's eyes. "But when I met your Nick, it was like seeing your father all over again. It brought everything back. I knew you loved him. You glow every time you're around him. And he loves you, I feel it."

"Oh, Mother, I wish you were right, but Nick is such a wonderfully responsible person. This whole thing started out wrong. And it's my fault."

"Can you be so sure about his feelings? Does a man have to speak the words when actions say more?"

"Jackson said the same thing. But he's never once said he loved me, even when we ..." Kelsey cried again.

"Is that all that's holding you back? A few little words."

"I can't live a life like I did with Ralph. I was so lonely, so alone. It's better to be alone than to be with someone who doesn't love you."

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, in Queens, Nick put the phone down slowly, his hand numb, his mouth quivering with words unsaid. Tony stumbled into his room, "Anything wrong?"

"No Tony, go back to bed. Everything is fine."

"You don't look so fine," Tony grumbled.

"A groom never looks fine, especially a day before the wedding," Nick mumbled.

When Tony went back to bed, Nick lit a cigarette. He leaned back against the wall, and listened at the quiet of the neighborhood. A good neighborhood. All thanks to one little lady. But the cigarette did no good and he stashed it.

How could she do this? Had he been too distant? Had he been so concerned about controlling things that he'd lost Kelsey, somehow? Maybe he should have stayed the night with her, when they made love. But for God's sake, her mother was in the house, how could he compromise her?

How could she desert him like this? Just like his father. Just walked out on him. Desertion! The one thing he never could get over. Loving someone who walks out on you is intolerable. Nick admitted it to himself for the first time, slamming a fist onto the table and watching the salt and pepper shakers bounce and fall to the floor. Damn!

"Dammit, Kelsey, don't do this to me! To us!" he shouted as a tear slipped silently down his cheek. A silent tear he refused to acknowledge. "Don't desert me."

He grabbed the bottle of Jack Daniels from the top of the kitchen cabinet and set it on the center of the kitchen table. He took a glass from the cupboard, then slouched down in a chair at the table and glared at the bottle. He hadn't cried since he stole the toothbrush, but suddenly the tears seemed harder to ignore. His finger rubbed absently at the bottle.

He wasn't weak like his father; he didn't need a bottle to help him through the rough spots. He licked his dry lips and suddenly big round tears came down like a raging storm, unabashed. Tears he had held back for years, for his father, for Kelsey. His body shook with the force of trying to keep them back. But this time he lost the battle. And the more he cried, the madder he got. He'd always heard Italians were too emotional, now he believed it. He hated men who cried.

He glanced about to see if he disturbed anyone. Nothing in the house seemed to stir. He swiped at his eyes with the back of his shirtsleeve.

His life was nothing without Kelsey, as empty as when his father had left him. Yes, he had missed his father, he could finally admit it to himself. He had worshipped the man. A man who came home drunk too many times, a man who lost his job too many times. But yet, a man who loved his children, and kept the family together through thick and thin for years. A man who taught his son the values of life, honesty, integrity, loyalty. And shattered every one of them in his leaving. Had the burden of his own weaknesses been too much for him?



How could a woman make you fall in love with her, and then walk out on you? She got exactly what she wanted--his baby. His baby. Dear God, he'd almost forgotten about the baby. But it wasn't the baby that made him ache as though someone had cut off a limb from his body. It wasn't the baby that made him need to cry, to rid himself of the loneliness within him. It was Kelsey. Loneliness swept through him, the same kind of loneliness that Kelsey had faced so often in her life. Whoever this Ralph character was, he must have been the biggest kind of fool to let a woman like Kelsey slip through his fingers. He had felt Kelsey's loneliness, grieved for her. Damn, he wanted her, needed her, and she didn't know it.

Then it hit him, like a huge wall caving in on him. Had his father needed someone to reach out to? Had he ever told his father how he felt? He hadn't told Kelsey either.

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

Now his baby would grow up without him.

Then the boys from the garage came to mind. How many of them had grown up without a father, a family to call their own? Too many. He'd seen the hurt in their eyes, the shame, the emptiness. He'd felt their sorrows, suffered with them. How many of them might have gone astray had they not gained respect for themselves. A future, that's what kids needed. All kids, his kid.

Suddenly Mama Rosa appeared in the doorway, in her robe and big fuzzy house slippers. Nick didn't look at her, just the slippers. "She called the wedding off, didn't she?"

"How'd you know?" Nick asked, not bothering to look at her.

"I had a feeling. She looked too sad tonight. You gonna let her get away with it?"

"Get away with it? She called it off, Mama. What am I suppose to do?" He smiled sadly at her and her fuzzy slippers. "You know I always liked those slippers."

"You're so much like your father." His mother chuckled and shook her head, recapping the bottle that he steadfastly refused to touch. "Nicky, you must go and tell her how you feel. Tell her you love her. A woman needs to hear the words, especially before she marries. Marry her, Nicky," Mama said, banging her fist on the kitchen table dramatically.

"You're right. I won't let her get away with this. She's my woman, and before tomorrow night, she's going to know it."

"Good, now go to bed, Nicky, get some sleep."

And like the good son that he was, he kissed his mama and went straight to bed.

The next day, the day of the wedding, Nick dressed in his black tux, feeling rested and more confident than ever, as though nothing had gone astray. He told his mother to be at Sacred Heart by eleven, and make sure Tina and Tony were there.

Halfway across town, Kelsey slept late, having cried herself to sleep. She wanted to wipe this day off the calendar. This would have been her wedding day. She might not even get up, today, she decided as she heard a ruckus in the other room.

"That's right, Mrs. O'Sullivan, take that dress to the church, we've got to hurry or we'll be late. Father Nelan is beside himself. Dorothy, why aren't you dressed. What am I doing? Why, I'm kidnapping my bride," Nick said with a little chuckle.

Kelsey barely had time to scramble out of bed when Nick entered her bedroom, scooped her into his arms, kissed her quite thoroughly on the lips and carried her out the door.

Kelsey began to throw a fit, once she had recovered from his kiss. Nick ignored her.

"What do you think you are doing?" Kelsey demanded pounding his back and kicking her feet and legs.

"Taking you to the church."

"You can't do this, Nick. You can't make me marry you," she began, but Nick turned the radio on, and glanced in his rearview mirror. Her parents were following behind, barely managing to pack the proper clothes in the car.

Nick didn't say another word; too busy dodging traffic. She arrived at the church just in time to hear the priest mumbling something about making up their minds. Nick hustled her into the dressing room where a couple of bridesmaids stood waiting. He set Kelsey down and looked deep into her eyes. "Trust me, Kelsey. For once in your practical life, trust," Nick said and left her standing agape.

Trust? Could this be about trust?

Nothing prepared Kelsey for such a jumbled up mess. Half the bridesmaids had been called about the cancellation. Her mother ran about in a tizzy, checking on one thing or another.

Kelsey's hair wouldn't stay up, so she combed it down, then wondered as she stood in front of the mirror with the beautiful wedding dress on, "What am I doing?"

The music began only minutes later. Kelsey glanced up and realized it was too late. Panic gripped her. How could she cancel now? It was too late. Her parents had spent a small fortune on the wedding, could she dare call a halt?

Hurriedly she ran to her place, beside her father. He smiled calmly, and took her arm. No last minute reprisals from him, either? Could she go through with this, even for the baby's sake? "I'm very proud of you, Kelsey," her father said to her astonishment.

Suddenly, the procession began and she felt her knees wobble. Her father glanced at her inquiringly, and smiled.

She couldn't do this. But Nick's last words haunted her--trust.

She walked down the long aisle, glancing at the people in the congregation, smiling at her. She wanted to bolt, and yet something rooted her to this spot. Trust?

Her family on one side, his on the other. Jackson nodded his approval as she caught a glimpse of him, across the room. Dorothy stood next to him, tall and proud, a vague smile on her lips. Her mother nodded. They were all a blur except for Tina now, just ahead of her, her maid of honor, and Tony to Nick's side, his best man. Tears rolled down Kelsey's cheek.

Then she saw Nick and everything faded but him. How handsome he looked in his tux. Oh, how she loved him at this moment. Her heart felt as though it had jumped into her throat.

A tiny hope flamed in her heart. Another tear fell.

The music suddenly stopped, her father let go of her arm, and Nick took her hand, his eyes ablaze.

The priest said a prayer, then he asked them to kneel. Kelsey felt her whole body shake as she went to her knees. She gulped back a loud sob, and suddenly, Nick turned to look at her.

"Wait," he shouted. The congregation gasped in alarm, then quieted. Kelsey stiffened, her face full of strange anticipation. Nick whispered something to the priest and he nodded. Then Nick helped Kelsey to her feet and lifted the veil.

"Oh, God, you're so beautiful, even when you're scared stiff," he whispered for her ears only. "But I can't make you go through with this without telling you how very much I love you, Kel. And how much I want to marry you." He turned around, faced the crowd of people with a smile. "Everything is fine. I just want the world to know how much I love Kelsey O'Sullivan." He shouted to the congregation, and everyone clapped and shouted with joy.

Kelsey wiped the tears from her eyes and stared into Nick's smiling face. "What did you say?"

"I said, I love you more than my life. I'll do anything to make this marriage work. I can't live without you. But I forgot, in all my haste to give you the choice--Will you marry me, Kelsey O'Sullivan?"

"Oh, Nick," she cried, grabbing his shoulders for support, and looked lovingly into his face.

"Oh, yes, yes, I'll marry you."

Then everything disappeared as Nick took her in his arms and kissed her thoroughly on the lips, and she melted into his embrace. For a moment there was nothing but the two of them.

The congregation seemed to sigh aloud.

The ceremony lasted another thirty minutes, then the priest smiled and whispered, "You may kiss the bride--again!"

The reception took a couple of hours. Finally, they were in the backseat of a limo embraced in each other's arms, as rice spilled from their clothes and hair.

"I can't believe we've done it." She sighed happily.

"Now what about this name Flora, do you like it or not?"

"I-I hate it," she said, hesitating to tell him.

"So do I." He chuckled. "And before we go any further, are you advertising for any more sperm donor's?"

She giggled. "I won't need to now!"

He teased her lips, feeling himself grow warm, and ready for her. "What do you say we stop off at the garage on our way to Carmel. I've got a '57 Chevy I'd like to show you."

"I'd love to see it," she said with a smile.

"Great, we've got another reception down there, waiting for us. I told the kids about you, you know, the ones I teach karate, and they want to meet you. I've got plans to open a karate school. What do you think?"

"I think it's a great idea, and I can't wait to meet them."

"Don't worry, we'll run everyone off early."

"Why Mr. Leonetti, what do you have in mind?"

"You'd be surprised. I never told you about my foot fetish, have I?" He smiled and kissed her on the nose.

"You neglected to mention that."

"Forgive me for not confessing my love sooner. But, I had to concentrate on the one thing I knew you wanted--the baby."

She giggled. "Your baby! And it's only one thing I wanted--not the only thing."

"If it helps, I was in pain." He smiled and kissed her hand. "But I wanted you to realize that our love was not just on a physical plane. I wanted to tell you how I felt that night in the garage, and the other night too, but I was afraid you wouldn't believe me. I wanted to make you love me, for being me, Nick Leonetti."

"Oh, Nick." She sighed happily, kissed him hotly.

He finally had to push her away to explain more. "Mama planned a spaghetti party, first, and my older brothers and their families will be there, they were in the wedding congregation, but they couldn't make the reception because they planned this one. It won't be as high class, but everyone there loves you. There will be music and dancing, and kissing, relatives you wouldn't believe--like my Uncle Antonio that won't let go of you, and afterwards..." he whispered in her ear, and she giggled. "Maybe we should forget the garage and go somewhere quiet. I don't think I can wait 'til we get to Carmel."

"No, I like your first plan better. We'll just run them off a little early. Besides, I want to meet the boys, and your friends, and be with your family. And Nick, I haven't told you. I haven't said the words--but I love you, too. Just for being you. From the moment you said you wouldn't have any part of my plan."

"I gambled on that." He smiled and kissed her hotly on the lips. "But a guy needs to hear it sometimes."

"I'll remember to tell you often."

"We're good for each other." He chuckled and planted a more than inviting kiss on her enticing pink lips.

"I want several children..."

"Me, too."

"I want to live in New York," she insisted.

"Sounds great," he said and smiled. "It's always been home to me."

"I want to quit working, and be a mother, and wife."

"Great. I like being the breadwinner. We won't live on your family's money, agreed?"

"Agreed. What you make, I'll spend."

"I'll put you on a budget," he insisted. "And I'll keep the garage so I can tinker from time to time, at least 'til someone wants to buy me out for another skyscraper. But I need a place to go when you get your dander up."

"That's alright, I'll probably run home to mother when we fight. Does it still bother you that the old neighborhoods are going to disappear?"

"It'll always bother me. But it's guys like me that make history survive. Hell's Kitchen will never completely die in the heart of the people at least. But I've been through a few changes, and it didn't kill me. I'm learning to adapt."

"So, you'd put me on a budget?"

"I'll probably have to."

"I'll skimp one month, and splurge the next, then. I'll spoil our children with love, like your family has you. You know you're richer than you think, Nick. You have always had the one commodity that money can't buy--love. And that's one Leonetti tradition I plan on cultivating myself. We'll bake, and sew and make crafts all the time. You'll have to walk over everything in the house to get to us. I want--"

"Ever done it in a limo?" Nick asked, his face mirroring his love for her as he pulled the curtain between them and the driver.

"No, but there's always a first time."

## Epilogue

"Uncle Jack, will you tuck me in," the little girl with dark hair and enormous blue eyes cried, pulling on Jackson's pants leg.

"I'd be delighted, my dear." Jackson smiled down at Sarah Jackson Leonetti in her blue silk pajamas. Picking her up, he carried her to bed, planted a kiss on her forehead, and gently tucked her in. "Sweet dreams, little one," he said, smiling down into her small face. "Did you enjoy your party with your grandparents?"

"Very much. Grandma Rosa's gonna bake cookies next weekend and she's gonna let me help. I love going to her house cause Tony always gives me rides on his back, and Tina puts make-up on me. Grandma O'Sullivan is taking me shopping too, she says I don't have enough pretty dresses. Night, Uncle Jack, I love you so much."

Staring glassy-eyed at the child, obviously touched by her love, Jackson blew her a kiss. "I love you too."

"Night."

"Goodnight," Jackson replied as he strolled towards the door, his emotions once more intact, and turned out the light, his face beaming with a wide smile.

Nick and Kelsey were just saying goodbye to all the relatives who had shown up for the three-year-old's birthday party. The house looked as if a bomb had gone off, and Dorothy, who had stopped long enough to join in the festivities, was now cleaning up the mess, humming a tune as she went.

"She's in bed, already?" Kelsey squealed as she spotted Jackson.

"Too much excitement I'm afraid." Jackson chuckled. "See you two Monday morning at the office. That deal you helped us land with the city for the contracted warehouses is out of this world, Nick. I'm not sure how we managed so long without you around. And thanks so much for inviting me to the party."

Nick grabbed at his elbow. "Hey pal, you're her Godparent, that makes you extra special around here. I'm afraid you'll be attending a lot more of these functions in the next few years. Hope you don't mind too much."

Jackson let a smile escape his lips. "Mind? I'd be disappointed if you didn't. Goodnight, now."

"Night, Jackson."

Nick pulled Kelsey into his arms his eyes alight. "I'll just go check on her and be right there."

"Not too many stories, Nick. You're spoiling her."

Nick smiled and glanced at the growing bulge of his wife's stomach, a gleam in his eyes holding her to the spot. "Gotta stay in practice for the next one."

Kelsey smiled, kissed him swiftly and darted for the bedroom, with the full knowledge that her husband was having the time of his life.

Nick opened the door to his daughter's room and smiled; she hadn't gone to sleep. She had waited for his story, just as he knew she would.

"Well, pumpkin, did you enjoy your birthday party?"

"Yes, Daddy, but I ate too much ice cream."

"I'm sorry. But you've got to stay in shape, because tomorrow we're going to ride the Ferris wheel, eat hotdogs, and have a big time. That is, if Mommy is feeling up to it."

The little girl's eyes widened and she grabbed her daddy by the neck and pulled him down for a big hug. "I can't wait. I hope Mommy feels better tomorrow."

"She wouldn't miss it. You know she's loves the Ferris wheel and she's addicted to hotdogs."

"Isn't the baby coming?"

"Not for a couple more weeks the doctor said."

"It'll be the best day ever."

"Oh, Sarah Jackson Leonetti, I love you," Nick cried, his heart swelling with pride.

"I love you too, Daddy. Now," she paused and looked into his smiling face, her blue eyed stare suddenly serious, "will you tell me a story?"

"Of course, don't I always?" he said and glanced about her room for her books. Just as he was about to pull one from the bookshelf, she shook her head at him.

"Not that one, Daddy. I want you to tell me about the one you know by heart. Grandma Rosa says the best ones are the ones you don't have to read."

Nick glanced at his daughter with a sly smile. "But you've heard that one a dozen times. Aren't you tired of it?"

"I'll never be tired of that one, Daddy."

Nick sighed with exaggeration. "Okay. If that's the one you really want to hear."

"Yes, please."

Nick glanced at his daughter, thinking how wondrous it was to be here with her, telling her stories, loving her, watching her grow. What a miracle she was.



"Once upon a time," Nick began as he curled Sarah into his arms, secure at last that he would always be there for her. "There was this beautiful lady named Goody-Two-Shoes ..."

The End

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

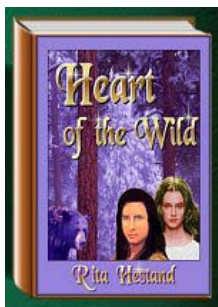


A native born Texan, Rita Hestand is no stranger to the imagination. As an only child, Rita often had to use her imagination to create new friends to play with. Rita is a mother of two daughters and a grandmother of seven.

Rita spent twelve years as a Day Care Provider, helping to raise her own grandchildren. It seemed only natural that she enroll in the Institute of Children's Literature, where she graduated in 1997.

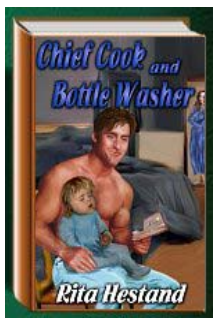
Rita writes children's books, poetry, romance, and short stories. She is a member of DARA, a local chapter through RWA and is an active member of EPIC. Rita is a firm believer that learning should never stop and continues to expand her horizons. Her motto about writing is: NEVER GIVE UP!

### OTHER ROMANCE NOVELS BY RITA AVAILABLE FROM WRITERS EXCHANGE:



#### HEART OF THE WILD

Kaisie Moore had run from a planned marriage 8 years ago. Now kidnapped by her father's choice of husbands she must battle old hurts. The blizzard is doing nothing to keep her hidden passions intact. Seeking to keep her heart and regain her freedom she must fight Chayton's attraction. Chayton might have agreed to the kidnapping, but would he be able to prevent his heart from falling in love with hers? Would he capture her heart as surely as she had years ago?



#### CHIEF COOK AND BOTTLEWASHER TRAVERS BROTHERS BOOK 1

Emma Smith hadn't been straight with her new boss, but he hadn't given her much of a chance to explain. Trapped in her own lies and uncertainties Emma was running in fear of losing her baby.

Deke Travers, oldest son on the 4 Bar None Ranch, needed one thing to make his life more peaceful, his brothers to settle down and get with the business of ranching. There was only one solution, marry them off to a country gal!

Then Emma Smith crashed into Deke's life and Deke had found the answer to his problems--he thought! Emma was sweet and beautiful, and when she looked at him with those whiskey brown eyes he was a goner.

Deke could tolerate almost anything but a liar! And The Chief Cook and Bottle Washer was lying!



#### COURTING ABBY TRAVERS BROTHERS BOOK 2

Clint Travers and Abby Martin were best friends, always had been. They'd confided everything to each other over the years as next door neighbor ranchers. That is till one night when passion over-ruled good sense and Clint compromised Abby. He'd broken a promise to her father, and lost his best friend.

Years later, Abby's Back for her father's funeral, and has she got a surprise for Clint. One look and Clint knows it's his kid. But that doesn't solve the problem. Abby is now independent, going with someone and not at all convinced that Clint ever cared about her.

How can he change her mind? What can he do to win Abby and his son? His sister-in-law, Emma, tells him he has to.... Court Abby!

\*\*\*

Rita has many more books coming out from Writers Exchange, you can keep track of them at her author page: <http://ebooks.writers-exchange.com/rita-h.htm>