



Isn't It Romantic?

By

Ellen Fisher

© copyright May 2004, Ellen Fisher

Cover art by Eliza Black, © copyright May 2004

New Concepts Publishing

5202 Humphreys Rd.

Lake Park, GA 31636

www.newconceptspublishing.com

Chapter 1

Kipling Stanton had never seen such a great ass.

Having just picked up the morning paper off his driveway, he looked over the low hedge of shiny, dark-leaved bushes that separated his new yard from his neighbor's. And there was his neighbor, bending over to pick up her own paper.

Just like his Realtor had said, the view was fabulous.

He reminded himself firmly that the Realtor had been talking about the view of the creek that rambled past his lawn, rather than his neighbor's attributes. But attributes they certainly were. His neighbor was wearing extremely tight-fitting shorts that cupped her butt lovingly in the rear and made her tanned legs look incredibly long. Her equally impressive torso was clad in a purple T-shirt. Considering it was Monday, he was a little surprised she wasn't dressed for work. Then again, maybe she didn't work.

He scoffed at himself. With the notable exception of himself, everyone worked here, in this neighborhood of stately old houses on waterfront lots, all charging off to their important jobs in huge SUVs the size of Rhode Island. He was probably the only unemployed person in the place.

Maybe she worked odd hours. Or maybe she was a stay-at-home mom. Which would mean she was married.

That would be kind of a bummer, he thought, sneaking a last hasty look at her butt as she straightened up.

"Hi," he said over the top of the bushes.

She jumped and let out a little squeal. "I'm sorry," he said hastily. "I didn't mean to startle you. I'm your new neighbor."

She held a hand to her chest. "Oh, my *God*. You scared the hell out of me."

"Sorry," he said again. "I figured you saw the big truck yesterday, when I moved in."

She offered a tentative smile and moved closer to the hedge. "Yeah, I saw it. I'd kind of forgotten, though. I'm not real awake this hour of the morning."

"I can understand that," he said, flashing a grin at her. There wasn't the slightest reason for him to be out of bed at six a.m., considering he was now unemployed. It was a bad habit, one he was going to have to break himself of.

"I'm Cody Lang, by the way."

Cody. He liked that. Short and sweet. "I'm—" He hesitated for a long, awkward moment. "Uh, Kipling."

Her eyes widened, and she made a funny, muffled sound that he suspected was a repressed snort of amusement. He got that a lot, and he couldn't blame her for being amused. As far as he knew, he was the only man named Kipling in the entire United States. At least he sure as hell hoped so. No one else should have to be stuck with the damned name.

"Kipling, huh? Is that your first name?"

He nodded glumly.

The corners of her mouth twitched, but she managed to suppress outright laughter, for which he was grateful. "I guess your parents liked *The Jungle Book*, huh?"

He flashed her a self-deprecating smile. "Could have been worse, I guess. They could have called me Rudyard."

A giggle escaped her. "Yeah, that would definitely have been worse."

Cody Lang had a nice smile, he thought. It made her dark eyes sparkle. In fact she was a nice-looking woman. Not glamorous, not with the wildly curling mop of bright red hair and not a speck of makeup to be seen on her features. Not in the least like the elegant, sophisticated women he usually dated. But she was undeniably pretty.

She looked at him across the hedge, and he felt himself take a couple of steps in her direction, near enough to see the smattering of freckles across

the bridge of her nose. It was as if she was drawing him toward her with those big, dark eyes. He was close enough now to see that her eyes were the color of chocolate. Dark, rich, expensive chocolate. Godiva eyes.

“Are you married?” she said.

Kipling blinked, taken aback by the blunt question. For a moment he thought she had recognized him. Since he was just stepping out to get the paper, he hadn't bothered to wear the “disguise” he'd used yesterday while dealing with the movers—a pair of sunglasses to conceal his distinctive eyes, and a cap to tuck his well-known blond mane into. This morning there was nothing to disguise his famous features but the scruffy beard he was in the process of growing.

He realized he should have worn the cap and glasses, but he'd lucked out this time-- it was obvious she hadn't recognized him. If she had, she surely wouldn't be asking if he was married. Not after *People* had labeled him “America's Hottest Bachelor” in eighty-point type. Maybe she was just interested in meeting his wife, had he had one.

He raised his hand so she could see the absence of a ring and grinned ruefully. “Nope. You?”

“No.” She gave him a long, considering look. Somehow being on the receiving end of that look made him nervous as hell. He felt like a gazelle, being sized up as a possible snack for a lioness.

“In that case,” she said at last, “I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Really? What?”

She paused for a long moment and gave him the lioness-gaze again. At last she said, “I want to marry you.”

Chapter 2

Disappointment curled in Kipling's gut. Damn it. She *had* recognized him.

Just once in his life, just *once*, he'd like to meet a woman and not have her throw herself at him, just because he was famous. Just because she'd seen his face on a few magazines and seen him chatting with Oprah once or twice. And he couldn't have the slightest respect for a woman who wanted to have sex with a celebrity. There were a stunning number of women in the world who would.

Somehow, based on her innocent, forthright face, he'd thought Cody Lang wasn't one of them.

"Go to hell," he said shortly, and turned.

"No, wait!" she called, and ran closer to the hedge. "I didn't mean to offend you. It's just that I'm in a real jam, and I needed some help. I thought maybe since you were new, you might have a few days off."

"So you thought we could fly to Vegas and get married?" he said stiffly, without turning around.

"Well, obviously I don't really want to get married. I mean, you're cute and all, but that's not really a basis for a long-term relationship, is it?"

Cute. He was pretty sure no one had ever called him *cute* before. Sure, Oprah had called him "the best-looking man in America," but that wasn't really the same thing, was it? Oddly enough, he found he liked being called cute better. Especially by Cody Lang.

He turned and regarded her suspiciously. "I don't understand. You asked if I wanted to get married. Didn't you?"

She chuckled. "I guess you weren't flattered by my romantic proposal, huh?"

"It's not exactly that I wasn't flattered," he said cautiously. He supposed he should be flattered by the scores of letters he received every week from women, asking him to marry them or just to have sex with him, but somehow he wasn't. He didn't particularly appreciate being perceived merely as a sex object.

"Just a little too soon in our relationship to talk about marriage, right?"

He was beginning to suspect Cody Lang was a rabid fan. Either that, or she was simply certifiably insane. That was all he needed, to move in next to a crazy person. Too bad he'd closed on the house yesterday. It was a little too late to get out of his contract now. "Look," he said at last, backing away slowly, "I don't know what you've heard about me, but—"

She waved her hands in the air impatiently. "I know it sounds crazy, and I'm sorry. It's just that my dad is coming to visit me tomorrow, and I sort of told him I was married."

Kipling paused in his cautious, steady progression toward his porch. "Say what?"

"I told him I was married," she repeated, looking uncomfortable.

"But you're not."

"That's right. I'm not."

"And now that he's coming to visit, he expects you to produce an actual husband?"

"Something like that," she agreed.

Kipling narrowed his eyes at her. "So you're looking for someone to help you deceive your father? What is this, some sort of inheritance thing? He's going to write you out of his will if you don't get married?"

"Of course not," she said, looking affronted. "It's nothing like that."

"So you're just a pathological liar."

She scowled. "I suppose I deserve that. No. It's just that...." She broke off, looking even more uncomfortable than before. "Dad has some very serious health issues," she admitted at last. "He wants me to get married before he dies, so I have someone to look after me."

Kipling cocked an eyebrow at her, standing in front of a house that probably cost more than most people made in five or six years. "Like you need someone to look after you."

“You’re absolutely right, I don’t. But Dad has this old-fashioned sexist hang-up. He doesn’t want to see me alone. So I sort of told him I eloped.” She grinned. “A wedding isn’t that hard to make up. Making a husband is a lot harder.”

Kipling found himself slowly moving toward her again, drawn by the earnestness in her chocolate eyes. “And you thought he wouldn’t find out about this?”

She shook her head. “He doesn’t travel much. He lives on the other side of the country. He’s never liked planes, and with his health problems...well, I just figured he wouldn’t come out here. But once I told him I was married, he decided he’d come out to meet my husband.”

“So now you’re in a deep shit.”

The corner of her mouth quirked, and he noticed that she had nice, full lips, lips that just begged to be kissed. “You could say that.” She paused and looked at him hopefully. “So can I convince you to be my husband?”

“Ah don’t know what to say,” Kipling said in a thick Southern drawl, fluttering his eyelashes in his best Scarlett imitation. “This is all so sudden.”

She grinned outright. “Why don’t you come over for lunch, and we can talk about it?”

“Considering all my kitchen stuff is still in boxes, that’s an offer I’ll be happy to accept.”

“Terrific. See you at noon, then,” she said brightly, and bounced up her front steps. Kipling watched her wistfully as she disappeared through a massive mahogany door, and he realized his gaze wasn’t fixated on her rear end anymore. He had the distinct impression there was a lot more to Cody Lang than a nice ass. Although, he thought as he headed back to his own front porch, that was definitely one of her better points.

* * * *

Cody sat down at the kitchen table and flipped open the newspaper, but she realized after a couple of minutes she wasn’t actually comprehending anything she read. Somehow her mind wasn’t on the headlines.

Her new neighbor was one hell of a good-looking guy.

Kipling might have a ridiculous name, but he had a face that would put a movie star to shame, despite the scraggly growth of blond hair that covered the lower part of his face. High cheekbones, well-defined lips, and a chin that jutted out just a bit too far. Hazel eyes that couldn't quite decide if they wanted to be green or amber and somehow managed to be both. All surrounded by dark gold hair that fell to his shoulders. She didn't usually go for guys with long hair, but in this case she was more than ready to make an exception.

A gorgeous face packaged with a lean, tight body in jeans and an old T-shirt. Really, was there a downside here?

Yeah, she thought grimly, taking a sip of coffee. There was a downside, all right. He thought she was nuts. She'd seen it in those incredible eyes.

And maybe she was crazy, asking a complete stranger for help in this charade.

But she was *desperate*, damn it.

Besides that, for some reason Kipling didn't seem like a complete stranger. It was odd, but she would have sworn she'd met him before. There was something familiar about the set of his broad shoulders, the curve of his lips when he smiled. There was something about the shifting, green-gold eyes that made her think they'd gazed into hers before.

Maybe I've seen him before in a dream.

That was, she admitted, a ridiculously romantic notion, but then she was ridiculously romantic. All her life she'd been waiting for someone.

Why couldn't that someone be Kipling?

The phone rang, and she stood up, almost stepping on her chocolate lab, Rocky, who was sprawled comfortably on the rug beneath the kitchen table, waiting for a bite or two of toast. She grabbed the phone before its second ring. "Hello?"

"Hey, Cody."

Cody recognized the voice of her friend and employee, Tiffani Harshaw. "Oh, hi, Tiff. What's up?"

"I just wanted to tell you I managed to open the store without you." Tiffani was the manager of Cody's bookstore, Lang's Fairy Tales.

Ordinarily Cody worked six days a week, but for the first time in a very long time she'd taken off the entire week in anticipation of her father's visit.

"Really? And everything's still standing?"

"Did I forget to mention the ceiling caved in?" Tiffani gave one of her charming, bubbly giggles. "No, everything's fine and we've already had quite a few customers. But it's quiet right now. So what are you doing on your day off?"

"I just asked a guy to marry me."

There was a brief pause. "I hope you're kidding."

Cody chuckled. "Sort of. My dad called and said he'd be down tomorrow."

"Ohmigod. And last week you told him—"

"Uh-huh. So I'm trying to get my new next-door neighbor to fill in."

"What? Do you mean the guy who moved in yesterday?"

"Yeah. The perfect solution to my problems."

"You mean," Tiffani said slowly, "you're going to get a total stranger to sleep in the house with you and your dad for a week?"

Cody paused. "Well, when you put it that way, I admit it does sound kind of dumb."

"Sounds worse than dumb. If you go through with a crazy scheme like this, you are too stupid to live, girlfriend."

"I have got to get a husband before tomorrow," Cody said, desperation tingeing her voice. "I *have* to. Anyway, I've got Rocky."

Tiffani snorted. Despite his macho-sounding name, Rocky was a pushover who'd greet a burglar with a wagging tail and a cheerful willingness to disclose the location of Cody's jewelry in exchange for a pat. "That dog's useless. He's not a chocolate lab, he's a *marshmallow*."

"Well, my neighbor doesn't know that."

"This is nuts, Cody. Don't you know any other guys who'd do this for you?"

"None I'd trust alone with me."

"But you'd trust this guy you just met?"

Cody laughed ruefully. "Maybe I don't want to trust him."

"Ah, the truth is out there. Good looking, huh?"

"Better than good looking. Amazing."

“You know, psychos can be handsome, too.” Tiffani paused, and Cody heard the sound of her nails tapping on the phone. “Look, let me come over tonight, okay? I can kind of check him out. I have a better eye for psychos than you do.”

“You’ve certainly met more than I have.”

“Hell, I was married to one, once upon a time. So invite this guy over for dinner, and I’ll have a look.”

“You just want to see if he really is that good-looking,” Cody accused.

Tiffani giggled again. “Damn straight, girlfriend. Damn straight.”

* * * *

Kipling spent the rest of the morning unpacking stuff from his boxes. The books were the first things to come out. The house had a big study, lined with floor-to-ceiling cherry bookcases—one of the things he’d liked most about it. He started piling books onto his shelves. His extensive CD collection went onto the shelves as well, in no particular order right now. He’d organize everything later.

Next he found a box of silver-framed photographs. His little sister, Chrissa, smiling at the camera. She really was beautiful, he thought fondly. In fact, with that long, dark-blond hair and her shifting amber-green eyes, she looked a lot like him. But he couldn’t really call her “little” anymore. She’d just entered the university here in Swift Creek—which was one of the reasons he’d moved here, to keep an eye on her.

He put the picture of Chrissa, along with a photograph of their parents, up on the mantel in the family room, then thought to look at the time.

It was past twelve already.

He ran for the door, while thinking that a person who took four hours to unpack his books and CDs had too damned many of the things. He gave brief thought to donning his cap and sunglasses, then decided not to bother, since Cody had gotten a good look at his face already anyway. He went up his neighbor’s front steps and rang the doorbell. His blood froze in his veins as he heard a dog bark.

Christ. Cody had a dog. Cold sweat broke out on his body, and he felt nausea twist in his stomach.

Cody opened the door, restraining the dog with one hand on its collar as it strained to get to him. It was a wild-eyed, savage brute with huge ivory fangs. He felt the familiar heavy pounding of his heart and had to stop himself from taking a step backward.

"Hi," Cody said, smiling. Then she looked up into his face and must have read his appalled expression. "Oh," she said. "Don't worry, he's perfectly friendly. This is Rocky."

Rocky. It sounded like a savage-dog name to him, the kind of name people gave to enormous, muscular pitbull-rottweiler crosses. He saw foam dripping from the beast's jaws and thought he might faint, right here on the porch.

Yeah, that would impress the hell out of his new neighbor. Kipling Stanton: stud, hunk, and quivering mass of Jell-O.

"Uh," he said, fighting desperately to keep his voice from shaking, "I'm kind of allergic to dogs."

"Oh," she said, looking disappointed. "Want me to put him out back, then?"

Oh, God, please do. "That'd be fine," he said.

She wrestled the wild-eyed dog away from the front door and managed to get it out the back. Then she returned to where Kipling was still waiting on the front porch. "You could have come on in," she said, smiling.

He didn't remark that he liked keeping a nice heavy door between himself and vicious animals with enormous glistening fangs, figuring that such a remark would probably not endear him to the owner of the aforementioned vicious beast. "Thanks," he said, stepping onto the gleaming hardwood floor. The foyer was pretty damned impressive, with a huge brass chandelier and a wide, curving staircase leading to the second floor.

Now that the dog was safely shut away in the backyard somewhere, he actually felt free to look at her. She was wearing the same faded shorts she'd worn this morning, and they were as tight and short as he remembered. Beneath them her legs stretched on pretty much forever. Her coppery red curls formed a halo around her face, accenting her pixie-like features.

She really was pretty.

Too bad she had a dog.

"Come on into the kitchen," she said, turning and leaving him to follow in her wake. He walked behind her, trying very hard not to watch her hips sway back and forth in their hypnotic rhythm. Her kitchen looked like something out of *Country Living*—pine cabinetry, a rustic-looking pine table topped with a hand-crocheted tablecloth, and apple green walls that had been stenciled along the top with an apple pattern. A narrower back staircase, its risers carefully stenciled with the same apple pattern, led upstairs.

He got the feeling she had put a lot of effort into decorating her house. Maybe he'd be able to get her to give him a few pointers.

"This is a nice kitchen," he said.

"Isn't it romantic? I did all the work myself." She opened the fridge. "I figured we could have sandwiches," she said, her voice muffled as she leaned into the refrigerator, giving him a fabulous view of her behind. "I have rolls, deli ham, Swiss cheese, that sort of thing. Is that okay with you?"

"Uh," he said. She straightened up and he glanced away hastily, before she caught him ogling her butt. "I mean, yeah. Sure. Thanks."

"No problem," she said easily, starting to toss food onto the distressed pine island. "It was nice of you to agree to come over, considering that you think I'm crazy."

"I don't think—"

She waved her hand. "Of course you do. I know I sounded nutty this morning. I'm not really awake that hour of the morning, you know?" She walked across to a cabinet and got down two sandwich plates. She offered him one, smiling guilelessly. "But I really am desperate, and I figured maybe you wouldn't mind helping me out."

Kipling took the plate from her hand. It was blue and white and looked as if it might be extremely old. Then again, for all he knew she'd bought it from a department store yesterday. Decorating wasn't his strong point. "What exactly do you want me to do?"

She waved her hand again, in a vague fashion that didn't fool him in the least. He was beginning to realize that Cody Lang was the least vague person he'd ever met. "I just need a husband for a week or so."

“A week? You want me to masquerade as your husband for a *week*?”

“Or thereabouts, yeah. Dad hasn’t said exactly when he’s going back yet.”

“So this could conceivably stretch out longer than that.”

Cody shrugged. “If you have to go back to work, we could just tell him you have to go on a business trip or something.”

“Why don’t you just do that now?”

She started slathering Grey Poupon onto her roll. “To be perfectly honest, I don’t think he’s going to go away until he meets my husband. Unless I want him to move in with me permanently, I need to come up with one.”

He put several slices of ham onto his roll and added four slices of Swiss cheese, abruptly remembering he’d forgotten to have breakfast this morning. “So you want me to stay in your house for a week?”

She beamed at him brightly, as if he were her star pupil. “You got it.”

“Let’s just be clear here. Nights, too?”

Her composure slipped slightly, and a slight blush colored her cheeks. “I guess that would be necessary to make our marriage look, uh, real.”

“Yeah, I guess it would. And we’d have to sleep in the same room in order to convince him. Are you really so desperate to go through with this that you’ll share a room with a complete stranger?”

“Oh, no,” she said, and her face cleared a bit. “My room has a little room off it. A nursery, I think it’s supposed to be. Anyway, there’s a connecting door. You could stay in my room until Dad’s gone to bed, then go and sleep in the other room.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” he said, although he wasn’t so sure it was. Sharing a room with Cody Lang didn’t seem like such a terrible idea. But it was bound to make things more complicated, and this situation was already shaping up to be complex enough without added problems.

“Of course,” she added, “Rocky sleeps with me.”

The dog. He felt his heart begin to pound with dread, and imagined himself trying to sleep with that ravenous beast just on the other side of the door.

But of course, she probably wanted the dog in her room to make sure her “husband” behaved himself. She had absolutely no idea how safe the

dog's presence would make her. He wouldn't go into a room with a dog in it to save his life.

"Fine," he said. "But keep the dog outside till I'm out of the room, okay?"

She frowned at him as they crossed to her table to eat. "So you're allergic to dogs, but not dog hair?"

Settling into a chair, he gave her a puzzled look over the top of his sandwich. "Say what?"

"You seem to be suggesting you're only allergic to dogs who are in the same room with you."

Damn. She wasn't stupid, that much was for sure. He hastily dissembled. "Dog hair bugs me too. But it's worse when the dog's in the house with me."

To his relief, she seemed to accept that at face value. "Fine. I'll keep Rocky outside except at bedtime. He doesn't mind. He loves the outdoors. Labs always do."

"Labs?"

"He's a Labrador retriever, you know."

Kipling's only impressions of the beast had been powerful, bone-cracking jaws and a huge, muscular body. He had thought the thing was a mastiff or a Great Dane. Evidently his imagination had been working overtime again. Or perhaps he just didn't care to look at a dog closely enough to determine its breed. The unfortunate truth was he didn't like Labradors better than any other sort of dog.

"Really," he said, trying to force himself to sound interested, when in fact dogs were his absolute least favorite topic of conversation. "I thought Labs were black."

"No, they come in yellow and chocolate, too."

"Chocolate?"

"Brown," she said patiently, as if he were mentally slow.

"Yeah, I get it. But why black, yellow, and chocolate?"

She studied him curiously. "I don't understand."

"Either they should be black, yellow, and brown, or they should come up with better names for the other colors. You know, like licorice, lemon, and chocolate." He stammered to an awkward halt, aware that he was

babbling nervously.

But she giggled. "You know, you may just have a point."

I doubt it, he thought glumly. Just the mention of dogs in a conversation was enough to make him a blithering idiot.

Apparently oblivious to his mental meltdown, she went on to another subject. "I guess we ought to figure out details about our marriage."

He blinked. "Our marriage."

"Yeah. Dad is going to want details. Like where we got married."

"Las Vegas," Kipling suggested.

"Please, no. I wouldn't go there if you paid me. How about the Grand Canyon?"

"The what?"

"The Grand Canyon." Her eyes lit up. "We had a lovely wedding on the North Rim, just as the sun was setting."

"That's crazy. Who the hell gets married at the Grand Canyon?"

She managed to look slightly offended. "Isn't it romantic? It sounds romantic to me."

He snorted. "Romantic, hell. It sounds stupid. Anyway, when people elope they usually go to Las Vegas."

She shook her head. "Las Vegas won't work. I've never been there, but Dad's gone three or four times. He'd trip me up in no time."

Kipling nodded, seeing the logic of her argument. "But the Grand Canyon won't work, either. We don't have pictures. No one goes to the Grand Canyon without taking a picture or two."

"We were in such a hurry to get married we forgot our camera," she suggested, but he shook his head.

"Not with all those little disposable cameras you can buy for next to nothing in gift shops nowadays. It won't work. We must have gotten married somewhere pretty tacky."

"That isn't very romantic."

"If you want romantic, you'd better have pictures to back it up, or your dad won't buy your story."

She stuck her lower lip out. "Fine. Tacky it is, then. The local justice of the peace."

"He could check your story, if he's prone to being suspicious. It

probably shouldn't be local."

"My best friend could confirm it. Then he wouldn't have any reason to be suspicious."

Kipling cocked an eyebrow at her. "You're going to drag your best friend into this too? Do you plan on having the entire population of Swift Creek, Virginia lie about this by the time you're through?"

Her cheeks went pink again. "Look, you keep making this sound like I have some nefarious ulterior motive. I'm just trying to make my dad happy. That's all."

"Uh-huh," Kipling said, unconvinced. It was obvious to him she had some sort of unresolved issues with her father. But he wasn't a psychiatrist, so he kept his mouth shut. "Fine. We got married here. Where?"

"On my lawn, down by the creek."

"Okay, that sounds reasonable. How come we don't have pictures?"

She brightened. "We could take a few."

Kipling stared at her. "I beg your pardon?"

"Wedding pictures. We could take some."

He swallowed the last bite of his sandwich. "Are you seriously suggesting that we take pictures of a fake wedding?"

"Sure, why not?" She was warming to the idea. He could tell by the way her hands were starting to wave through the air. "We could dress up this afternoon, put my camera on a tripod, and take a few pictures."

"Just of us?"

"Well, we didn't have anyone there except us and the minister," she said with enthusiasm. He wondered if she was beginning to believe this whole thing. Maybe she was crazier than he thought. "And the minister would be the one holding the camera, see, which is why he isn't in the pictures."

"I thought we had your best friend there."

"Oh, right." Cody thought for a minute, then her face brightened.

"Well, Tiff hates having her picture taken, so she refused to be in any of the pictures."

"Who refuses to have their picture taken at a wedding?"

"Tiff will back up my story if I ask her to." Cody grinned broadly.

"This is terrific. What a fabulous idea. Dad'll believe it for sure."

Absolutely. Trust me.”

Kipling was beginning to get a pounding headache. “Fine,” he said. “I’ll go back to my house and see if I can dig out my tux.”

“You have a *tux*?” She beamed. “Better and better. This’ll be great.”

He stood up. “I’ll be right back.”

“Oh, but wait,” she said. “We have to tie up a few loose ends first.”

Warning bells clanged in Kipling’s head, and he looked at her suspiciously. “Loose ends? What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, you know.” She waved her hand in that vague way meant to conceal some very definite purpose. “We just need to cover our asses completely before we take pictures, that’s all. For example, there’s your hair.”

“My hair,” Kipling repeated. “Are you talking about cutting it? Because I’m not going to do that, damn it.”

“Oh, no, of course not. I like it that length.”

“Good,” he said.

She flashed the sweet, innocent smile that he’d figured out by now meant nothing but trouble. “We’re just going to dye it.”

Chapter 3

A few minutes later, after a quick search through her medicine cabinets, Cody tossed a box in front of him. Kipling turned the box over to see a smiling, beautiful woman with a head of long raven hair. “Look,” he said, “I told you that I am not going to dye my hair. Especially not black.”

“It’s the kind that washes out after a few showers. Trust me.”

“I don’t care. I am not going to do it.”

She fixed him with an appealing expression. “I told my dad I married a guy with black hair.”

“Any particular reason why?”

“Well, you know, it’s an old cliché. He asked me what my husband looked like, and I told him the first thing that came into my head. Tall, dark, and handsome.”

“Tell him I bleached my hair.”

“But your eyebrows are blond, too. He’ll *know*.”

“Tell him I wear a toupee. Hell, tell him whatever you want. I am not going along with you on this one, Cody. I have been more than reasonable about this entire—“ He stopped himself before uttering the word *affair*. Not the word he was looking for. Not right now, anyway. “This entire extremely bizarre situation. But I am not going to dye my hair. Next thing I know you’ll have me wearing contacts.”

“No, your eyes are fine,” she said earnestly. “I told him they were green. They’re close enough.”

“Thank God for that.”

“But your hair just can’t be that color.”

Kipling muttered a curse beneath his breath, flipped the box over, and started reading the instructions. “Look,” he said after a few minutes, “this

won't work. It says specifically not to use it on eyebrows and eyelashes. My eyebrows are blond. It'll look fake."

"We could try it anyway."

"I'd rather not lose my eyesight, thank you."

"Um..." She stared at him thoughtfully for a long moment, then her face brightened. "Mascara."

He held his hands out in front of her as if trying to ward her off.

"No," he said firmly. "No, no, no. No mascara. No makeup. No hair dye. I'm staying blond, thank you very much."

* * * *

"I think it looks terrific."

Kipling looked dubiously at his hair in the mirror. The hair dye had taken well. Maybe a little too well. His world-famous long blond mane had become ebony-black. Against the golden tone of his skin it didn't look quite natural. "It's too dark. It looks stupid, if you ask me."

Cody grinned at him in the mirror. "I think it suits you. Very manly."

He was flattered by her obvious admiration but tried hard not to show it. "I hope your mascara idea works," he grumped, looking at his golden eyebrows.

"It'll work. Trust me."

He closed his eyes to shut out her relentlessly cheerful expression.

"Stop saying that. Please. And what about my beard?"

"Is that what that is? I thought you were growing mold on your face."

"I've only been growing it out for a week."

"Then it won't kill you to shave it off."

Kipling frowned at himself in the mirror. Without the fuzzy growth disguising the distinctive lines of his chin and jaw, there was a fairly good chance someone would recognize him. "I don't want to shave it off."

"You have to," she said cheerfully. "Dad knows I'd never go for a man with a beard. Anyway..." She met his eyes in the mirror, and the admiration in her gaze warmed him like the summer sun. "I think you'd look very handsome without it."

Kipling felt himself melting faster than butter in a microwave. God, he was pitiful. One look from Cody's dark eyes and he'd do almost anything for her.

Anyway, he thought optimistically, he could grow his beard out again in a few days. And in the meantime, his hair was a totally different color, which should be at least as effective a disguise as a scruffy beard. He knew he was rationalizing, but with her dark, hopeful eyes pinned on him, he found he didn't much care.

"Fine," he said, shrugging. "I'll shave before we take pictures."

"Terrific. Here." She tossed him a tube of black, waterproof mascara. "You can put this on your eyebrows and eyelashes. In the meantime, I'm going to the store to get some decorations."

He clutched the tube of mascara, feeling like he'd fallen into a Dali painting. The situation just seemed to get more and more surreal. "Some decorations? For what?"

She beamed more brightly than before. "The decorations for our wedding, of course."

* * * *

Which was why, an hour later, Kipling found himself hanging white streamers and balloons from the trees in her backyard. She had put her dog safely inside her house, and then made a quick run to the store and fetched huge quantities of white crepe paper streamers and about two hundred balloons...about a hundred and ninety-nine more than he thought was necessary. If he had to blow up another damned balloon, he was going to pass out from lack of oxygen.

She stood beneath the ladder, watching as he hung the last few streamers. "It's a beautiful day for a wedding," she said brightly.

He stifled a groan. The weather was as lovely as only Virginia could be in October, about seventy-five degrees and with a bright blue sky dotted with fluffy clouds. It *would* have been a beautiful day for a wedding, he had to admit, if he hadn't just been putting up decorations that he was going to have to take down again thirty minutes later, while she drove to the store again to get the photos developed.

But the fact was that they weren't getting married.

He looked down at her and gave her a sardonic grin. "I bet you'll make a beautiful bride."

Suddenly she gasped and reached up to her hair. "Ohmigod!" she wailed. "My hair looks like hell!"

Evidently they had two entirely different notions of what constituted hell. "It looks fine," he said. In fact, it looked significantly better than fine. Her hair was wild and wanton and sensuous, but he wasn't going to tell her that. He barely knew the woman, after all. "Anyway, at least yours is the right color."

"Ohmigod! I need a shower!"

Like that was going to be obvious in a photo. Kipling didn't bother to stifle his groan. "Look, is this going to take all day? Because believe it or not, I have things to do. I really have to unpack some more."

"I would never, ever look like this on the day I got married!" she wailed.

"Fine," he said. He came down the ladder and looked at her, clad in shorts and T-shirt, her hair a frizzy copper halo. She looked terrific to him. "If you want to take an hour or so to get ready, go ahead. I'll meet you back here at, uh, three. Is that okay?"

"Perfect," she said, and sprinted for her house.

Kipling went toward his house more slowly. It occurred to him, not for the first time, to wonder if she was setting him up. Pictures of him getting married—even a fake marriage that couldn't be confirmed-- would be worth a hell of a lot to the tabloids. She could probably retire off the proceeds.

But somehow he just couldn't believe she was the type to screw him over for profit and notoriety. She seemed too sweet. At any rate, if she had recognized him he hadn't seen the slightest sign of it. Maybe she was a fabulous actress. But he thought it was more likely she was simply a guileless and slightly clueless woman.

Still wondering if he was doing the right thing, he found the box that contained most of his clothing and dug out his tux. It was an Armani and had cost more than the first car he'd had in high school. He'd packed it carefully, and it wasn't wrinkled in the least. He started to pull off his shirt, then paused, realizing how sweaty he was. His newly black hair was plastered to his head with perspiration, and the scruffy golden growth still covered his chin. He didn't look a hell of a lot like a man who was about to be married.

Sighing, he headed for the shower.

God help him. He was as crazy as Cody was.

* * * *

An hour later, smooth-faced and dressed to kill, he headed back toward Cody's yard. He'd noticed some black dye going down the drain as he showered, but his hair was still midnight black. He had to admit grudgingly it looked pretty convincing. Anyone would have thought he'd been born with a head of black hair.

He went through her gate, checking carefully first to make sure the killer dog wasn't in the back yard, and stopped short as he saw her.

He'd been wrong. She wasn't just pretty.

She was unbelievably gorgeous.

She was dressed in a tea-length, lacy white dress that bore more than a passing resemblance to a wedding gown. It was low-cut, but not excessively so, offering a tantalizing glimpse of her cleavage. It was sleeveless, showing the toned strength of her arms. She had done something to her hair to make it sleek and pulled it back in a sophisticated style. And she wore a white hat with a small veil.

He'd never seen a more stunning woman.

Her face lit up as he approached, and she grinned. "You look incredible."

"Thanks. You look pretty nice yourself." He looked her over, feeling more concerned than ever that he'd been set up. "Any particular reason you keep a wedding gown in your closet?"

She looked down. "This? This isn't a wedding gown, it's just a dress."

"It's an extremely frilly dress."

"Isn't it romantic? I saw it in a catalog and loved it, so I ordered it, but I haven't found a lot of use for it yet. Maybe it does look a little too much like a wedding gown."

It looked exactly like a wedding gown to him, but since that was, after all, the idea, he didn't comment. "And the hat with the veil?"

"I like hats. I have a million of them."

"Because they're romantic."

"Exactly. And while we're on the subject, why do *you* have a tux?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," she said as they walked together across the yard, "I don't know a single man who owns a tuxedo. Everyone I know rents them if they get married. Why on earth do you own one?"

Kipling shrugged. He certainly wasn't about to admit that in the circles in which he traveled, a tux was as necessary as jeans. Perhaps more so. "Isn't it romantic?" he said instead, wiggling his eyebrows.

She giggled. "Oh, you. Come on, I bet you're melting in that outfit. Let's take some pictures."

But taking pictures wasn't as short a process as he would have supposed. Cody insisted on posing them, very carefully. He put his arm around her shoulders and they both smiled at the camera, doing their best to look like happy newlyweds. Cody pushed her remote and the camera clicked.

"That's not right," she said.

Kipling felt annoyance bubble up. "Come on, Cody. Let's get it done."

"That was too much like a snapshot," she said stubbornly.

"So? It *was* a snapshot. There isn't supposed to be a professional photographer at our wedding, remember?"

"Yeah, but I can do better." She looked around. "Here. Lean on this tree."

"Huh?"

"The tree. Lean on it. Like this." She demonstrated.

He did exactly what she had done, placing his forearm—in its very expensive Armani—against the rough bark and leaning toward the tree. "So am I supposed to be marrying the tree now?"

"Don't be silly," she said. "This will be romantic. You'll see." She took the camera's remote in her hand and leaned against the other side of the tree. "Now look into my eyes."

He looked into her eyes. He *fell* into them. They were the most beautiful eyes he'd ever seen, incredibly deep and dark. Abruptly he realized her lush pink lips were scant inches from his mouth. To his chagrin, he felt himself growing hard.

The camera clicked. "Perfect," she said happily. "Now we just have to have a photo of us kissing."

"A photo of us what?" he croaked.

"Kissing!" she said impatiently, as if he were a dunce. "We just got married, remember? We have to kiss!"

He swallowed. Now was definitely not a good time. He wanted to keep the tree between them for at least a few minutes longer. "Uh, can't we take another couple of pictures like that?"

"Nah, that was perfect." She smiled up into his face, and his erection grew harder. A whole lot harder. Which was ridiculous. Sure, she was a beautiful, enticing woman, and sure, her lips were very close to his, but he hardly knew her.

God help him if she noticed. She'd think he was some kind of pervert.

"Uh..." he said.

Her lips twisted wryly. "Oh, come on, Kipling. I can't be *that* repulsive."

No, repulsive certainly wasn't the word he'd use. Reluctantly, he stepped away from the tree, praying she wouldn't look down. "Okay," he said, and bent down. For the first time he noticed she was quite a bit shorter than he was, even in satin three-inch heels. She had a presence that was a whole lot bigger than she was.

He pursed his lips, closed his eyes, and waited.

Only to hear her giggle. He opened his eyes and scowled. "What are you laughing at?"

She laughed harder. "Haven't you ever kissed anyone before, Kipling?"

He lifted his chin and glared at her, annoyed. He'd kissed some of the most famous women in Hollywood. "Of course. In fact, I've been told I'm a pretty good kisser."

"You have got to be kidding me. You look like a fifteen-year-old waiting for his first kiss."

"Fine," he said curtly and stepped toward her. "How about this?"

He pulled her into his arms and yanked her against his chest. His lips came down on hers, hard and demanding. She wrapped her arms around his neck and her soft, yielding lips surrendered to the onslaught.

She tasted as great as she looked. He wanted to deepen the kiss, and

wondered what she'd do if he slid his tongue against her lips. If he plunged his tongue deep into her mouth. He wondered if she found the kiss as erotic, as incredibly stimulating, as he did. And then he knew the answer.

Because he heard the camera clicking.

He lifted his head from hers and stared at her, as stunned as if she'd slammed a Louisville Slugger against his skull. The hottest kiss of his life, and *she* hadn't felt a damned thing. She'd just been setting up a picture.

Oblivious to his chagrin, she smiled sunnily into his face. "Those were terrific," she said. "Very romantic. Dad will never believe we're not in love."

"Great," he muttered. He wanted to get away. He didn't want to get near this woman again, let alone touch her. She had a powerfully erotic effect on him, as if he'd accidentally swallowed some Viagra. He stepped back, hoping again she didn't happen to look down. "Are we done now?"

"Yeah, I think so." She turned in a circle, looking at her backyard. "Of course, we need to take down the decorations."

"Of course," he said under his breath, thinking it had taken over an hour to get the damned streamers and balloons in place. "Just let me get my tux off."

"Sure. Why don't you do that, and take down the decorations, and meanwhile I'll go to the store and get these photos developed?"

"Great."

"Then I'll make you dinner, if you want. You might as well get used to my cooking."

He hesitated. She stepped nearer to him and placed a hand on his forearm, rigid beneath the woolen fabric. "Look, Kipling," she said, smiling up at him, "you're being a really good sport about this, and I appreciate it."

Some of the tension flowed out of him, and he found himself grinning back. Cody had the most infectious smile he'd ever seen. "No problem. At least I've found someone to cook for me."

"Great. We'll have dinner and figure out the rest of the details."

"Details?" he said cautiously.

"Yeah. You need to know more about me, I need to know more about you. Plus we need to know where we went for our honeymoon. Stuff like that."

“Okay. But no more changes. No more hair dye. No more makeup.”
“That’s fine.” Her smile widened. “You’re perfect.”

Chapter 4

Cody's cell phone buzzed while she was wandering around the department store, waiting for the one-hour photo developers to finish with her so-called wedding photos. She flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Hi there," Tiffani's voice said. "How's it going with Mr. Right?"

"Better than you'd expect, actually," Cody said. "We took some great wedding photos."

There was a silence on the other end. "Wedding photos," Tiffani said at last, carefully, as though she might have misunderstood because of static.

"Yeah, we took some fabulous ones of us getting married."

Another silence. "Look, Cody, I feel constrained to point out that you haven't actually gotten married."

"True," Cody said brightly, "but no one could look at these photos and believe it. We decorated the back yard, he dressed up in a tux, and I wore that really frilly white dress. It was really romantic."

"Cody," Tiffani said with concern, "this entire situation is getting extremely bizarre."

"No, it isn't. I'm just taking photos so my dad will believe I'm really married."

"You got this guy to decorate your entire backyard, dress up in a tux, and take pretend wedding photos, and you think this is completely normal?"

Cody thought about it for a moment. "Okay. So maybe it's a little weird."

"*Weird* is an understatement. You are tottering on the brink of insanity with your foot on a banana peel, hon. And Mr. Right is showing serious signs of psychosis too. Frankly, I'm not sure who's crazier, you or him."

Cody checked her watch. "Look, Tiff, I gotta go pick up my wedding photos."

"Your *wedding* photos. Jesus."

"I'll see you at dinner, okay?"

"Actually, that's what I called to tell you, but you distracted me. I can't do dinner tonight. Ken called from work. He wants to take me out for a fancy dinner, and he already arranged a baby-sitter for Alice." Ken was Tiffani's husband, and Alice was her three-year-old daughter.

Cody felt an odd quiver of pleasure in the pit of her stomach at the thought of spending a quiet evening alone with Kipling. She did her best to suppress it and not burst into song, which might have the unfortunate effect of tipping Tiffani off. "That's okay. How about tomorrow at lunch?"

"Won't your dad be in by then?"

"Sure, but he'll love you. Better than he likes me, most likely. Don't worry about it. Come for lunch."

She said goodbye to her friend, closed the cell phone, and returned to the photo department. The cashier handed her a packet of photos. Behind the counter, a couple of teenage girls were whispering and nudging each other. Cody caught snatches of their conversation. "It couldn't be—"

"Well, *ask*."

"*You* ask."

"No. It can't be."

"But it sure looks like—"

"But his *hair*—"

Teenagers giggling over some boy, Cody thought. Amused by their intensity, she smiled at them, took her packet of photos, and left.

As she walked through the store, she opened the photos and glanced through them. *Perfect*, she thought, seeing herself clad as a bride, staring into Kipling's eyes with a startlingly convincing imitation of love. As it happened, it was lust, but who could really tell the difference anyway? And the picture of them kissing...well, it melted her stomach just looking at it.

She wondered if Kipling had had the slightest inkling she'd wanted to pull him down on the grass and have her way with him, with total disregard for her frilly white dress and his tux. Obviously he hadn't, or he wouldn't have agreed to stick around for the next week. He'd have run in the other

direction. Fortunately for him, he didn't have a clue, and she planned on keeping it that way. But it was going to be difficult.

She'd never had this powerful reaction to a man in her life.

* * * *

"Isn't it romantic?"

Kipling stared down at the photo Cody dropped on the table in front of him. It showed the two of them in a liplock, arms around each other, looking for all the world like a blissful newlywed couple. Looking at the picture, he felt an instantaneous response that made him extremely glad he was sitting down.

"Pretty good," he agreed. "You ought to be a professional photographer."

"I used to be," she said, sitting at the table across from him.

The fear that he'd been set up spiked through his chest again, and he looked at her through narrowed eyes. "No kidding. You used to take celebrity shots?"

"Are you joking? I don't know any celebrities." Her smile was guileless, as always, and the tight knot of tension in his chest loosened marginally. Anyway, it occurred to him that if she'd wanted to sell pictures of him to the tabloids, she'd be unlikely to insist he dye his hair first, so that he was virtually unrecognizable. "No, after college I worked for a photography studio and took candid portraits of kids for a while. I love kids. That's what I do for a living now. I own a children's book shop."

He looked at the picture she'd taken with the remote. "You're one hell of a good photographer."

"Maybe. But it helps to have a good subject. You're a natural in front of the camera, Kipling."

He stiffened slightly. "Uh, thanks."

"Really. I mean, look at these." She scattered out the remainder of their pictures. "You look fabulous in every one of these shots. Of course—" She smiled as she looked down at him. "You look fabulous in real life, too."

He blinked and looked away, embarrassed. "Thanks," he muttered again.

"So what do you want for dinner?"

He sighed. His life had taken a turn for the bizarre, and he might as well hang on for the ride. "We're on our honeymoon, Cody. Let's just order pizza."

* * * *

"So you own a bookstore," Kipling said through a mouthful of supreme pizza. "How did you get into that?"

"I've always loved books," she said. "When I was little, I had hundreds of books. My mom bought new ones for me every week. After I quit my job at the photography studio, I started working in the big bookstore downtown. My friend Tiffani worked there too. We talked about having our own store, specializing in kids' books, but it was just a pipe dream. Then I came into some money. I bought an empty space downtown and hired Tiffani to help me run the place. It's been pretty popular." She tilted her head and looked at him. "What about you? What do you do for a living?"

Kipling chewed his pizza carefully while thinking about what to tell her. He wasn't sure he trusted her enough to tell her the truth. In fact, he was pretty sure he didn't. He'd only met her this morning, after all. Conversely, if he lied to her and her father recognized him, that would be beyond embarrassing for her. It would totally destroy the charade.

He decided to gamble that no one was likely to recognize him, now that he was sporting midnight-black hair. His long, golden hair was easily his most recognizable feature. Hell, maybe he should have thought of dyeing his hair himself, instead of trying to hide it under a cap. He probably ought to just cut it short, but somehow he couldn't quite bring himself to do that. After six years of wearing a shoulder-length mane, it would feel like cutting off an arm.

"I worked out in California," he said, deciding some of the truth was better than none. "Programming midrange computers, AS/400s." Computer science was what he'd majored in in college, and the first job he'd had out of school. Before his life had changed so drastically.

"Really? You don't seem like a computer geek."

He grinned. "Guilty as charged."

She stuffed the remainder of her vegetable pizza into her mouth and looked at him. "So did we go to California for our honeymoon?"

"I don't think we've been on our honeymoon yet," he said thoughtfully. "I just moved here, after all. I'm looking for a job."

"How did we meet?"

He frowned, then grinned wickedly. "On the Internet. In a chatroom for singles."

She snorted. "That'll shock the hell out of Dad. But why did we fall in love? What do we have in common?"

"Uh... I'm not sure. What do you like?"

Her shoulders moved in a graceful shrug. "You mean, what would I put in a personal ad?"

"Sure. That's a good place to start."

"Mmm." She pressed her lips together. "Let's see. 'Single female, thirtyish, enjoys romance novels, new age music, photography, art, jogging, seeks single male, tall, handsome, and—'" Her eyes crinkled with humor. "Blond."

"Are you thirty?"

"Thirty-three, actually."

"No kidding. I won't be thirty-three until March." He leered at her. "I've always found older women attractive."

"Hmph. Let's hear your ad."

"Single male, thirtyish, incredibly handsome—"

"Ha."

"You disagree?"

"I'm not going to answer that. You think you need a bigger ego?"

He grinned. "Likes the quiet life, watching videos, reading, biking. Seeking single female, small, insane, and with wild red hair."

She blushed in a way that contrasted oddly with her copper curls. "I'm not insane."

"Just a little loopy."

"As it happens, my best friend agrees with you." She took another bite of pizza. "You know," she said thoughtfully, "your ad makes you sound kind of...boring."

Boring was exactly what he was striving for. He was tired of going from party to party, having beautiful women who didn't know him from Adam trying to seduce him, tired of seeing his face on magazine covers

every time he needed milk from the grocery store. Tired of being mobbed every time he stepped outside his house, for that matter. Tired of having the press camped around his house every time his agent manufactured a rumor about him. He wanted normalcy. If he had to be boring to get it, that was just fine with him.

“I like boring,” he said mildly.

“I guess it goes along with your job. Somehow I don’t associate computer geekiness with a wild lifestyle.”

He felt a brief flash of guilt for the way he was deceiving her, but squelched it ruthlessly. He scarcely knew the woman, after all, and she’d somehow talked him into doing her an enormous favor. But that didn’t give her a right to know all the grim details of his existence up to now.

“Yeah, computer geeks are boring,” he agreed.

Cody looked at him through her dark russet lashes. “I don’t know about that. I think you’re pretty exciting, actually.”

Kipling turned his head sharply and looked at her. Was she coming on to him? He felt the uneasy sensation again. Suppose she just wanted to sleep with him and spill the details to a tabloid? Suppose she was trying to seduce him merely for the thrill of the hunt? Or worse yet, as some sort of dare?

Bag a celebrity, earn one hundred points.

Some of his wariness must have been reflected in his eyes, because she suddenly burst out laughing. “You should see your face,” she said, giggling. “Like you think I’m going to jump on you and *ravish* you, or something.”

Despite his nagging suspicions, he couldn’t help but grin. “Protecting my virtue is very important to me.”

“Your virtue?” She giggled again. “I’m not sure I’ve ever met a virtuous man. Until now, I mean.”

She hadn’t met one now, either. Because he was tempted. Very tempted. He’d never met a woman quite like Cody Lang before, and he could feel his tenuous grasp on his “virtue” slipping away rapidly. Fortunately, she promptly put him in his place.

“But you don’t have to worry,” she went on cheerfully. “I wasn’t trying to get you into bed.”

Damn, he thought.

“I just think you’re a really sexy guy, that’s all. But you probably get that all the time.”

The words *America’s Hottest Bachelor* flashed through his mind. “Uh, every now and then,” he said. “Thanks.”

Chapter 5

A couple of hours later Kipling was sprawled on the pink rose-upholstered couch in Cody's house, feeling warmer and more contented than he had in a long time. The TV was on, but neither of them was really paying much attention.

"Uno," he said.

Cody scowled at him, and at the single black-backed card in his hand. "You're going to go out, aren't you?"

He gave her his best blank look. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"Is that supposed to be a poker face? Because I can read you like a book."

"Yeah, right," he scoffed. He was pretty certain she couldn't read him at all, or he wouldn't be beating her so badly. And a damned good thing, too. If she could read him like a book she'd be able to tell how attractive he found her. And that was an element he didn't want added to the situation just now.

"I can," she said, and laid down a yellow eight on his blue one.

Kipling flipped over his card, showing her a yellow two, and dropped it on the pile. "Game over," he intoned.

Cody stuck out her lower lip. "Darn it," she said.

"Watch your language. You're shocking me."

She giggled. "Want to play again?"

Across the room, a tune suddenly started playing, a musical theme Kipling knew as well as he knew his own name. He glanced up, saw a big gray spaceship on the TV screen, and lunged for the remote control, slamming his thumb onto the channel button. Cody looked at him curiously as the screen flickered and *Leave it to Beaver* appeared in all its black-and-

white glory.

“Don’t you like science fiction shows?”

“Uh, not really,” Kipling said. He dropped the remote back on the table, aware that his hand was shaking. That had been close. Too close.

The corners of her mouth tilted up. “That’s something else we have in common, then. I don’t like them much, either. In fact, I don’t watch much TV at all. But my friend Tiffani Harshaw adores that show.”

“Tiffani? The one who helps run your store?”

Cody nodded. “Her brother-in-law wrote the novels it’s based on, believe it or not. She’s a *Farthest Space* fiend. She knows every last detail of every show.”

Kipling swallowed uncomfortably. He was obviously going to have to stay far, far away from this Tiffani. “So she’s a Spacey, huh?”

“A what?”

“Fans of *Farthest Space*. They’re called Spaceys.”

He saw a glimmer of curiosity in her eyes and knew the next question out of her mouth was going to be, *How did you know that if you don’t watch the show?* “You know, like Star Trek fans are called Trekkies or Trekkers. Everybody knows that.”

“I didn’t.”

He gave his best effort at a casual laugh. Even to his own ears it sounded pretty forced. “Well, okay. *Almost* everybody.”

Cody was still frowning at him, obviously puzzling over his rather extreme reaction. At last she said, “You know, maybe we ought to expand our horizons a little. Who knows? We might like it.”

And she reached for the remote control.

Alarm exploded in his chest, and he reached out and captured her hand in his. He couldn’t help but notice how delicate and fragile her fingers looked caught in his own. “Maybe we ought to turn off the TV and expand our horizons a different way,” he suggested.

Cody looked surprised. “You want to play Monopoly?”

A burst of genuine laughter escaped him as he removed the remote from her fingers, clicked the TV off, and then lifted her hand to his lips. Hell, he hadn’t laughed this much in months. Maybe years. “That isn’t exactly what I had in mind,” he said softly, and brushed his lips across the

soft warmth of her palm. Her eyes went wide, and her lips parted in what he presumed was shock. He kissed her palm again, and her small, slender fingers curled against his cheek, then stroked his hair, sliding through it. A sword's edge of primeval desire cut into him, shocking him with its fierce intensity. He'd been trying to distract her, nothing more. He hadn't realized a simple touch from her would be enough to send him to his knees. He hadn't expected to feel this throbbing, violent desire.

He hadn't had the slightest idea he wanted her this much.

A lush, romantic fragrance of honeysuckle and roses teased his nostrils. Drawn irresistibly to her, he leaned forward and brushed his lips over hers.

She made a small noise, an drawn breath of surprise, and he took her face in his hands and kissed her again, exploring the contours of her soft, lush mouth, reveling in the warm moisture of her lips against his. He felt her response, heard her soft moan of pleasure, and he went instantly, incredibly hard in an aching onslaught of desire.

She wanted him. She didn't have the slightest idea who he was; she'd never watched him on *Oprah* or noticed his face plastered on the *Weekly World News* in the supermarket. She simply liked him. Not his celebrity, not his fame...just *him*.

That realization was enough to make him go a little crazy.

His tongue sought hers, and he discovered she tasted like the dessert they'd eaten, sweet vanilla ice cream topped with peaches. He pressed his lips against hers more insistently, yanked her off the floor, and settled her on top of him on the sofa, so that his taut, aching length was cradled within her warmth.

God, he thought dazedly as his mouth devoured hers, he'd never felt this way before. As if just kissing her might be enough to bring him to climax.

And then her body moved slightly, very slightly, against his, and he shuddered as pleasure washed over him, drowning him in a warm tide of desire. He'd never been this hot for a woman before in his life, even when he was a teenager.

God help him, he was going to come before he ever got his jeans off. He could just imagine that interview the next time he was on *Oprah*: "Tell

us about your problems with premature ejaculation, Kip.”

“Christ,” he whispered against her lips, the word both a reverent whisper and a desperate prayer for help. “Don’t move that way, Cody.”

She froze instantly, and her huge dark eyes looked down into his with concern. “Did I hurt you?”

“Uh...no,” he muttered. Her concern touched him and made him want to laugh at the same time. He was five seconds away from what he instinctively knew would be the greatest orgasm of his life, and she was worried about *hurting* him.

Then again, maybe she wasn’t used to men who had so little self-control in bed.

“It’s just that...it’s been a while,” he explained, his voice harsh with the effort of controlling himself.

She stared into his eyes for a moment longer, then a wicked smile tilted up the corners of her mouth. “I see,” she said softly. “So when I do this...” She moved against him, very slowly and deliberately, and he groaned.

“Cody,” he whispered faintly, painfully aware of the relentless throbbing and twitching of his erection. “*Don’t.*”

Her lips still curved in a sensual smile, she slid off him, sitting next to him on the couch. Her slim, graceful fingers reached down and began to trace his swollen contours through the denim of his jeans. No one had ever rendered him totally helpless, turned him inside out this way. She was able to control him utterly, just with the merest brush of her fingertips. He leaned his head back, clenched his eyes shut, and moaned.

“Do you want me to stop?” she whispered.

Yes. No. His tongue was tied into knots, and he couldn’t decide which word he should say. And then it was too late to say much of anything. A ripple of irresistible pleasure shuddered through him, tearing a soft growl from his chest, a raspy sound of helpless submission and total surrender.

He exploded beneath her gentle, strong fingers in surge after surge of heat, bucking wildly against her hand, gasping frantically for breath. It was an incredible, turbulent release, overwhelming in its impact, utterly unlike anything he’d ever felt before in his life.

At last the pleasure began to ebb, and her fingers moved away from him. He kept his eyes closed for a long moment, too humiliated even to look at her. At last he lifted his lashes and shot a hesitant glance in her direction. "I'm so sorry," he said softly.

She wrinkled her forehead quizzically. "Sorry? About what?"

"I don't usually..." He trailed off in embarrassment, aware that his cheeks were red. "I mean, I haven't. Not since I was a teenager."

American's hottest bachelor is a dud in bed. He imagined that plastered across the cover of *People* and his face grew even hotter. But she was smiling at him, apparently not in the least put out.

"It's okay, Kipling," she said gently. "You said it had been a while."

As it happened, it had been. Despite what the public liked to imagine, he wasn't a playboy. He had dated quite a few women, but he rarely slept with them. Somehow he had the feeling most of them were only interested in him because of the publicity they could garner by being associated with him, and that didn't do wonders for his libido.

Cody, on the other hand, did one hell of a lot for his libido.

"Yeah," he agreed, grateful that she wasn't sneering at him. "It has been."

"Anyway," she said, "I don't really think I'm ready for..." She trailed off, biting her lip. "We haven't known each other that long. I don't think I'm ready for...you know."

"No," he agreed. "Me neither."

Never mind that five minutes ago he'd been more than ready for *you know*. That had been a sheerly physical reaction, and he understood clearly enough that wasn't what she was talking about. The absolute last thing he wanted to do was hurt Cody Lang. He had a discomfiting certainty she was pretty damned vulnerable.

He sat up and looked down at her, trying to ignore the wet patch on the front of his jeans, which still made him feel uncomfortably like a clumsy teenager. "Maybe I ought to get going," he suggested.

"That's fine. Why don't you come over tomorrow morning for breakfast about eight? My dad's supposed to get here about ten."

"Sounds good," he agreed, rising to his feet. He looked down at her for a long moment, then bent abruptly and kissed her, hard and fast.

“Thank you,” he muttered harshly, then turned and headed for the door.

Chapter 6

When he got back to his house, Kipling was too keyed up to sleep. He changed, then decided to do some more unpacking. He was in the midst of sorting a huge pile of science fiction novels onto the shelves when his cell phone played the theme from *Star Wars*. Since he was pretty busy, he briefly debated not answering it, but realized it was probably his parents or Chrissa checking up on him. He yanked it out of his pocket. "Hello?"

"So how's life in the boondocks, Kip?" a familiar, husky feminine voice drawled. "Ready to come home yet?"

"This part of Virginia is not exactly the boondocks, Serena," Kipling answered. "Believe it or not, they actually have paved roads here."

"I never would have guessed. It's not exactly like LA, though, is it?"

"No place is like LA," Kipling said tersely. "Thank God for that. Look, Rena, I'm kind of busy here."

"Fine," his agent said in a warm, throaty voice that could seduce a monk. Serena Robinson was a gloriously lovely, ebony-haired woman who'd gone to Hollywood to be an actress and wound up representing actors instead. Her beauty was misleading; beneath the lovely face lurked the soul of a hungry shark. "Let's cut to the chase. I got a lead on a terrific part for you, Kip."

"I told you I wasn't interested in doing anything right now, Rena."

"Uh-huh. You actually believe you'll be happy living in the 'burbs and doing absolutely nothing?"

Kipling sighed. "I just want my life to get back to normal. Not LA normal, but normal normal."

"Not going to happen, Kip. The press will descend on you the minute you step outside your house."

"You're probably right," Kipling admitted with a sigh. "Did you do something to get the press off my back for a while like I asked you to?"

"I told them you were headed to Las Vegas. I sort of suggested you had a gambling problem, too. They'll be racing to Nevada looking for a scandal, so that ought to keep them out of your hair for a little while. But they'll find you eventually, you know."

"Hopefully in a few weeks I'll be old news."

"I doubt it, Kip. You're the hottest thing since Harrison Ford."

Kip groaned. "Don't say that, okay? I am getting really, really tired of being compared to real actors."

"You *are* a real actor, Kip. You just don't give yourself enough credit. You never have."

Kipling snorted as he placed Asimov's *Foundation* novels onto a shelf. "I've been lucky. That's all. I figure I ought to quit while I'm ahead."

"Quit and do what?"

That was the problem, of course. He didn't have the faintest idea what he ought to do with his life now. "That's what I'm trying to figure out," he said.

"Why don't you give up this ridiculous idea of living in the sticks and come on back? I can get a part for you, you know."

He didn't know, and he was half afraid to try. What if he tried and failed, with the whole world watching? He wasn't willing to take that risk right now. After seven years of outrageous success, he was utterly paralyzed by the fear of failure.

"I want to be near my family," he temporized. "I've hardly seen them since I moved to California."

"So keep that house and use it as a vacation home. We'll get you something with a less demanding schedule. But for God's sake, Kip, don't leave me in the lurch here. And what about your fans? Think about them, will you?"

"Don't try giving me a guilt trip, Rena. It won't work. I'm having fun here, for the first time in ages."

Something of his last encounter with Cody must have echoed in his voice, because Serena immediately jumped on him. "What's going on,

Kip?"

"Uh...nothing," he said, hating that she managed to put him on the defensive, just like his mother had when he was in eleventh grade and trying desperately to conceal the fact that he'd gotten to third base with an incredibly flexible cheerleader.

"Is it a woman?"

Kip cringed. She knew him much too well. "Don't be ludicrous," he said sharply. "I haven't been here long enough to meet anyone. I've only been here two days, Rena. Give me credit for some restraint." Too bad he didn't have any restraint, at least where Cody was concerned.

Serena sighed. "Fine," she said at last, sounding utterly unconvinced. "Enjoy pretending you're just an ordinary joe, then. It won't last, you know."

"Yeah," he said softly. "I know. But I want to enjoy it while it does."

* * * *

When Kipling finally went to bed, he fell into a deep, exhausted slumber. He hadn't slept so well in months. But around two o'clock in the morning he awakened with a jolt. He lay awake in the darkness, wondering exactly what had awakened him.

And then he heard a crash from downstairs.

He jerked to a sitting position, yanked a pair of denim shorts over his silk boxers, and headed for the door. He gave brief thought to calling 911, but he figured it just might be Cody, considering what had happened between them earlier in the evening. Anyway, he'd come to Virginia to get away from the glare of the spotlight, and the last thing he wanted to start off his new life was publicity. If there was a prowler downstairs, he'd simply have to take care of the situation himself.

He opened his door soundlessly and stepped out into the hall. From below he heard someone muttering under their breath, and all his muscles went tense and battle-ready. He moved toward the stairs and went down them, swiftly but silently. In the foyer he could see a dark shape moving, but it seemed to be unaware of him.

There was another crash, and Kipling thought wryly that this was the most inept housebreaker he'd ever heard of.

In another second he'd caught the dark shape around the waist and

flung it to the ground, pinning it beneath his weight. There was a shrill, feminine scream, and Kipling hesitated.

“Cody?”

“Who the hell is Cody?” an irritated voice demanded.

Chrissa. He sat up immediately and stared at his sister in the dark.

“What are you doing here, Chrissa?”

“I came to see you,” she said, sitting up. Her hair looked rumpled, but otherwise, to his relief, she looked no worse for wear. Thank God he hadn’t hurt her. He stood up, fumbled for a light switch, and flipped it. Immediately the foyer flooded with light. Chrissa stood up and faced him, a young woman with dark honey hair and the face of an angel...a sweet, lovely face concealing a razor-sharp intellect, not to mention the cranky stubbornness of a team of arthritic mules.

“That’s nice,” he said, trying very hard to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. “Any particular reason you came to see me at two in the morning?”

“What on earth did you do to your hair?”

“Let’s stick to the subject, Chris. Why are you here?”

He saw her bite her lower lip, a nervous habit she had. “I need to talk to you, Kip.”

“Call me Kipling,” he said.

She cocked her head, instantly curious. “But you hate that name.”

“Yeah,” he admitted, “but everyone knows me as Kip. Using Kipling tends to throw people off my trail a bit.”

“You know, you won’t be able to hide forever. Even with your hair that color. Someone’s going to recognize you sooner or later. Probably sooner.”

He knew she was right, but he shrugged. “Just do me a favor and call me Kipling, okay? Look, Chris, we’re not talking about me. You broke into my house—which took some doing, come to think of it. Didn’t I leave the alarm on?”

“I disarmed it,” she said with a shrug.

“Terrific. It’s nice to know my little sister has an innate talent for burglary. Gives you a profession to fall back on, if you can’t make a living at medicine.”

“That’s what I need to talk to you about,” she said unhappily.

“Burglary?”

“No, you moron. Medicine.” She bit her lip again. “I don’t think I want to major in premed after all, Kip.”

Kipling frowned, wondering what had brought this on. Chrissa had wanted to be a doctor since she was ten. “Look, Chris,” he said, “it’s pretty late. Why don’t you crash on my couch tonight? Maybe we can talk tomorrow.”

“I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“You already have,” he said, smiling. “But I don’t care. I’m glad to see you, Chris.”

Impulsively she moved toward him and flung her arms around his neck. “Oh, Kip. I’m glad you’re here.”

Their parents were in Northern Virginia, a good three hours away—actually more like five hours, considering the bumper-to-bumper traffic up there. In the Washington area, every hour was rush hour.

He’d been a little concerned that Chris would be upset by him moving into the same town where she attended college, that she would think he was cramping her style, but evidently he’d had no reason to worry. But then, they’d always been close. He squeezed her around the waist in a brotherly bear hug, then let her go.

“Get some sleep, Chris. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

* * * *

At eight in the morning Chrissa was still snoring on his couch. He scribbled her a note explaining he’d be back later, left it on the coffee table where she couldn’t fail to see it, then quietly let himself out and headed over to Cody’s.

He knocked on the door, and it opened almost instantly. Cody grinned at him. “Hi, Kipling.”

“Hi,” he said. “What’s for breakfast?”

Cody let him in and shut the door behind him. She looked worried. “I’m not sure. I thought I had enough eggs, but the carton says they expired two days ago.”

“Don’t worry about it. Cereal is fine.”

“I think eggs are okay for a few days after the date on the carton,” she went on. “That’s what my mom always said, anyway. Is that right?”

He wasn't an expert on cooking—hell, he'd hardly known where to find the kitchen in his California house—but he nodded solemnly anyway. “That sounds right to me.”

She grinned. “That's terrific. I'll make us omelets, then.”

Kipling glanced cautiously around the kitchen. Cody caught his wary expression and interpreted it correctly. “I knew you were coming over, so I put Rocky outside,” she volunteered.

Relaxing, he sat down at the scrubbed-pine table and watched her butt as she bustled around the kitchen making breakfast. Really, he thought as he admired the smoothly rippling contours of her rear beneath her shorts, life didn't get any better than this.

Before long she'd dropped an enormous omelet in front of him. He stabbed his fork into it and took a bite. It was full of mushrooms, green peppers, onions, and a whole lot of cheddar cheese, and he grinned at her appreciatively as he dug into it.

“This is great, Cody.”

He was surprised to see her shrug dismissively as she sat down across from him. “Thanks, but I know I'm not much of a cook.”

It was more than obvious that compliments made her uncomfortable. “Are you kidding? It's terrific.”

“My mom was a terrific cook,” she said, taking a bite of her own omelet. “She died when I was fifteen, and I did my best to cook for Dad, but I was never really good at it. I think cooking is a talent, like drawing or playing the piano. Either you're good at it or you're not.”

“I think you've got a whole lot more talent than you realize,” Kipling said as another bite of omelet melted in his mouth.

He saw the wry, disbelieving curve of her lips. “I think you're just trying to make me feel better.”

Kipling opened his mouth to argue again, but decided against it as he saw the skepticism in her eyes. It was more than obvious that he could talk till he was blue in the face, and she still wouldn't believe him. He changed the subject instead. “This is a nice house. When did you buy it?”

“Oh, I grew up here,” she said.

Kipling paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. “Really?”

She nodded. “Yeah. When my mom died, she left the house to me,

along with a lot of money.”

“I would have thought the house would have belonged to your dad too,” Kipling said cautiously, aware that he was being nosy.

“Mom bought the house with her own money. In fact, she was pretty much the one with money, and she never let Dad have much. She left him part of her estate, but only stocks and bonds, nothing personal. She and my dad had certain...issues.”

Not unlike you and your dad, Kipling almost said, but caught himself in time. It was obvious that Cody was willing to go to ridiculous lengths not to tick off her dad, but maybe she was genuinely motivated simply by the desire to keep him happy in his declining years. He suspected, though, that there was a lot more to it. But that really wasn't his problem. “So you came into money when you were *fifteen*?”

She shook her head. “It was held in trust till I was thirty. But I think that was the reason I could never figure out what to do with myself, because I knew eventually I wouldn't really need to support myself. Sometimes I wish I'd done more with my life.”

“I thought you told me you owned your own business.”

She shrugged, and that self-deprecating smile stole back onto her lips. “It's just a bookstore.”

“A bookstore for children, right?”

She nodded. “It's not much, really.”

Kipling frowned at her. He'd never met someone so determined to undervalue everything she did. “Do you sell new books or used ones?”

“Both,” she said. “When I worked at the big store downtown, I noticed it didn't sell a lot of good kids' books. It sold a lot of paperbacks, but it didn't have many classics. No old books, no poetry, no fairy tales, none of the books I really loved when I was a kid. I used to complain about it, but management kept telling me kids don't read *Little Women* any more. I figured if they didn't, they ought to. When I got my money, I bought a nice space, and I started surfing the Internet, looking for beautiful books for kids. There were a lot of nice new ones, but I found lots of gorgeous old ones too, so I decided to carry both new and used books.”

“So do kids still read *Little Women*?”

“Don't tell me *you've* read it.”

“Uh, no. But I liked *Around the World in Eighty Days* and *The Hobbit*.”

“Oh, I’ve got some fabulous illustrated versions of *The Hobbit*,” she said, her dark eyes glowing. “You should come in and take a look.”

“Do these books sell?”

“Are you kidding? Don’t you know that the number one best-selling book last year was a kid’s book? Kids love to read. They just don’t have enough quality books offered to them.”

He heard the fire in her voice, saw the way her hands began to move with animation, and realized that this was something very important to her. She might deprecate her business as “just a bookstore,” but it was more than obvious she didn’t really mean it.

“Do you work a lot of hours?”

She nodded. “It’s just me and two employees, although one of those is my best friend, and more of a partner than an employee. I work almost every day. I’m there from seven to seven every day. But I took off a week so I could spend time with Dad. It’s the first time I’ve had a whole week off in two years.”

“Your store must mean an awful lot to you, then.”

“It’s not that important,” she demurred. “I mean, owning a bookstore isn’t like being a doctor or a lawyer or anything. It’s more like, you know, a hobby.”

That assertion was so overtly ridiculous that he almost laughed. *Sure, Cody. A hobby you work at twelve hours a day, seven days a week.* He sobered quickly, though, realizing it really wasn’t that funny. He wondered if she really believed that what she did mattered so little, that the store she put heart and soul into was basically irrelevant. If so, that was incredibly tragic.

“I guess I sound kind of like a loser,” she said, smiling wryly.

He put his fork down onto his empty plate and reached over the table, cupping her cheek in his hand. “Actually,” he said softly, “you sound like an utterly fascinating woman.”

He saw her eyes go wide with surprise, then her hand reached up and touched his, very lightly. It was a light touch, but it was enough to make him go ballistic. His body responded instantly, hardening to the point of

pain.

He was stunned to realize he found this insecure, nutty, oddly vulnerable female more exciting than any woman he'd ever met.

He leaned forward.

She leaned forward.

Their lips didn't quite touch.

"This table's too wide," he muttered. Standing up, he walked around the table, knelt next to her chair, and pulled her head down for a ravenous kiss. His lips slid against hers, caressed and explored every contour, and then his tongue slid into her mouth and touched hers. A surge of electricity exploded within him, and he moaned and dragged his lips away from hers, burying his face in her shoulder.

"This is crazy," he muttered.

"I don't think it's crazy," she whispered.

"Trust me. It's crazy. I hardly know you."

"I think it's romantic," she said, pulling back, her huge, dark eyes gazing into his. "Isn't it romantic?"

Hell, maybe it was romantic. It was sure as hell crazy. But he knew he didn't have the strength to argue. He curved his hand around the nape of her neck and pulled her head down again. Except he must have miscalculated his own strength, or else she'd been perched precariously on the edge of her chair. Because she fell onto his lap.

Kipling yelped as he was knocked over backward. His head connected with the wooden floor with a solid *thwunck*, and he groaned.

"Ohmigod," she whispered. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," he said, blinking to clear his vision. "Just a little dizzy. Which is perfectly normal when I'm around you."

The corners of her mouth turned up with reluctant amusement. As his head cleared, he became aware of the way she was sitting on top of him, her thighs on either side of his. *Just like last night*. An aching surge of overwhelming need rose within him as he remembered, all too vividly, the incredible climax she'd brought him to.

She must have read his thoughts on his face, or perhaps she felt the evidence of his arousal swelling beneath her, because a mischievous light suddenly filled her eyes, and she moved against him.

Kipling groaned as scorching heat kindled within his body. His hips flexed involuntarily, bringing him into closer contact with her warmth.

“Not that way,” he murmured, reaching for her. “Not again.”

She leaned over him, bracing her hands on either side of his shoulders. “You have something else you’d prefer?” she inquired in a smoky, sultry voice.

“I have a few ideas.”

“I have a few ideas of my own,” she said in a soft whisper, then bent down to trace her lips along his throat. Kipling leaned his head back, letting her caress his most sensitive spots with her lips and tongue. Her mouth was magic, he thought, wondering how it would feel if she were to move lower. A lot lower. The thought made him dizzy with longing, dizzier than if she’d slammed his head against the wooden planks again.

Slowly, she pulled up his shirt until most of his chest was exposed. She sat up and looked at him for a long minute, and the heated admiration in her gaze almost made him evaporate into a cloud of steam. “Holy cow,” she said at last. “You look like a pinup.”

He decided it was best not to mention that his bare chest had been featured prominently on calendars for the past six years. And then he couldn’t mention anything at all, because her hand was tracing the contours of his chest, running across his pecs, exploring the hollows under his collarbones, and then—*oh, God*—brushing ever so lightly over his nipples.

A strangled sound of pleasure caught in his throat, and she chuckled. “You like that?”

“Ummm,” he said. That was his best effort at intelligent conversation.

Her hand slid gently down his abs, unfastened his jeans, and pushed down his jeans. She hesitated, and he saw her mouth curve with amusement. “Nice shorts.”

Flat on his back and half naked, Kipling did his best to pin her with a dignified expression. “I happen to like boxers.”

“Uh-huh. Boxers are okay. But red silk boxers? That doesn’t seem quite your style, somehow.”

“Silk is very comfortable,” Kipling said defensively.

“I see.” She pushed the boxers down, exposing the tip of his erection.

“So comfort is important to you, then.”

“Very important,” Kipling croaked.

“Hmmm.” She touched the delicate tip, and he groaned. “You don’t seem terribly comfortable right now. Is there anything I can do to help?” She moved her hand down and caressed him right through the silk. “What about this? Does this help?”

Kipling ground his teeth together as his erection throbbed helplessly against her fingers. “No?” she said, and pushed the boxers down, so that he was fully exposed. She wrapped her fingers around him and bent over. “What about this?”

Her tongue slid out and caressed the incredibly sensitive tip of his penis, and he jerked violently. “Oh, *God*,” he gasped.

She lifted her head slightly and grinned at him. “So this is something of a religious experience for you, then?”

Kipling bared his teeth at her. “Do you *ever* stop talking?”

“I can stop talking if you like. Is there something you’d like me to do instead?”

Kipling covered his eyes with a forearm. “Please tell me you’re joking. You *are* joking, right?”

“Uh-huh,” she said dryly. “I kind of figured out what you wanted.”

He watched her head lower again, slowly, and her tongue slide out from between her luscious pink lips, and then his eyes drifted shut in ecstasy as she caressed him wetly, thoroughly, exploring him with her tongue until he thought he was going to die of pleasure. Small noises that could only be called whimpers came from the back of his throat, and his body writhed helplessly as she explored him. He had totally forgotten he was lying on a hard, cold wooden floor. He had completely, utterly submitted to her, and the pleasure she was giving him. He had forgotten everything in the world except *her*.

At last he caught at her hair. “Cody,” he whispered. “Please. Stop.”

She lifted her head and regarded him with a ghost of a smile. “But we haven’t even gotten to the good part yet.”

God help him. If she took him into her mouth he was going to die on the spot. “I’m pretty sure we’d already gotten to the good part,” he said hoarsely.

"It can get better, you know."

He looked at her, still fully dressed, her eyes glazed with passion, her hair a tousled mess. He supposed he must have been digging his fingers into it, but she hadn't complained. "But what about you?"

She shrugged. "I figured...."

"You figured wrong," he said, distressed to realize that Cody's apparent tendency to take care of everyone and ignore her own needs seemed to extend to sex. "This isn't just about me, Cody. And the way I figure it, I owe you one."

She looked down at the floor. "I wouldn't put it that way."

"I would." He sat up and hauled her into his lap, aware of his rigid erection rubbing against the bottom of her jeans. The friction was nearly enough to send him over the edge, but he managed to control his reaction. He reached up under her T-shirt.

"Lacy bra," he said, taking her nipple between his fingers and rubbing it slowly.

"Mmmm," she murmured.

"Somehow I had pegged you for the plain white cotton bra type."

"Are you kidding? That wouldn't be romantic."

"I thought maybe underneath it all, you were practical."

"Well, I'd pegged you for the plain white cotton brief type. I guess we have some things to learn about each other."

"I'm looking forward to learning," he whispered, and drew the shirt off over her head. The bra, he was pleased to discover, was lavender, a color that went beautifully with her coppery hair.

"You look incredible this way," he said. "Maybe you're the one who should be a pinup."

She flushed slightly. "My boobs are too big."

"I like them big," he said, cupping one and discovering that the soft, satiny flesh just filled his hand. "Yours are exactly big enough." He bent and brushed his lips over the lavender silk, finding that her nipple was rigid beneath the fabric. He stroked her through the fabric, first with his lips, then his tongue, until she was squirming.

"Kipling."

He wanted to take her nipple into his mouth and suckle it, but he

managed to restrain himself and transferred his attentions to her other breast. He licked and nibbled through the fabric until she buried her fingers in his hair, leaned her head back, and let out a long, shuddering moan.

Finally he unhooked her bra—it unhooked in front, thank God for small favors—tossed it to the floor, and cupped her breasts in his hands, staring at them in reverent wonder.

“You are *beautiful*,” he whispered.

Slowly he bent and took one of her big, dark pink nipples into his mouth. She cried out in pleasure, and he felt his own body tighten in response. He’d never enjoyed bringing a woman pleasure so intensely. It was as if everything she felt, he felt.

As he sucked on her nipples, he pushed down her jeans and underwear—lavender and lacy, just like her bra—until she lay naked against the wood floor, her pale skin and red hair a beautiful contrast to the rich brown color of the pine flooring. He kissed his way across the slight mound of her belly, and lower still.

She was already incredibly wet, unbelievably swollen, desperate for what he wanted to give her. He pushed her thighs apart and leaned into her, breathing the hot, fragrant scent of her. Slowly, very slowly, he caressed her with his tongue.

She uttered a broken sobbing cry of agonized joy, and he did it again. This time her hips came right off the floor, and he understood her unspoken plea—she couldn’t wait, any more than he could have waited last night.

He claimed her with his mouth, demanding, warm, and firm, and she gave herself up to him, crying out over and over again, shuddering violently with the force of her release.

At last her body relaxed, and he slid between her thighs, took her face in his hands, and looked down at her. He couldn’t believe how responsive she was, how easy to please. She was an incredibly sexy woman. “You’re wonderful,” he said softly.

“You’re the wonderful one,” she said in a hoarse, thick voice. “That was just...unbelievable.”

No one had ever called him unbelievable before. He groaned and let himself move toward her, then stopped. “Hell,” he growled.

“What’s wrong?”

“When you invited me for breakfast this morning,” he said ruefully, “it didn’t really occur to me I’d be invited to have dessert. I don’t have a condom with me.”

“Oh, jeez.” She sighed. “I didn’t think of that.”

He sat up, zipping his jeans, and wagged a finger at her. “That ought to be the first thing you think of, Cody.”

She sat up as well, drawing her discarded jeans over her lap in a vague attempt at modesty. “It’s been a while,” she said defensively. “Despite what it probably looks like, I don’t fall into bed with every guy I meet.”

Kipling felt a warm rush of pleasure at her words. It was nice to think she’d made an exception for him. “Unfortunately,” he said, noticing his voice was still hoarse with thwarted passion, “I don’t think you’re going to be falling into bed with me right now, either.”

Cody gazed at him seriously a long minute, then suddenly grinned. “How about later?”

He returned her smile. “I can’t wait,” he said.

Chapter 7

A taxi pulled up in front of Cody's house at ten o'clock sharp. Kipling stepped out onto the porch with Cody, his arm around her shoulders, doing his best to look like a devoted newlywed. He'd pulled his hair back into a ponytail and hoped that, along with the darkened hair, would make him look different enough that he wouldn't be recognized. He couldn't very well wear his sunglasses, lest Cody and her father wonder why he was trying to disguise himself.

The rear door of the taxi opened, and a man got out. Based on what she'd told him, he expected to see a frail, white-haired man, perhaps hunched over, or even confined to a wheelchair. Instead he saw a powerful, dark-haired man, who picked up his bags easily and strode toward them purposefully.

A stab of anger lanced through his chest. Cody had lied to him. For whatever reason, she'd lied. Her father was obviously not on the verge of death. He was a strong, middle-aged man just past the prime of life. He wondered what the hell was going on. Was this all about inheritance, after all? Or did this have something to do with trapping him?

Puzzled and angry, he stole a glance at Cody and saw her mouth was hanging open. She looked shocked as her father came up the stairs, two at a time.

"Cody!" the man said, and flung his arms around her.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders in return, then stepped back and peered at him suspiciously. "I thought you told me on the phone you were sick, Dad."

An innocent expression settled onto her father's craggy features. "I had the flu."

"The last time I saw you, you were in a *wheelchair*."

"I hurt my knee."

"That isn't the impression you gave me, Dad."

The older man smiled, an eerie reflection of Cody's guileless smile.

"If I gave you the wrong impression, I apologize."

"But you told me you'd had serious news from the doctor. Your liver, wasn't it?"

The older man had the grace to look slightly abashed. "Yes, well, the doctor thinks I'll be fine."

Cody narrowed her eyes still further. "I may not know much about medicine, Dad, but I do know livers don't regenerate. Unless you got a transplant."

"It was all a mistake," her father assured her. "I'm fine. Never better." He stuck his hand out. "You must be my daughter's new husband."

"Yes," Cody said. Her lips were still pressed together. Kipling thought she looked seriously pissed off, but her father appeared oblivious to her anger. "This is my new husband, Dad. Kipling—" She broke off, glancing at Kipling with horror, and he realized she had no idea what his last name was.

That, he reflected, was probably one of the loose ends they should have covered last night.

When he moved to Swift Creek, he'd decided to call himself by his middle name, figuring Kipling Madison was unlikely to ring any bells, since it didn't sound a whole lot like Kip Stanton, the name he was known by. Unfortunately, in his haste to conceal Cody's awkward pause he momentarily forgot his cover and gave his own last name. "Kipling Stanton," he said, and immediately cursed himself for his stupidity. Some actor he was, unable to remember lines for more than ten seconds.

He offered his hand to the older man, who shook it heartily. He had a good, strong grip. "David Lang. Call me Dave. Nice to meet you, son. Nice to meet you." He turned toward his daughter. "Let's go on into the house, shall we?"

"Uh—" Cody looked hunted. "Go on in, Dad. You know where the guest room is. We'll be in in just a minute."

Her father disappeared into the house, and Kipling looked down at

Cody. "What the hell is going on here?"

Cody looked bewildered. "I haven't the faintest idea."

"You implied your father was on the verge of death. You said he had, and I quote, *serious health issues*. So what's going on? He looks pretty damned healthy to me."

Cody looked stunned and furious.

"He lied to me," she said slowly. "He *lied* to me, damn it."

Kipling felt the corners of his mouth twitch up in amusement.

"Evidently everyone in your family is a pathological liar."

Cody stamped her foot. "It is not funny. He lied to me to manipulate me into doing what he wanted. Damn him!"

"Well, it appears to me that the joke's on him."

She frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"He lied to force you into getting married. You're lying about being married. It's actually pretty funny."

"Pardon me if I don't roll on the floor laughing."

"Maybe the two of you ought to try being honest with each other."

She caught at his arm. "*Honest*? Are you suggesting I tell him we're not really married?"

"There doesn't seem to be a real good reason to keep this charade up now, Cody. Your dad isn't dying, and it won't hurt him if you tell him the truth."

"But he'll be so *upset*," she said plaintively.

"Who the hell cares? He deserves to be upset after pulling a stunt like that."

"I don't want to disappoint him."

Kipling looked down at her earnest face. There was definitely more here than met the eye, he thought. More than even Cody was probably aware of. Obviously there were unresolved issues between her and her father, a long history of deception and dishonesty on both sides.

Maybe, he thought slowly, those issues could be resolved if he helped keep her father here for a few days.

That made sense, now that he thought about it. Sure. If Cody confessed her deception now, her father was likely to walk out in a huff. They'd never get a chance to talk. But if they went ahead with the

deception for a couple of days, Cody could talk to her father, and maybe develop a little backbone where he was concerned.

Seen in that light, it almost seemed kind of...*noble*...for him to stick around.

He scoffed at himself, knowing it wasn't nobility that was prompting him to think about going on with this ridiculous charade. It was something else, something he didn't want to examine too closely.

He wanted to stay near Cody, and pretending to be her husband was the perfect excuse. Even if he was risking his anonymity.

Cody was worth the risk.

She clutched his arm and looked up into his eyes pleadingly. "Don't bail on me now, Kipling. *Please.*"

He looked down into the dark chocolate depths of her eyes and felt himself drowning in melted Godiva. "Okay, Cody. Let's go on inside."

* * * *

As Cody had expected, her dad grilled them mercilessly. Kipling appeared unfazed by the slew of questions, and didn't fumble once. He was a terrific actor, she thought gratefully, as he manufactured a story about their passionate correspondence via e-mail.

Once she brought out the pictures, she could see her father's doubts melt away and knew he had bought the story hook, line, and sinker. No one could look at those pictures and believe they weren't in love. They were that convincing.

In fact, she found them pretty damned convincing herself. If she hadn't been aware she'd known Kipling for only a day, she'd swear she saw love in his eyes as he gazed at her in the photograph.

The doorbell rang, and Cody jumped to her feet. "I invited a friend for lunch, Dad. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," David said.

Kipling's eyes went wide with what looked like alarm, rather to Cody's surprise. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Uh..." Kipling cleared his throat. "I just didn't realize someone else was coming."

Cody beamed. "My best friend. You'll love her." She went to the front door and opened it. There stood Tiffani Harshaw, in hip hugger jeans

and a vivid pink T-shirt, her blonde hair cut very short and streaked with pink that matched her shirt. She was twenty-four, but with her impish face and slim body she could have easily passed for sixteen. She did story time at the bookstore every week, and the little kids adored her. It wasn't just the pink hair, either; it was the very real enthusiasm that glowed in her voice as she read to them.

"How's it going?" she asked as she stepped into the foyer.

"Fine," Cody said with a wink. "Dad believes everything we've told him. The only thing is..."

"Oh, God. What's gone wrong?"

"It's good news, actually. Dad seems to have kind of manufactured a crisis to get me to marry."

"Say what?"

"He's perfectly healthy, Tiff. There's nothing wrong with him."

"The old bastard," Tiffani said under her breath. "So why are you and Mr. Right going on with this?"

"It seemed like the best thing to do. I wouldn't want Dad to create some sort of real crisis. Next time he might run his car into a tree, or something."

Tiffani shook her head. "I stand by what I said about you tottering on the brink of insanity, Cody. But you know, it obviously runs in the family."

Cody grinned wryly. "That's kind of what Kipling said."

"Who?"

"Kipling. My, you know, *husband*."

"Kipling? His name is Kipling? Poor guy, his parents must have hated him on sight to stick him with a name like that."

"I don't think it's that bad."

"Trust me. It's that bad."

Cody swallowed the giggle that rose up. "Come on into the living room, Tiff. Dad would like to meet you."

She went into the living room with Tiffani just behind her. David and Kipling stood up as one, their gazes riveted on Tiffani. Which wasn't surprising. Tiff tended to dominate any room she entered, simply by the effervescent bubbles of her personality. Of course, the pink-streaked hair was rather riveting too.

“Dad, this is my best friend, Tiffani Harshaw. Tiff, my dad, David.”

Kipling frowned. “Tiffani Harshaw. That name sounds a little familiar.”

“Well, it should. We were talking about her last night, when *Farthest Space* came on.”

She watched the expression on his face go from puzzlement to absolute horror. “Excuse me for just a minute,” he said abruptly, and fled from the room.

Tiff looked after him with a thoughtful expression. “That was weird.”

“I’m sure he’ll be back in just a minute,” Cody said with a confidence she didn’t feel. She’d seen a flash of panic in his eyes that didn’t bode well at all.

She wasn’t sure exactly what Kipling’s problem was, but he’d looked for all the world as if he were facing Godzilla armed with nothing but a peashooter.

Chapter 8

Kipling stood in the bathroom and stared into the mirror. His hair was still very black, although it was, he thought, lightening up a bit. The mascara made his eyebrows look heavier than usual, and his darkened eyelashes made his hazel eyes more noticeable than ever. He did look very different.

Just not different enough.

He remembered what Cody had said: *She's a Farthest Space fiend. She knows every last detail of every show.* Tiffani Harshaw was bound to recognize him, despite the hair dye and the ponytail, especially the moment she heard his entire name—the name he'd given in a moment of idiocy. Calling himself Kipling wasn't going to fool her for as long as a nanosecond. She'd probably go straight to the local news stations.

And his newly peaceful life would come tumbling down around his ears.

He'd known that the media would eventually catch up with him, but he'd hoped for a few weeks' peace and quiet. Just a few weeks as a normal, anonymous guy with a normal, anonymous life.

Evidently normalcy was going to elude him yet again.

Damn it! he thought savagely. It was just incredibly bad luck that Cody had a rabid *Farthest Space* fan for a best friend. The feeling that he was trapped inside a Dali painting came back to haunt him, stronger than ever. Somehow this situation just kept getting more and more bizarre.

And to think, until yesterday his life had been perfectly ordinary. In a Hollywood sort of way.

He stood in the bathroom, staring at his unfamiliar dark hair, until he heard footsteps at the door. "Kipling? Are you all right?"

Cody's voice, doing a very good impression of a concerned wife. "Yeah," he said. "I'm sorry, I just—" He glanced around wildly and saw the commode. It gave him the germ of an idea. "I have a little stomach problem, that's all."

"Oh," she said, and he could imagine her cheeks turning pink with embarrassment. "Well, we'll wait on lunch for a little while, then."

"Thanks."

When her footsteps had moved away, he considered what he should do next. He needed to get out of here, fast. Climbing out the window seemed like the best option. He could tiptoe across the backyard and get back to his own house without anyone being the wiser.

He opened the window. And stopped as he heard a bark.

Oh, hell. The dog was out there in the backyard.

He slammed the window down, glumly aware his escape route was cut off. He wouldn't risk going near a dog, unless maybe if the house was on fire. This emergency wasn't dire enough to make him consider it even for a microsecond.

Okay. There was only one way out of this bathroom, and that was through the door. Somehow he had to get away from Tiffani Harshaw without giving her a good look at his face.

He closed his eyes for a moment in thought, then started gagging. Loudly. Dramatically.

Sure enough, in a moment he heard Cody's voice through the door again. "Are you all *right*?"

He groaned. "Jesus, I feel terrible."

"Oh, my *God*. It must be the eggs. I knew I should have thrown them out."

Calling on every ounce of his acting ability, he made a retching sound and spoke in a weak voice. "Maybe I just have a bug. I mean, you feel all right, don't you?"

"Well, so far." He retched again. "Oh, you poor thing."

He stopped retching and breathed heavily enough that he was certain she could hear him on the other side of the door. "God. My stomach hurts like hell."

"Maybe you should lie down."

“Yeah, I guess maybe I should.” He staggered across the bathroom, making sure his feet fell heavily against the tile. He yanked the ponytail holder out of his hair, bent over and put his arms over his stomach, then opened the door.

“I’ll help you upstairs,” she said, and he understood. She was going to show him where “their” bedroom was. It would, he thought, kind of be a giveaway if he had to ask directions.

He stayed bent over, his long hair falling like an ebony curtain in front of his face, which was a good thing, because a moment later Tiffani materialized before them in the hall. He could see her pink Keds right in front of him. He didn’t look up.

“Is he okay?”

Cody smoothed his hair in a way that didn’t feel in the least pretend. He felt bad that he was playing on her sympathy this way, but he couldn’t explain the problem to her. At this point he wasn’t even sure he could trust her. For all he knew she’d sell him out in a heartbeat.

“He’s really sick,” she said in an anxious tone. “It’s my fault. It was the eggs.”

“The eggs?” Tiffani repeated, and he heard the doubt in her voice.

“Yeah, they were two days too old according to the package. I knew I should have thrown them out. I *knew* it.”

Tiffani hesitated, clearly suspicious. Kipling made a gagging sound, and she stepped back hastily, getting her clean Keds out of range. “I need to lie down,” he said hoarsely.

Hanging on to Cody’s arm, he slowly ascended the staircase.

* * * *

“I don’t believe this,” Cody said to Tiffani a few minutes later. They were in the kitchen together. “I’ve only known the man for one day, and already I’ve given him food poisoning.”

Tiff looked at her with narrowed eyes. “You mean this wasn’t some kind of a setup?”

“What do you mean?”

Tiffani shrugged. “I thought maybe you and he arranged this so he wouldn’t have to spend too much time being grilled by your dad.”

“No. He’s really sick.”

"Are you sure he's not trying to get out of talking with your dad too much? Did your dad upset him just before I got here?"

"Come on, Tiff. How could he be faking it? Didn't you hear him puking his guts out?"

Tiffani shrugged again. "He could still be faking it. He might just be a really good actor."

"You're paranoid," Cody retorted. "You are way too suspicious."

"Maybe. But he looked...kind of familiar. Not that I got a good look at him, since he doubled over practically the minute he saw me."

"He looks familiar to me, too." Cody smiled faintly. "I think maybe I've seen him before in my dreams."

Tiffani rolled her eyes. "That is the most idiotic romantic claptrap I've ever heard."

"Idiotic romantic claptrap is my specialty, after all."

Tiffani drank down the rest of her Diet Coke in one gulp. "Trust me, Cody. If you've seen him before, I can pretty much guarantee it wasn't in your dreams."

* * * *

Kipling lay sprawled in Cody's bed. Her bedroom was extremely romantic, which surprised him not at all. The bed was a Shaker-style four-poster with a fishnet canopy, and it was covered with a patchwork quilt that gave the room a bright, warm feeling. The rest of her furniture was plain pine, but the room was enlivened by pretty botanical paintings on the walls, crocheted runners, and lacy curtains.

He figured he had a choice. He could either back out of this entire insane situation and leave Cody high and dry, or he could confide in her and make sure Tiffani didn't visit again while he was here.

Really, there was only one smart option. Once Tiffani was gone, he was going to get the hell out of here and back to his own house.

He imagined the disappointment on Cody's face, and a stab of remorse hit him in the chest. He didn't want to see her reproachful face every time he got his morning paper. He'd promised.

But he'd obviously been as crazy as a loon.

He heard the front door slam. It was, he supposed, too much to hope for that Tiffani was already leaving, but he was curious. Getting stealthily

out of bed, he went to the window and pushed the curtain aside just a bit. He saw Tiffani, unmistakable in her hot pink T-shirt, opening the passenger side door of a bright yellow Volkswagen Beetle and leaning inside. A moment later she straightened up with a small black rectangle in her hand, closed the door, and walked back up the driveway. He squinted, trying to see what exactly she was holding.

A camera. Christ. She had a *camera*.

He had to get out of here. Right now.

Swearing under his breath, he headed for the door. But before he got to it, he heard a sound that made his blood run cold.

A clicking noise like castanets and a sniffing noise. Followed by an audible *thunk*.

Cody's dog had somehow gotten into the house. And it had taken up a vigil just outside his door.

Chapter 9

“So you’ve already made your new husband sick.”

Cody looked up at her father’s accusing tone, a tone she’d heard every day of her childhood. “It looks like it,” she agreed weakly. “I guess I should have thrown out those eggs.”

Kipling was still upstairs, and Tiffani had stepped outside momentarily to get her camera from her Beetle, claiming she wanted to take pictures of the happy couple. Cody figured Tiff would probably blackmail her with the pictures later. After all, what were best friends for? But she had to admit she’d want more pictures of Kipling when this was all over. These were two days she never wanted to forget.

“You’re always so careless,” her father grumbled.

“I know,” she admitted meekly, staring at the carpet.

Just then there was an odd thumping noise. Cody jerked her head up. “What on earth was that?”

Her father shrugged. “Sounded like it was outside.”

Cody stood up and stalked to the window. Outside in the backyard she saw Kipling, staggering to his feet and limping rapidly toward his own house.

Hell. What on earth was he doing?

“I’ll be right back,” she said hastily, and headed for the door at a run before her father could intercept her.

By the time she got outside Kipling had gone through the gate and was in his own backyard. She broke into a run—she was pretty fast, as a result of jogging every day—and caught up with him before he reached the large, ornate deck of his house. She grabbed his muscular forearm. “What the hell are you doing?”

Kipling tried to shake her off, but she clung to his arm with the tenacious determination of a bulldog. She managed to spin him around, but he must have been sicker than she thought, because he promptly fell over. He collided with the lush green grass of the lawn and lay still, apparently dazed.

"Oh, no," she said, bending down to peer at him. "Are you still sick? Are you *delirious*?"

Kipling slit his eyes open and glared at her. "I'm fine."

"But you're lying on the ground."

He bared his teeth. "You knocked me over."

"You must not have been feeling well, or I couldn't possibly have done it."

Kipling glowered at her, making absolutely no attempt to get up. "I think I broke my goddamned ankle jumping from your window."

For the first time it dawned on her *he* had made the thumping noise she'd heard. She frowned, puzzled. "Why on earth did you jump out of the window?"

"I couldn't get out the door. The dog was there."

That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard, she started to say, but thought better of it barely in time. Doubtless he'd had a reason for his actions, although she couldn't begin to imagine what it might be. Or perhaps he was too ill to know what he was doing. "Um, I thought you were sick," she said instead. "How come you decided to leave?"

"I have had enough," Kipling said. Still lying flat on his back, he punctuated his words by shaking his finger at her. "I have had enough of lying to people. I have had enough of being congratulated on a totally fictitious marriage. And if I stayed a minute longer, my cover would have been blown."

"Your *cover*?" She knelt beside him and stared into his eyes with an expression of fascinated interest. "Are you some sort of...double agent?"

He let out his breath in a laugh that sounded more like a gasp of pain. "You're nuts, you know that? Totally crazy."

"I'm not the one who just jumped out a second-story window."

"Apparently your insanity is catching," he growled.

"Are you hurt? Do you really have a broken ankle?" She reached

down and grabbed his calf. Reflexively, he started to yank his leg away from her hands, then yelped with pain.

"You *are* hurt," she said.

"Ya think?" he retorted with savage sarcasm.

"We should get you to the emergency room and have that X-rayed. Maybe we ought to have them look you over in general, make sure the food poisoning isn't too bad."

"I do not have food poisoning," he said between his teeth.

"Are you sure? Because if you're delirious enough to fall out of a window—"

"I'm not delirious, goddamn it! I jumped out that window on *purpose*!"

Cody hesitated. At last she said, quietly, "Kipling, why don't you tell me exactly what's going on?"

At that moment the back door of Kipling's house opened, and a very pretty girl emerged. She had a heavy, waving mane of tawny hair, precisely Kipling's natural shade, and as she ran down the wood steps of the deck Cody noticed her eyes were the same odd combination of colors as well. A relative, she surmised, probably his sister. She was young, but not so young that she could possibly be his daughter.

"Kip!" the girl exclaimed. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, Christ," Kipling said, apparently to a potted begonia. "Here we go again."

"He's hurt," Cody said briskly. "We need to get him to an emergency room."

"What happened?"

"My ankle is broken," Kipling whined plaintively.

"Oh, it is not, you big baby," Cody retorted. "If you'd broken it you couldn't possibly have made it this far. But just to be on the safe side we should have it looked at."

The girl glared at Cody over Kipling's supine form. "What did you *do* to him?"

"I didn't do anything," Cody said defensively. "He jumped out of my window."

The girl stared at her a moment longer. "You must be one hell of a

boring conversationalist.”

“We weren’t talking,” Cody snapped. “He just jumped out a window. I don’t have a clue why. It must be a macho guy thing.”

“I’ve never had a guy jump out of one of *my* windows,” the girl retorted.

“You’d damned well better never have had a guy in a position to jump out one of your windows,” Kipling said.

“I’m eighteen, Kip,” the girl drawled in a bored voice, “not twelve.”

Still flat on his back, Kipling rolled his eyes. “Look, I can’t go to the emergency room, Chris. You know that.”

“Let me take a look,” the girl called Chris said. She shoved his pants leg up out of the way, rolled down his dark sock, and scowled. “This is pretty badly swollen, Kip.”

“Stop calling me Kip. Is it broken?”

The girl frowned. “I don’t know. I’m not a doctor yet, you know. I don’t think the tibia is broken, but there are a lot of smaller bones in the foot that can be fractured. If you really jumped from a second-story window—“

“I swung out and dropped to the deck. It really wasn’t that far.”

“Obviously it was farther than you thought,” Chris said, frowning at his ankle, which did look swollen. “Can you put your weight on it?”

“A little bit.”

“Try standing up,” Cody suggested.

With some effort, he managed to get to his feet. He put one arm around each of them and hopped awkwardly up the steps. “We’ll try ice,” Chris said. “That might bring the swelling down, if it’s not a serious injury.”

“I still think he should go to the emergency room,” Cody objected as they helped him into the study, a room with bookshelves from floor to ceiling on every wall. Science fiction novels were stacked every which way, with more boxes on the floor, but there was a clear path through the room. They helped him into a leather club chair.

“I am not going to the emergency room,” Kipling said.

Cody glared at him, her chocolate eyes practically shooting lightning bolts. “Why the hell not?”

“Trust me. It wouldn’t be a good idea.”

Chris left the room to get some ice, and Cody lowered her voice as she continued to glare at him. "You ran out on me, Kipling."

He sighed and looked away, finding it difficult to meet her annoyed gaze. She reminded him of a very angry kitten bristling with rage and baring its tiny claws. "I know, Cody. And I'm sorry. But I just couldn't do it any more. Things were...unraveling."

"Unraveling *how*? Things were going exactly according to plan. My dad was really impressed by you."

"Yeah," Kipling admitted with a sigh. "Things were fine until your friend showed up."

"Tiffani? She's harmless."

Armed with a camera, Tiffani was as dangerous to his continued peaceful existence as a rabid Rottweiler, but he couldn't very well explain that to her without giving everything away. "Trust me," he said impatiently. "She isn't harmless."

Cody crossed her well-toned arms across her chest in a way that accented her round, full breasts. Despite the sharp pain in his ankle, he felt a surge of lust. Ruthlessly he tamped it down. He didn't want to feel lust for Cody.

He didn't want to feel *anything* for Cody, damn it.

"You're weaseling out of our agreement, aren't you?"

"I don't want to, Cody, but—"

"Maybe *weaseling* isn't the right word," she went on in a taut, angry voice. "No, you jumped out of our agreement feet first."

Kipling winced. "Look, Cody—"

"So you're just going to leave me up a creek? Is that it?"

"I just can't—"

"Damn you, Kipling! It'd be one thing if you'd backed out earlier, but now-- What the hell am I supposed to tell my father?"

"Try the truth," Kipling suggested.

Cody's eyes blazed, and he had a strong suspicion that smoke was about to come out of her ears. Fortunately for his continued survival, Chrissa walked back into the study at that moment. She put an ice pack against his ankle, making him hiss through his teeth.

"*Shit*. That hurts."

"If you insist on doing stupid things, you're likely to get hurt," Chrissa remarked coolly. "Next time get a stuntman."

"I always do my own stunts."

"I guess you don't work well with others," Cody snapped. "So I'll just be leaving now."

"Fine," Kipling retorted, although it wasn't fine at all. He didn't want her to leave. He might have only known her two days, but he knew her well enough to know he wanted her in his life.

But he was damned if he'd let Tiffani Harshaw sell his photo to the highest bidding tabloid.

Cody stalked to the door, her spine rigid and shoulders squared, and Kipling watched her go with mingled regret and remorse. Just before she stepped out of the room, he said, "Cody."

She turned back and looked at him, an expression of hope on her features.

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

She snorted and stomped out of the room.

Kipling looked back to find Chrissa watching him thoughtfully. "So what's going on with you two?" she asked.

"Going on?" Kipling repeated. "What do you mean?"

"I mean there are so many sparks between the two of you, I was afraid you'd set your new house on fire. What's going on? Is she your girlfriend?"

Kipling remembered what they'd done last night and this morning, and his cheeks heated slightly. "No," he said.

Chrissa grinned at the note of wistfulness in his voice. "Do you *wish* she was your girlfriend?"

Absolutely, he thought. Aloud, he said, "Of course not. The woman is two inches from being a nutcase."

"She's kind of pretty, though."

Are you kidding? She's gorgeous. "I've seen better."

"Yeah, I know. I've heard it before. You've dated—" She dropped her voice in a fair imitation of his rumbling baritone—"some of the most glamorous women in Hollywood." She lifted the ice pack away from his leg and squinted at the swelling, then looked back up at him. "But you

know, most of them look kind of fake. Most of them *are* fake. Your neighbor looks like she's real. Pretty, but real."

Kipling's eyebrows drew together as he silently contemplated Chrissa's words. She was absolutely right, he realized. That was what attracted him to Cody—beyond her great ass, of course. She was entirely different from the plastic actresses and emaciated, half-starved models he'd known in California. She was entirely, totally, completely real.

Unfortunately, she thought he was real, too.

A real jerk.

Chapter 10

“Where’s your husband?”

Cody dished pasta salad onto three cobalt and white plates, aware that her hand was shaking slightly. She hoped her father didn’t notice. “He’s still feeling sick, Dad.”

Her father glared suspiciously at the plate she offered him. “I’m not sure I want to eat food you prepared, Cody. You’ve already made one person ill today. Maybe we should just go out to eat for lunch.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Tiffani said brightly as she took a plate from Cody. “Cody’s a terrific cook. Anyway, for all we know, Kipling just has a virus.”

“It was probably Cody’s cooking,” Dave grumbled. “She’s always been a menace in the kitchen. Hell, she’s always been a walking disaster area.”

Cody gritted her teeth against the angry retort that seethed in her mouth. Kipling wasn’t even really sick—well, except for an ankle that was beginning to attain the proportions of a watermelon—and here she was being unjustly accused of poisoning him.

She couldn’t believe the son of a bitch had run out on her this way. What the hell was she supposed to do now?

She remembered his sarcastic words: *Try the truth.*

Good advice, but looking over at her father’s scowling face, she knew she couldn’t follow it. She just couldn’t. She’d been nothing but a disappointment to him all her life. She simply couldn’t bear disappointing him again.

Tiffani stabbed a rotini spiral with her fork, ate it, and said, “It’s delicious, Cody.”

Cody sent her friend a grateful smile.

Her father dug tentatively into the pasta salad with an expression that suggested he might perish on the spot, but after the first bite his face lightened and he kept shoveling it down with enthusiasm. "So," he said between mouthfuls, "you're finally married."

Cody smiled weakly, wondering how the hell she was going to pull this off, considering that Kipling wasn't even in the house anymore. She imagined herself explaining his absence. *I'm sorry, I seem to have misplaced my husband.*

Dad wasn't that gullible.

Hell, no one was *that* gullible.

"That's right," she answered brightly, pushing her misgivings away. "I'm Mrs. Stanton now."

Tiffani's head jerked up, and she stared at Cody strangely. "Stanton?" she repeated.

"Uh-huh," Cody said, wondering why Tiffani looked so odd. She knew Cody wasn't really married, after all. Tiffani dropped her fork to the plate with a clatter.

"Can I see you in the kitchen for a sec, Cody?"

"Uh—" Cody glanced at her father for a moment. He looked alarmed. "Um, sure."

She got up and followed Tiffani into the kitchen. Behind her, she heard her father mutter, "I *knew* there was something wrong with the salad."

* * * *

In the kitchen, Tiffani spun to glare at her. "*Stanton?*" she repeated in a loud whisper. "Why the hell didn't you tell me his last name was Stanton?"

"I didn't actually know until today," Cody said. A hot blush spread over her cheeks as she remembered what they'd done together this morning. She could hardly believe she'd been so intimate with a man whose last name she didn't know. "I forgot to ask."

"It seems crazy, but I think I understand what's going on now," Tiffani said. She was walking back and forth across the kitchen. "I think I know why he's hiding upstairs."

"Actually, he's not."

Tiffani paused and glanced at her. "What do you mean?"

"He, uh, kind of jumped out the window."

Tiffani covered her face with her hands. "Jesus. What did you do to him, Cody?"

"Why does everyone always assume everything is my fault?" Cody demanded. "It was *your* fault, not mine."

"My fault? What do you mean?"

"He started pretending he was sick the minute you came in, and then he just...ran off while you were outside. I don't understand it."

"The camera," Tiffani said, looking like light was dawning. "He must have seen me getting the camera."

"Are you suggesting he has a pathological fear of cameras?" Cody demanded. "That's nuts. I took his picture yesterday, remember?"

Tiffani wrinkled her forehead. "He said something about me earlier. He said...." She scowled in concentration. "He said my name sounded familiar."

"Yeah. And I said sure it did, we talked about you last night when we were watching TV."

"No," Tiffani said, snapping her fingers in sudden excitement. "You said you'd talked about me when *Farthest Space* came on."

"Oh, right. He didn't want to watch it. I mentioned you were a big fan."

"Aha. It all makes sense now."

"*What* makes sense?" Cody exploded in exasperation. "Nothing that's happened this morning makes sense. Kipling was going along with me, just like we planned, and then the moment you showed up he started acting just plain *weird*."

"That's because he knows I know who he is."

They were back to Kipling's secret identity again. Cody was starting to wonder if he really was some sort of double agent. Had James Bond moved in next door?

She lifted her eyebrows quizzically. "What do you mean?"

Just then her father appeared at the doorway. "Are you two going to yammer all afternoon or are you going to eat?"

"We're coming," Cody said hastily. As she followed her father out of

the kitchen, Tiffani whispered in her ear.

"I promise, I'll explain everything later."

* * * *

"Your ankle looks better."

Kipling watched Chrissa's hair swing forward in a sleek golden curtain as she bent over his injured leg. "Don't you have classes to get to?" he asked.

Her head jerked up, and she looked startled for a split second before she concealed it behind a mask of casual indifference. "I decided to skip today. I've been working too hard."

"You have to work pretty hard if you want to get into med. school."

Her face went hard. "I told you, I don't know if I want to go to med. school."

Kipling leaned forward and took her hand in his. "Chrissa," he said gently, "why don't you tell me what's going on?"

She returned his gaze for a moment, her eyes narrowed, then abruptly her lower lip began to tremble, reminding him of the girl she had been not very long ago. "Oh, Kip," she whispered. "I am an *idiot*."

"Runs in the family," he said lightly, trying to keep her from bursting into tears. It looked like a fountain was only seconds away, and feminine tears made him want to crawl under the nearest chair and hide. He supposed he was pretty much like most other men that way.

"I bet you've never done anything so stupid," she moaned.

"You might be surprised. What did you do?"

"I failed an exam!"

At Chrissa's heartfelt wail, he felt the corners of his mouth twitch. He promptly suppressed it, aware that she would be mortally offended if he laughed at her. Chrissa had been a straight-A student ever since kindergarten, and he supposed that to her a failing grade was close to the end of the world. "You actually failed an exam?" he repeated, calling on all his acting ability to sound suitably grave.

She nodded, and tears began to flow. *Damn*, he thought, seeing the flood begin. "I haven't been studying hard enough," she choked out. "I didn't think college bio would be that much harder than AP Bio was, but it is. And the night before the exam, when I should have been cramming...I

went to a *party*.”

The self-disgust in her voice was almost enough to make him dissolve into laughter, but he restrained himself. “Look,” he said gently, “everyone screws up every now and then, Chris.”

“I don’t,” she said, sniffing. “I’ve always gotten good grades. I’ve always worked hard.”

“And that’s what you need to keep doing,” Kipling agreed, leaning forward and looking at her earnestly. “You have to work for what you want, Chris. If med. school is important to you, you need to keep working hard.”

She wiped her eyes and looked at him curiously. “How come you quit working hard at acting, Kip?”

Kipling blinked, slightly taken aback by her question. “Who says acting is important to me?”

“It’s what you’ve been doing for seven years,” she said. “And then you just, you know, dropped it and moved here.”

“I didn’t drop it. It dropped me. I lost my job, Chris.”

“It’s not like the only job in Hollywood, is it?”

Kipling shrugged uncomfortably. “I’m not really that good an actor,” he mumbled defensively.

She looked at him with surprise. “Millions of people watch you, Kip. Millions of people love the character you play. Maybe you’re a better actor than you think.”

“Uh, maybe. But I think maybe I was just lucky. Most people don’t just have jobs drop into their laps. If you want to go to med. school, you’re going to have to work at it, Chris.”

“The way you ought to go back to LA and work at acting?”

“I kind of like it here,” Kipling said.

She grinned again, her tears drying already. *Teenagers*, he thought with mingled annoyance and amusement. One minute the world was ending, the next everything was just peachy. But his amusement faded at Chris’ next words.

“You’re in love with your neighbor, aren’t you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve only known her for a couple of days. You can’t fall in love in a couple of days.”

“How do you know? Have you ever been in love?”

A vision of Cody rose up to haunt him, and he shook himself mentally, trying to divest himself of the mental image of dark chocolate eyes, smooth ivory skin, and wildly curling, coppery hair. The vision refused to budge. Cody had somehow become firmly ingrained in his subconscious.

“No,” he said. “I’ve never been in love.”

But he was pretty sure he was lying to himself.

Chapter 11

By dinnertime Cody's father was showing serious signs of disbelief. Cody trotted up and down the stairs several times, carrying on intense and totally fictitious conversations with nobody, feeling that Tiffani was right. This whole idea had been nuts from the beginning, and she was this close to the edge of insanity.

Tiffani had gone back to the bookstore right after lunch, leaving Cody alone with her father—the last thing Cody wanted. She'd never gotten along well with her father. He made her anxious at the best of times, let alone when she was futilely trying to cover up the inexplicable absence of her supposed husband.

She and Tiffani hadn't had a private moment to talk over whatever Tiff had promised to explain—in fact, Tiffani had tried to drag her into the kitchen twice, and both times Cody's father had followed them, effectively putting a stop to whatever Tiffani had to say. He had always held a low view of women whispering between themselves, Cody thought grimly, remembering how he'd listened in on her phone conversations with her girlfriends when she was in high school.

Tiffani had called from the store a couple of times, but Cody had let the answering machine pick up her increasingly frantic-sounding messages and hadn't bothered to play them back yet. She couldn't cope with anything other than her father right now, and she seriously doubted that anything Tiffani had to say would have a lot of relevance to the awkward situation anyway. After all, Tiff had never met Kipling before today, so what could she possibly know about him? Kipling had run off because he was a jerk, pure and simple.

About six thirty her father switched off the news, stood up, and said

in a tone of grim finality, "That's it."

Cody blinked rapidly several times and swallowed nervously.

"What's it, Dad?"

"I want to talk to your husband."

"I think he's sleeping," Cody said in a quick rush of invention. "Last time I went upstairs he didn't answer."

Her father pointed his index finger at her, a habit he had that really annoyed the hell out of her. Then again, she thought wryly, he didn't have too many habits that *didn't* annoy the hell out of her. "If he's really that sick, Cody Rebecca Lang, he needs to see a doctor. We should go to the emergency room instead of a restaurant."

"He says he's feeling better. He just doesn't want to eat right now."

Dave glared at her. "You're trying to pull the wool over my eyes, Cody Rebecca. It didn't work when you were a little girl, and it won't work now."

"What do you mean?" Cody said, trying to sound offended. It wasn't easy, considering he was quite right—she'd been trying to pull something over on him all day. Just not very well.

"Something is going on here," her father intoned. "Something very peculiar."

Peculiar? Oh, no, Dad, I just convinced a total stranger to pose as my husband, and he ran out on me for God only knows what reason. And I've been talking to thin air through a door all afternoon. That's not peculiar, is it?

Aloud, she said, "I don't know what you mean, Dad. I cooked some bad eggs and Kipling ate them. That's all."

"There's something else going on." Dave narrowed his eyes at her. "Is your husband in a coma? Or *dead*?"

Cody managed to swallow back a hysterical giggle. "Are you serious, Dad?"

"I don't know what else to think," Dave said. "I haven't seen the man since eleven this morning. I haven't heard footsteps upstairs, or his voice speaking, or a toilet flushing. I think you accidentally poisoned him, and now you're trying to cover up the evidence. It's the same sort of thing you did all during your childhood. Always trying to cover up your mistakes."

Cody thought about pointing out there was a big difference between “losing” her report card in eighth grade because she’d gotten a C in Earth Science and letting her husband’s corpse lie upstairs because she was too afraid to admit she’d fed him bad eggs, but she couldn’t seem to make her mouth work. At last she managed to pick her jaw up off the floor. “Dad,” she said, grateful that her voice didn’t squeak too badly, “you’ve been watching too many soap operas.”

“Don’t patronize me, young lady. Your husband is lying up there unconscious, or dead, and you’re trying to cover it up!”

Her own father thought she’d killed her husband, or at least put him into a coma, by the sheer awfulness of her cooking. This, Cody thought numbly, had to be the lowest point ever of a very rocky father-daughter relationship. It was such a bizarre accusation she couldn’t think of anything to say. “Uh....”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said a voice. “If I were dead, I’m certain I would have noticed.”

At the sound of the low, rumbling voice, Cody spun around. She could have passed out in relief. Kipling was standing on the bottom step of the staircase, looking perfectly healthy. To say she was shocked would be an understatement, considering the way he’d growled the words, *I have had enough*.

He’d bailed on her. Yet here he was, taking up the part of her husband as if nothing had happened between them—as if he hadn’t jumped out a window to get away from her. Could she possibly be so desperate she was imagining things?

But as he stepped off the bottom stair with a slight wince, she knew he was real. She guessed he’d come in the garage door and sneaked up the back staircase, but for all she knew he’d donned a cape and tights and flown in through the window. She was so relieved to see him she didn’t much care how he’d gotten there.

He looked as handsome as ever, his long hair confined neatly in a ponytail, dressed in a collared shirt and pressed slacks. He offered her father a bland smile. “I’m sorry I’ve slept most of the afternoon away, sir.”

Her father looked slightly surprised. “Glad to see you up and about, son. Feeling better?”

“Yes, thanks.”

Dave snorted. “I guess you’ve learned never to trust my daughter’s cooking.”

She was staring at him hungrily, so she didn’t miss the slight stiffening of his features. Kipling was annoyed by her father’s casual deprecation of her abilities. For some reason that made a surge of warmth go through her—a surge that only grew when he stopped next to her and slid his arm around her waist.

“It might not have been her cooking at all,” he pointed out. “And even if it was—well, everyone makes a mistake every now and then, don’t they?”

Dave pressed his lips together. “Maybe. But I for one am glad we’re going out to eat.”

Kipling hesitated. “Out?”

“I figured we’d go out to Willy’s,” Cody said. “Dad loves their burgers.” Instantly, a flash of wary tension illuminated his eyes, and Cody wondered what caused it. She knew she owed him big time for coming back, so she tried to backpedal. To protect him from whatever he was afraid of. “But if you’re not feeling up to going out—“

“I feel fine,” Kipling said. “Let’s go.”

* * * *

He’d done plenty of dumb things in his life, Kipling reflected gloomily, but this was far and away the dumbest thing he’d ever done. He’d slipped into the side door of her house while the dog was safely in the backyard and managed to hobble up the back staircase, despite the pain in his ankle. Taking pity on Cody and coming back to pose as her husband had been crazy enough, but now he was following Cody and her father into a restaurant packed to the gills with people.

Judging from the size of the crowd, they were going to have to wait an hour for a table, and while they were waiting someone was bound to recognize him, despite the mirrored sunglasses he wore. He must be out of his mind.

Love can have that effect on people, a little voice said inside his head.

He silenced that voice ruthlessly. He wasn’t in love, for Christ’s sake! He’d only known Cody Lang for two days. Two days! Sure, he liked

her a lot—a *whole* lot—but he couldn't possibly have fallen in love so soon.

The restaurant was called Willy's, and it was incredibly loud. Kipling tried to hang back behind his supposed father-in-law. Unfortunately Dave wasn't as tall as he was, and he felt eyes boring into him, assessing his features. Not that anyone had necessarily recognized him—people just liked to look at him for some reason. Especially women. Several women, he noticed uneasily, were goggling at him as if they were starving and he was a big slab of chocolate cake.

Cody stepped back from talking to the server, put a proprietary hand on his arm, and aimed a glare at all the women who'd been gazing at him, and they all looked away hastily.

"You sure get a lot of attention," Cody said in a half-teasing tone, but he noticed her lips were pressed together tightly, and she continued to glare at the women, all of whom had suddenly become very interested in their fingernails.

You have no idea, he thought. Aloud he said in a wry tone, "Yeah, it must be my amazing good looks."

"I think that's it," Cody agreed. "I'm not sure I like being married to a man who's better looking than I am."

"What else could you have expected?" her father said in his usual acid tones.

The teasing, humorous light in her eyes flickered out, and she dropped her gaze to the floor. Kipling felt a blast of rage go through him at her father's constant belittlement. Small wonder Cody was so uncomfortable around him; the damned bastard had an amazing talent for saying impossibly cruel things. He turned his head and glared at the older man through his dark glasses.

"Cody is beautiful," he said, and meant it.

Dave chuckled, apparently oblivious to his annoyance. "Really, son, let's not delude ourselves. She has Little Orphan Annie hair."

Hearing Cody's beautiful curls derided that way made Kipling long to slug the guy, but he wasn't going to hit an older man. He settled for clenching his fists. Hard. "Her hair," he said tightly, "is stunning. It's the color of a sunset. The color of polished copper. The color of flame."

Dave grinned wryly, either unaware of Kipling's anger or indifferent

to it. "That's pretty damned poetic, son, but let's be honest, it's orange. Cody got her mother's hair, unfortunately. Too bad for her that she got my face."

Kipling growled deep in his throat. "I happen to like her face."

"She's had trouble with her weight her entire life, too," Dave went on. "She's still chubby. I don't know where she gets that from. Her mother was slender, and I'm not overweight."

Kipling looked down at Cody and saw her cheeks flushing a brilliant shade of scarlet. Cody was the furthest thing he'd ever seen from chubby. She was built like a woman, with broad hips and generous breasts, but she couldn't be described as chubby by anyone with eyes in his head.

"She is not in the least chubby."

"Maybe not chubby, exactly, but you've got to admit, she's a little on the hippy side."

"Cody is gorgeous," Kipling practically snarled. "Her face is gorgeous. Her hips are gorgeous. And her hair is gorgeous. In fact, she's easily the most gorgeous woman I've ever known."

He saw Cody shoot a hesitant glance up at him through her long lashes, saw the tremulous wonder in her gaze, and he wondered if anyone had ever defended her against her father's unkindness before.

"You're biased," her father said dismissively.

"You ought to be the biased one," Kipling snapped. "She's *your* daughter, damn it."

Dave blinked, taken aback. Kipling went on, "Maybe you don't realize what an amazing person your daughter is, Dave. She runs her own business—"

"She runs a *bookstore*," Dave interrupted in a bored tone of voice that suggested running a bookstore might just be the lowest occupation on the face of the planet, somewhere far below garbage collecting, street sweeping, or basket weaving.

"She runs a bookstore for kids," Kipling said hotly. "She and her partner do story time every week. Cody gets kids interested in reading, Dave. If there's a more important thing to do with your life I've never heard of it."

Dave made a harrumphing sound. "Cody had excellent grades in

school. She went to Harvard. She could have become a doctor, an attorney...instead she decided to major in *English*, of all things. Is there a more useless major?"

"She's encouraging kids to read!"

"She could have been making real money!" Dave shot back.

"Goddamn it, Dave—"

Abruptly Kipling was aware of Cody, of the small choking sound she made. He looked at her, alarmed, and saw her dark eyes swimming with tears. "Cody," he said with concern, "are you all right?"

"Excuse me," she whispered, and ran for the ladies' bathroom.

* * * *

In the bathroom Cody locked herself into a stall, sat down on the toilet, and buried her face in her hands. She couldn't believe what had just happened.

Kipling had defended her. He'd said nice things about her choice of careers. He'd said she was gorgeous, for God's sake.

It was the most stunning thing that had ever happened to her.

She'd never dated a man before who'd stood up for her against her father. Dave was like a steamroller, verbally flattening anyone who didn't agree with him, and most men backed down quickly when faced with his pugnacious attitude. And most of the men she'd dated had told her she really should have gone into something practical, like medicine or law. Even Cody herself had felt she was something of a loser. What was she meant to do? Was she just playing at life, goofing off because she'd known she was going to have money someday?

When her mom had died and she'd come into her inheritance, she'd realized she couldn't just muddle around shelving books for the rest of her life. She'd decided to do something worthwhile, something the community really needed, and after talking it over with Tiffani, she'd opened Lang's Fairy Tales. The name had come to her when she'd been looking over her bookshelf and seen the old copy of the *Blue Fairy Book* her mother had given her when she was eight. It had seemed right, somehow, and she knew her mother would approve.

But her father sure hadn't.

She'd worked her fingers to the bone getting the damned bookstore

off the ground, poured her money into acquiring stock—nice new books and old collectors' editions—and put her heart and soul into the store for the past two years.

But Dad wasn't impressed. He kept reminding her she was still young enough to do something else. Something *important*.

She remembered that Kipling thought what she was doing was important. For some reason that made her throat tight and her eyes fill with tears.

The cell phone in her purse rang, and she pulled it out. "Hello?"

"Cody?"

The voice on the other end was anxious, and Cody felt guilty for not picking up the phone all day. "Oh, Tiff. Hi."

"We need to talk."

"I can't talk right now. We went out to eat."

"Out to eat?" Tiffani repeated. "Are you kidding? You dragged Kip to a *restaurant*?"

"He likes to be called Kipling," Cody said, wondering why Tiffani had called him Kip. As far as she knew, only his sister called him that. But maybe Tiffani knew Kipling's sister from the university, where her sister was a professor. That made sense. Maybe that explained why Tiffani seemed to know something about Kipling she was anxious to get off her chest.

"Yeah, I just bet he does," Tiffani said grimly. "Look, Cody, there's something you need to know."

"I don't have time, Tiff. Tell me later."

"But Cody—"

Just then the outer door opened, and a swarm of chattering females buzzed in. Cody heard a high, shrill voice exclaiming, "Ohmigod! Right here in Swift Creek! Can you *believe* it?" over a burst of jumbled conversation. Tiffani tried to say something else, but it couldn't have been drowned out more effectively by a burst of static.

"I'll call you later," Cody yelled at the phone, then clicked it shut and dropped it in her purse. She exited the stall, past a group of excited teenage girls who were babbling loudly as they hastily brushed their long hair and lacquered more makeup onto their faces—makeup that they certainly didn't

need, she thought, eyeing their heavy mascara and dark lipstick with amusement. As she walked past she caught disjointed fragments of conversation.

“God, he’s so *hot*!”

“Unbelievable!”

“Do you think we could get his autograph?”

“I’d love to get him to sign my—“

Cody exited the bathroom, but the noise level didn’t go down appreciably. If anything, it got louder. There was a huge knot of people near the entrance, jostling each other, yelling at the top of their lungs. It looked even busier than it had five minutes ago. And the mob of people looked really worked up about something.

Abruptly she realized it wasn’t just people waiting to be seated. Something was going on near the entrance. Maybe someone had fainted or had a heart attack or something, she thought, then a cold wave of dread washed over her.

Oh, God. Dad.

Cody broke into a run.

* * * *

Kipling had managed to dredge up his best public smile, although he didn’t feel a whole lot like smiling right now. He’d known better than to go out in public. He’d known better, but he’d done it anyway. Because of Cody.

And now she was going to hate him because of it.

He signed his name to another Willy’s napkin, smiling at the pimple-faced, ponytailed teenager who’d handed it to him. She took it from him, then flung her arms around his neck and plastered her lips against his.

Kipling gently disengaged her arms from his neck and tried to pull away, which wasn’t easy, since the kid was stuck to him like a stuffed Garfield suction-cupped to a car window. He finally got some clearance and looked over her head, hoping no one had gotten a photo of his lips adhered to a fifteen-year-old’s. *Weekly World News* would have a field day. Jesus, he’d be lucky if he wasn’t arrested for statutory rape.

And then he saw Cody, standing at the back of the crowd and glaring at him. He wasn’t terribly surprised to see that she was really, really mad.

She started toward him with murder in her eyes.

Chapter 12

There were too many people surrounding Kipling for Cody to get to him, which was just as well, because she probably would have bludgeoned him to death with a Willy's menu. Her father was standing just behind Kipling, looking shell-shocked at the volume the increasingly frantic mob was producing. She felt her lips twist in a wry smile. *Didn't know I married a celebrity, did you, Dad?*

But the really funny thing is I didn't know it, either.

She'd perpetrated a massive deception on her father, only to find herself the victim of an even bigger lie. There was probably a huge cosmic joke in there somewhere, but Cody didn't find it terribly amusing.

She still wasn't sure who the hell Kipling Stanton was, or why he was attracting more attention than a five-car pileup on the interstate, but she was starting to get a clue from the excited chatter that surrounded her, beating relentlessly at her eardrums. Kipling had something to do with *Farthest Space*, which probably explained why he hadn't wanted her to see the show. And why he'd panicked when Tiffani, a fan of the show, had showed up.

"Excuse me," she said, nudging the woman next to her with her elbow. "Who is this guy?"

The woman turned her head, and her eyes went wide with shock. "Don't you *know*?"

If I knew, I wouldn't be asking, would I, moron? Cody barely managed to restrain the sharp retort, aware that it was Kipling she was furious with, not this anonymous woman. "Haven't got a clue."

"He's *Kip Stanton*."

The woman said the name in the same hushed, reverent tone she might have said "Robert Redford" or "the President of the United States." It

was the first time Cody had heard the full name pronounced out loud, and she felt a twinge of recognition. She *had* heard that name before. She recalled that she'd vaguely remembered seeing his face...somewhere. Where?

Like Tiffani had said, it sure as hell hadn't been in her dreams.

"Uh, he's an actor or something, isn't he?"

The woman was practically drooling. She turned her eyes back to Kipling—no, *Kip*, Cody corrected herself fiercely—and gazed at him as if he were a priceless Michelangelo statue. A *nude* Michelangelo statue. "He's the star of *Farthest Space*. He's won two Emmies. Didn't you see him on the cover of *People* last month?"

Cody felt like someone had slugged her in the stomach. Bile rose in her throat.

God, I am so stupid. So incredibly, totally, completely stupid.

Kipling wasn't just an actor; he was a *star*. He was famous, so famous his face had been on the cover of a national magazine. Most likely he'd slept with dozens of gorgeous, famous women. He couldn't possibly be seriously interested in someone like her.

So why on earth had he gone along with her in this charade? Just to be nice? Why would a famous, rich actor bother with being nice?

And then there was the way he'd come to her defense against her father. He'd certainly seemed sincere. Maybe he was just a nice guy. But maybe he had an ulterior motive. She remembered the things they'd done last night, the things they'd done this morning, and wanted to throw up. Had Kipling thought she looked desperate? Had he just been trying to get an easy lay?

But why would a guy like him even *look* at her? Surely he could have any woman in the country he wanted. That grim thought was confirmed when the woman added in a breathless voice, "They say he's dated *Jennifer Aniston*."

Cody pictured the *Friends* star, with her beautiful straight hair and her million-dollar body, and felt like a total moron. Kipling couldn't possibly be interested in someone like her, with her curly orange hair and her fat behind. Not when he could have a gorgeous woman like Jennifer Aniston. No ordinary American woman could be expected to compete with

a superstar.

She noticed Kipling was starting to make his way through the crowd toward her. “Cody,” he said. She couldn’t really hear his voice over the noise of the mob, but she saw his lips form her name.

“No,” she whispered, backing away.

He stretched his hand out toward her.

“No!” she screamed, so loudly she was certain he could hear her, even over the chaotic uproar. She turned and fled. Kipling and his—his *groupies* were blocking the main door. She ran out through a fire exit, heedless of the fact that it set off an alarm, and raced down the sidewalk at a headlong speed that Seabiscuit would have had a hard time matching.

* * * *

“What the hell is going on, young man?”

Kipling had managed to disengage himself from the crowd and gotten outside. Too late. Cody was nowhere to be seen. He noticed her small, practical car was still in the parking lot, which meant she’d taken off on foot.

Great. She could be anywhere. He remembered the shocked disillusionment in her eyes and felt something shrivel inside him.

Spending time with her had been so quiet, so *normal*. He couldn’t think of the last time he’d played cards with someone, or just watched a sitcom. She hadn’t had a clue who he was, and he’d liked it that way. Their time together had been just them, with no fans intruding, no tabloid reporters eavesdropping, no news crews camping out on his lawn. Just two ordinary people spending time together.

Now she knew who he was, or at least had a pretty good inkling. And so did the rest of this town. Mirrored sunglasses and dyed hair weren’t nearly enough of a disguise. He’d be mobbed every time he set foot outside.

Cody wouldn’t want that. Some women would love it, but he knew she wasn’t the type. She wouldn’t think more of him because he was a celebrity. In fact, she thought less of him. He’d seen it in her eyes. She probably thought he was a playboy, a party boy who reveled in the attention.

And the irony of it was she would have been right until a few weeks ago.

Okay, he’d never been much of a playboy in the literal sense. Being

hunted and bagged like a big game animal in Africa had never held much appeal for him. But his life in Hollywood had consisted pretty much of parties, along with an endless publicity trail. He'd gone wherever his agent had sent him. The *Today* show, *Oprah*, covers for all those magazines.... It sounded kind of shallow, even to him.

"Answer me," Dave Lang demanded. He was standing just behind Kipling, who had taken refuge behind the dumpster. The smell was unpleasant, but at least the crowd wouldn't think to look for him here. Neither would the news crews that had just begun pulling up. He hoped. "What the hell is going on here?"

Kipling turned and looked at his "father-in-law" while he tried to figure out what to say. He was surprised to see defensive anger in the man's eyes. Dave Lang might not be much of a father, but he was genuinely concerned for Cody. "I'm an actor," he said at last, taking off his sunglasses and shoving them into his shirt pocket.

"I knew you looked familiar!" Dave said. "You starred on one of those dumb space shows, didn't you?"

Kipling managed to avoid decking the man for referring to *Farthest Space* as "dumb." He'd loved the books since *Farthest Space: The Beginning* had come out, and the show had been his life for seven years. Still, he supposed one man's life was another man's dumb. "That's right," he admitted. "It's called *Farthest Space*, and I played Captain McNeill." He gave a humorless laugh. "I saved the universe every week."

Dave frowned. "There's another guy in town who has something to do with that show."

"Yeah, Max Sinclair. He wrote the books."

"Hell of a coincidence that you're both here."

Kipling sighed. "I'm from Northern Virginia originally, but after I got the part on the show, I started coming to Swift Creek for *Farthest Space* conventions. Max doesn't like to do conventions much, and he won't do them anywhere but here, so I wound up coming here every year. I liked the town. My sister goes to the university here, and my parents aren't far away."

"You expect me to believe you just happened to meet my daughter over the Internet?"

Kipling just looked at him.

"That's what I figured," Dave said grimly. "Cody's been telling me a fish story. The two of you aren't married at all, are you?"

Kipling decided to keep his mouth shut. It was up to Cody to fix her problems with her dad, not him.

Anyway, he needed to fix his own problems. First and foremost, he needed to talk to Cody. He remembered the look of stunned betrayal in her eyes, and his throat felt tight. He wasn't sure how he'd made it this far without Cody in his life, but now that he'd found her, he couldn't bear losing her. The thought of a life without her gave him a cold, hollow sensation deep in his stomach.

"I have to find Cody," he said. He stuck his head out from behind the dumpster and looked cautiously around. As far as he could tell, the parking lot was deserted. Probably the news crews were inside trying to find out everything they could.

He tried to figure out which way Cody would go. Home? Or had she just taken off? Either way, she'd get home eventually.

Ignoring the pain in his ankle, he started walking.

Chapter 13

Cody was sprawled out on the couch, watching a *Friends* rerun with morbid fascination. Jennifer Aniston, in all her straight-haired glory, was on the screen. That was the kind of woman Kipling wanted. That was the kind of woman a man like Kipling deserved—a beautiful, perfect, slim goddess. Not a fuzzy-haired, short woman with a big butt.

The doorbell rang, setting off a wild burst of barking by Rocky, and she moaned. God help her, it was probably Tiffani. The last person on earth she wanted to talk to right now.

Then again, if she'd talked with Tiffani earlier, maybe she wouldn't be in this mess.

She stalked into the foyer, grabbed Rocky by the collar, and opened the door. A very familiar set of amber-green eyes looked back at her.

"Can we talk?"

Cody blinked at the girl she'd met earlier, the girl Kipling had referred to as Chris. "I guess so," she said, stepping aside and making sure she had a good grip on Rocky, who had a tendency to bowl people over with the force of his adoration. "You're Kipling's sister, aren't you?"

Chris flashed a grin that was eerily reminiscent of Kipling's. "Guilty as charged."

"I'll try not to hold that against you," Cody said. "Come on in."

The young woman stepped into the foyer, then offered her hand to Rocky. Rocky sniffed it and wagged his tail frantically, and she patted the broad head. "Good-looking Lab," she said.

"His name's Rocky. Are you allergic like Kipling is? I can put him out back."

"Kip doesn't have allergies."

“No? That’s what he told me.”

The girl grinned wryly. “He’ll kill me for telling you this, but he’s scared to death of dogs. One bit him in the leg when he was little. Mom says he used to have screaming fits whenever he saw one.”

Cody looked down at Rocky, who was undulating his whole body right along with his tail to show his delight as the girl rubbed his ears. It was hard to believe anyone could be afraid of Rocky, but she remembered the panicked expression in Kipling’s eyes when he’d first seen the dog and realized it was true. He was afraid of dogs.

Maybe that explained why he’d jumped out the window, too; she remembered that she’d let Rocky into the house after Kipling had gone upstairs. But if dogs scared him enough that he’d jump out a window rather than confront one, he had a pretty serious phobia.

It occurred to her that this girl could tell her a lot about Kipling. “Come on in and sit down,” she invited, and led the way to the living room.

In the living room, the girl sat down on a flowery chair and fixed her with a forthright, green-gold gaze. “I saw what happened on TV,” she said.

Cody glanced at her television, where *Friends* was wrapping up. “What do you mean?”

“It was on Channel 9. That whole thing at the restaurant. All Kip’s fans mobbing him. Someone had a video camera, and the station got hold of the tape.”

“Oh,” Cody said faintly.

“I saw you in the crowd, too. You looked like you’d gotten the shock of your life. I guess he never told you, huh?”

Cody swallowed unhappily. “He said he was a computer programmer,” she admitted.

“Well, he was, once. He majored in information systems at Virginia Tech, and when he graduated he got a job out in California.”

“Where he became an actor.”

“He says he fell into acting by accident. He always liked those *Farthest Space* books, and one day he and some friends heard there was going to be a show based on the books, and that they were casting for extras. So they went and tried out. The casting director liked Kip so much he cast him as Captain McNeill.”

"In the lead part? How could he act that well?"

Chris shrugged. "I guess it's a natural talent. I'm not sure his part required a lot of acting, anyway. I think that's what's got him so mixed up."

"What do you mean?"

"I guess you wouldn't know this, but *Farthest Space* just wrapped up its last season."

"You mean it's going off the air?"

Chris nodded. "The shows'll run through February, but Kip's done with it. They might make a movie in a year or two, but until then he's kind of at loose ends."

"Can't he get another role?"

"I don't know if he wants another role. I think he might be scared to try. He figures he's not really an actor, you know? Just someone who got lucky."

"I heard he won two Emmies."

"Yeah, he did."

"So maybe he's better than he thinks."

Chris shrugged. "I think he's improved a lot. But I'm pretty sure they cast him mostly because of the way he looked. He was a twig in high school, but in college he started lifting weights and got really big. Plus his face...well, he's an okay-looking guy."

"And he has all that gorgeous hair."

"I think he wore a wig the first year, actually. Computer programming is a pretty conservative job, and I remember his hair used to be really short. He grew it out for the part."

Cody contemplated this in silence. It sounded like Kipling—no, *Kip*, she reminded herself again—had had greatness thrust upon him, and had risen to meet the challenge. And now that the challenge was over he didn't know quite what to do with himself.

"Why'd he come to a little town like Swift Creek?"

Chris shrugged. "Our family's from Virginia. And Kip's been here for conventions and things. He likes Swift Creek. Anyway, I think he wanted to keep an eye on me."

Cody looked at the girl thoughtfully. "How do you feel about that?"

"I guess it's okay. We've always gotten along really well. Don't tell

anyone, but sometimes I kind of miss my parents. I'm glad he's here."

"I don't suppose he'll stay now," Cody said glumly.

"I think he might. He likes you, you know."

"I wish that was true."

"Trust me. It's true."

The doorbell rang again, causing Rocky to go into another frantic paroxysm of barking. Cody opened the front door to find Tiffani standing there. Tiffani took one look at her face, then put her arms around her, and Cody started to sob.

"Take it easy," Tiffani said, patting her on the head. "He did one hell of a number on you, didn't he? But you know, I saw the video, and I think he was as upset as you were."

"You think so?" Cody choked.

"Sure," Tiffani said. "I mean, he came here to get away from it all, didn't he? He was afraid of being recognized, and he still let you drag him to the restaurant. He's obviously dumb as a doorknob, but I don't think he meant for you to get hurt. He just didn't think it through carefully enough."

"Being dumb is my brother's specialty," a dry voice said from the foyer.

Tiffani looked over Cody's curls. "Are you Kip's sister?"

"Yeah, I'm Chrissa."

"Jeez," Tiffani said. "You look just like him."

"Only prettier," the girl said with a cocky smile. "Look, Cody, I think your friend is right. Kip really likes you, you know? He just didn't have a chance to say so before everything fell apart."

Cody sniffled. "I don't think he likes me that much."

"I think he does," Chrissa said. She grinned wickedly. "And I think I can come up with a way to prove it."

* * * *

By the time Kip got back to his neighborhood, his ankle was so sore he was limping badly. He'd thought about stopping and calling a taxi, but he'd been afraid that would alert the news crews to his location, and he figured he could make it three-quarters of a mile without serious injury. Right now, though, he felt like the only thing keeping his foot attached to his ankle was his sock.

He saw there were lights on in Cody's house. He wasn't surprised she was home already. He was pretty sure she could outrun him even when his ankle didn't feel like it had been pounded by a jackhammer for the past hour. Hobbling up the steps, he knocked on the door.

A dog started barking, and he instantly broke out in a cold sweat. A moment later Tiffani Harshaw opened the door, her hand on Rocky's collar. She glared at him through narrowed blue eyes. "Yes?"

With a dog barely a foot away from his leg, lunging at him and barking frantically, Kip had to swallow several times before he could speak. "I, uh..." He glanced down at the dog and gulped again. "I need to talk to Cody."

"You think so?"

Kip tore his nervous gaze away from the dog and looked at Tiffani's face. She knew who he was, he could tell. But he got the distinct impression she was running interference for Cody. He'd have to talk his way into the house.

"Yeah," he said. "I think I owe Cody an apology."

One of Tiffani's eyebrows shot up. "For lying? Or for making her look like a total fool in front of her dad?"

"Uh..." Kip found his eyes drifting back to the dog. His mouth went dry. "Both, I guess."

"Fine." Tiffani stepped back from the door. "Come on in."

His feet were frozen to the doormat. He glanced at the dog. "Do you think you could put, uh, Rocky outside?"

"No," Tiffani said flatly.

"I'm, uh, kind of allergic—"

"Your sister told us all about your *allergy*," Tiffani said. She gave a diabolical smile. "You want to talk to Cody, the dog stays."

His knees turned to water, and he shot a pleading look at her. "You aren't going to let him loose, are you?"

It was a measure of his desperation that he'd even consider going into a room with a dog in it. But if Tiffani would just hold onto the beast's collar....

But Tiffani shrugged. "I don't know. I might just turn him loose."

Gray spots danced in Kip's vision, and he caught hold of the

doorframe to steady himself. Something that looked like sympathy flickered in Tiffani's eyes. "Jeez. You're really scared of him, aren't you?"

"I'm not scared," he said with dignity. The dog made a sudden lunge in his direction, and he jumped backward. Tiffani tightened her grip on Rocky's collar, pulling him back, and Kip flashed a sheepish grin—or what was meant to be a grin, at any rate. "I'm terrified."

"Well, if you want to talk to Cody, you have to come past the dog."

"Fine," he croaked, and stepped into the house.

At least he meant to step into the house. What actually happened was nothing, because his legs were shaking too badly to move. He took a deep breath and forced himself to lift his feet, one at a time. After what seemed like hours, he managed to make it into the foyer, and Tiffani closed the door behind him.

The dog scrabbled frantically, eager to greet him, and Tiffani lost her grip on its collar.

It promptly bounded forward and struck him in the chest with both big forepaws. Caught unprepared, and off balance because of his injured ankle, Kip keeled over backward and hit the polished wood floor. The dog's fangs flashed in his vision as it licked his face, and Kip screwed his eyes shut and uttered an anguished yell of mortal terror.

And then the dog was being hauled away from him. He lay there, eyes clenched shut, and heard Cody's voice say reproachfully, "You didn't have to scare him to death, Tiffani."

"I don't think he's quite dead," Tiffani's voice replied. She added in a tone of deep interest, "You know, it's too bad we didn't have a video camera running. If we got a tape of 'America's hottest bachelor' screaming his head off because a Lab was trying to lick him, I bet the *Today* show would pay us a hell of a lot of money. If I get your video camera, would you—"

"No," Cody said firmly.

"You're no fun," Tiffani grumbled.

"And you're sadistic. Here, put Rocky outside, will you?"

Kip heard the clicking sound of Rocky's toenails recede. Still shaking, he slowly sat up and looked up at Cody. He realized she'd seen him shrieking in terror because a tail-wagging Lab had given him a friendly

lick, and he dropped his head, burying his face against his knees while his cheeks turned three different shades of red.

Cody sat down next to him on the floor. "Chrissa came by earlier. She mentioned you were bitten by a dog when you were younger."

"Not just any dog," Kip said in a muffled voice. "A huge, savage beast with enormous fangs. It was the size of a fucking Shetland pony. Picture a Shetland pony with teeth like daggers. That's what the damned thing looked like to me."

"Pit bull?"

"Uh... no."

"Doberman?"

He lifted his head slightly and glared at her. "It was a goddamned Dachshund, all right? I'm scared shitless of dogs because I was nipped in the leg by a five-pound weiner dog."

He heard her startled giggle, and he buried his face again. "I was four," he mumbled defensively. "It seemed like a pretty damn big dog at the time." She snorted again, and he groaned in an agony of humiliation. "Just kill me now," he muttered.

"Embarrassed, Kip?"

"Embarrassed doesn't begin to describe what I'm feeling."

"Maybe you have some clue how I felt when I suddenly discovered the man who agreed to masquerade as my husband was a famous TV star, then."

At the cutting edge in her voice, he slowly lifted his head and met her stormy gaze. "I never meant to embarrass you, Cody," he said softly. "I never meant to make your relationship with your dad worse than it already was. Things just got out of hand, somehow."

"Oh, I know that," Cody said. She sighed. "I guess this whole idiotic situation is my fault, really. Maybe if I'd just had a little backbone, I wouldn't have tried so hard to make Dad happy."

"Your dad's not worth it, you know."

She shrugged. "He's the only dad I have, Kip."

"He's a bastard. Those things he said—" He broke off, feeling the rage he'd experienced earlier well in him again. She looked at him, and he saw the surprise in her eyes.

“You were really mad at him, weren’t you?”

“He said some awful things, Cody. And none of them were true. You are absolutely the most wonderful woman I’ve ever met. And the most gorgeous.”

She met his eyes for a long moment. At last she said in a breathless voice, “But what about Jennifer Aniston?”

“Who?” Kip said blankly.

She looked down and picked at a fingernail. “I heard you dated her.”

“Jennifer Aniston? You mean the *Friends* star?” She nodded jerkily, and he snorted. “I think I met her once at a party. I sure as hell never dated her. And even if I had....” He tilted her chin up and gazed into her eyes.

“I’m looking at the most gorgeous woman in America right now, Cody. No one in Hollywood comes close.”

She hesitated for a long moment, then flung her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder.

“You want to know something?” he whispered into her hair.

“What?”

“I think I’m in love with you. I’ve only known you for two days, and I’m already in love. Isn’t that crazy?”

“That isn’t crazy,” she murmured. “It’s romantic.”

He started to laugh, and she lifted her head, looking wounded. “Isn’t it romantic?”

“I’m starting to think crazy and romantic are pretty close to being the same thing. At least where we’re concerned.” He slid his fingers into the depths of her hair—her gorgeous copper curls—and pressed his lips against hers.

For a few precious seconds, he forgot about the press hounding him, about Cody’s obnoxious father, about his stalled career. The rest of the world faded away. In this private moment, there were only the two of them, and nothing else really mattered.

“Will you marry me?” he said against her mouth.

He felt her lips curve. “Shouldn’t we take the time to know each other a little better first?”

Lifting his mouth from hers, he nodded solemnly. “You’re right.” He looked at his wristwatch and ostentatiously counted off sixty seconds, then

glanced back at her. "Is that enough time?"

"Definitely. More than enough."

"You'll marry me, then?"

"Yes, Kip. I'll marry you. For real this time."

He quirked an eyebrow. "What do you think your dad will have to say about that?"

Cody looked him straight in the eye and spoke with resolute firmness.

"I really don't give a damn what my dad will say."

"Attagirl," he said, and kissed her again. Her lips were sweet and soft, and he moaned softly and slid his tongue into her mouth.

"Ahem."

Kip jerked his head up like he'd been shot. Tiffani was standing just behind them, wearing a grin that reminded him of the Cheshire Cat. He wished she'd emulate the Cheshire Cat in another way and disappear. "I hate to interrupt," she said, "but there's an awful lot of camera crews out on the street looking for a story."

Kip shook his head and looked at Cody ruefully. "This is what my life is like, Cody. It's never quiet and normal. You think you can put up with it?"

She smiled. "For you? I can put up with anything."

"Terrific." Kip rose to his feet, a bit awkwardly because of the sore ankle, and extended a hand to her. "Come on. They're looking for a story. Let's give them one."

As they walked out onto the porch together, flash bulbs popped and film cameras aimed in their direction. Kip noticed Cody's father standing just behind the crowd on the lawn and staring at them. Cody lifted a hand and beamed at him, and Dave returned her smile with a tentative one of his own.

Kip put his arm around Cody and grinned at the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, with more pride than he'd ever felt in his lifetime, "I'd like you to meet the woman I'm going to spend the rest of my life with."

Chapter 14

"It was nice of your dad to take Rocky out for a walk and give us some privacy," Kip said later that evening as he sprawled on Cody's couch.

"I didn't give him a lot of choice," Cody said ruefully. "I pretty much told him to get lost for a couple of hours."

Kip chuckled. "And I'm willing to bet that's the first time you've ever told your dad to do anything."

"You're right," she admitted. "It felt good. I think I'm going to have to do it more often."

"Sounds like a terrific idea." He leered at her. "So what do you want to do while he's gone?"

Cody widened her eyes innocently. "I thought maybe we could play Uno."

He reached up and yanked her down onto him. "I had something else in mind," he said, just before he pressed his lips to hers and kissed her hard. Almost instantly lust sprang to life within him, along with an swelling of love so intense he could hardly bear it.

"I love you," he said against her mouth.

"Why?"

That wasn't exactly the answer he was expecting. He hesitated and drew back a bit. "What do you mean?"

"I mean why do you love me?"

He frowned. "I don't know, Cody. You're funny and sweet and just a little loopy. I've never met anyone quite like you before. When I met you, it was like...." He laughed wryly. "It sounds a little dumb, but it was like I'd been waiting for you all my life."

"But you could have practically anyone you wanted," she said. He

saw the vulnerability shimmering in her dark eyes, and he slid his hands into the depths of her hair, holding her so that she couldn't look away.

"I don't want anyone else," he said softly. "I only want you."

She reached up and covered one of his hands with her own. "I want you, too, Kip. I love you."

He groaned as his body reacted to her words, stiffening to the point of pain. "Too bad I didn't get by the store. You can't have me tonight."

"Actually...." She grinned. "Check my jeans pocket."

"Oh, my God. Tell me you're not kidding me. Because if you're teasing me, I'm going to die."

"I'm not kidding. I borrowed a few from Tiffani. She keeps them in her purse. Says it makes her marriage more interesting if they can do it any time, anywhere."

He slid his hand across her rounded bottom and found several foil packets in the back pocket of her jeans. He pulled them out and looked at them, then gazed back at her quizzically. "Cody, there are five condoms here."

"I may be romantic, but I believe in being prepared."

"Yes, but *five*? Do you really think I'm that..."

"Studly?" She shot him a seductive smile. "Why don't we find out?"

She yanked off his shirt, then reached down between them and began to unbutton his jeans, and he stripped off her clothing. Before long they were both stark naked. His hands roamed over her silken curves, caressing her soft skin, discovering her every secret. He'd never wanted to explore another woman this way, he thought as he touched her everywhere, as her nipples puckered beneath his stroking fingers and her skin grew heated and damp.

Within moments she was moaning and twisting against him, and he rolled her over, so that she was lying on the couch, and leaned over her. He ripped open the packet and rolled the condom on, then let his erection nudge at the hot, silky entrance to her body.

He wanted to thrust deeply into her, wanted it so badly he ached for it, but he managed to control himself, certain that she couldn't possibly be ready for him so soon.

He slid into her, only an inch or so, and discovered he was wrong.

She was as wet and warm as summer rain. It felt like heaven inside her, and withdrawing was the hardest thing he'd ever done in his lifetime. But he somehow managed to pull out, then slid slowly into her damp heat again, and she gasped and moaned and lifted her legs, wrapping them around him, wordlessly begging for more.

His control snapped, and he slammed into her, hard, all the way to the hilt. She cried out and dug her fingernails into his back as he began to move in a smooth, relentless rhythm. The heat built inside him with every thrust, an inferno he couldn't control, that he didn't want to control. She sobbed and gasped with each movement, her body tensing around him. And then she threw her head back, and he felt the unmistakable tremors of her climax.

A surge of nearly unbearable ecstasy blasted through him, and he surrendered to it, crying out as his body shuddered with fierce, overwhelming pleasure.

Long moments later, when he could draw breath again, he rolled over, and she rested her head on his shoulder. "This couch is too narrow," he grumbled.

"You didn't complain earlier."

"I didn't notice earlier. I was otherwise occupied."

"Maybe we should occupy you again," she suggested. "We still have four condoms."

"*Four*. Jesus. Are you trying to kill me, Cody?"

"I have faith in you, Kip." She propped herself up on her arm and trailed her fingers over his chest again. "I think you're up to the task. So to speak."

He was surprised to find his body reacting to her touch. "Fine," he said softly, pressing his lips to the damp, delicate skin of her throat. "We'll use them all, or die trying."

Cody giggled. "I can't think of a better way to go."

* * * *

They were married two months later on the banks of Swift Creek. White balloons and streamers adorned Cody's backyard. The groom wore an Armani tux, and the bride wore a tea-length, lacy dress, along with a white straw hat with a delicate veil.

In short, Kip thought, their real wedding looked very much like their

fake one. The only difference was that Rocky lay next to Cody throughout the ceremony, a spray of white orchids affixed to his collar. And this time they were surrounded by people who loved them...Tiffani Harshaw and her husband and daughter, Chrissa (who was furtively flipping through a biology textbook as she prepared for her next big exam), Serena Robinson, Kip's mother and father, and even Cody's father, who was blinking very hard and doing his best, in a gruff voice that all but drowned out the minister, to blame it on allergies.

At last the minister said, "You may kiss the bride," and Kip bent down and pressed his lips against Cody's. The assembled crowd began to applaud.

Apparently laboring under the misconception that the applause was for him, Rocky bounded to his feet, began a cheerful frenzy of barking, and jumped up, bracing his muddy feet against Kip's Armani jacket. Kip managed not to yell and jump away, and he was even able to put a hand on the dog's square head.

Knowing that marrying Cody meant he had to learn to tolerate Rocky, he'd spent the last two months getting to know Rocky and talking to a therapist about his irrational fear of dogs. He was slowly growing able to be in a room with the animal, and even developing a bit of affection for the big slobbering brute. Rocky was about as dangerous as a bowl of tapioca pudding...and every bit as bright, he thought, as the dog dropped back onto all fours and darted off through the crowd, inadvertently knocking the photographer to the ground.

"Sorry," Kip said, leaning over, extending a hand, and hauling the man to his feet. "Cody's dog tends to have that effect on people." He looked back over his shoulder and grinned at his wife, gloriously radiant in her romantic, lacy dress. "And for that matter...so does Cody."

Epilogue

Kip sat on the couch, his seven-month-old daughter sitting on his lap, as the cheerful music that heralded the beginning of “Book Time” came on the TV. His daughter, Davie, wiggled with excitement and cooed happily.

“She really likes your new show,” Cody said, leaning over his shoulder and kissing his cheek. She’d named their daughter after her dad, which had gone a long way toward cementing the improvements in their relationship. Dave Lang was still a pain in the ass, as far as Kip was concerned...but he was, as Cody had once pointed out, her only father, and the two of them were finally learning to get along without wanting to kill each other.

“She’s not the only one,” Kip said with real pride. “It’s doing great in the ratings. Kids seem to love it.”

“Kids love *you*. Who’d have thought a big macho guy like you would go over so well with preschoolers?”

Kip flashed his most modest grin. “I think the kids love Tiffani more than me. She has a real talent for reading with expression. She could make a grocery list sound exciting.”

After they’d married, Kip had started working at Cody’s store, and the more he sold books to little kids and saw their eyes light up, the more he felt that this was something worthwhile. He’d approached his agent about producing a show that promoted reading, using books that Cody and Tiffani, with their knowledge of children’s literature, would suggest. Serena had called back the same day to say that a prominent children’s cable network was interested...but only if Kip hosted it. Tiffani had gradually evolved from a consultant to a frequent guest star (clad in a furry, striped costume as Zelda the Zebra). The shooting schedule was light, and Kip was able to be

home most of the time. And nowadays when he was mobbed, it was usually by little kids, which he didn't mind in the least.

"Don't you miss saving the universe every week?" Cody said, coming around and sitting down next to him and Davie. The baby gurgled, and Cody picked her up and kissed her round little belly, causing a stream of happy giggles to emerge.

Kip shrugged. "There's still talk of a *Farthest Space* movie in a year or two, so maybe I'll get to save the universe again someday. But right now...." He put his arm around his girls and grinned at them.

"Right now," he said softly, "the universe is perfect just the way it is."

The End

An excerpt from
Never Love a Stranger
A futuristic romance by Ellen Fisher
Coming from NCP in August, 2004

At 6:28 Friday evening, entirely unaware that her life was about to be completely, irrevocably changed, Annie Simpson switched off the local news and wandered out to her kitchen to microwave some leftover spaghetti.

There was a naked man sitting on her kitchen table.

Annie let out a strangled shriek and jumped backward as the man rose to his feet. She noticed vaguely that he was a startlingly gorgeous specimen of manhood-- easily six and a half feet tall, blond and blue-eyed, with a powerful, sculpted musculature like none she had ever seen before in her life. And he was *entirely* naked.

Unable to help herself, she regarded the more intimate portion of his anatomy and was shocked. Long years ago, at seventeen, she had furtively flipped through a copy of *Playgirl* her girlfriends had brought to school and been suitably impressed.

But *Playgirl* had not featured a single man who approached this man's magnificence.

The man took a step toward her. Snapping out of her momentary distraction, she made a leap for the knife block on the counter. Snatching up the largest and most wicked-looking knife, she brandished it at him. "Don't come any closer or I'll scream," she warned him.

The man regarded her through calm blue eyes. He seemed unimpressed by the huge knife, despite the fact that some of his best attributes were decidedly lacking in protection. "I will not hurt you," he said.

His voice was as gorgeous as the rest of him--deep and gentle and mellow. Aware that she should not be mooning over a clearly deranged stranger, Annie firmly squelched her automatic reaction to the seductive depths of his voice.

"Of course not," she agreed with heavy sarcasm. "You were sitting naked as the day you were born on my kitchen table, but you don't intend to hurt me. What the hell *do* you want from me? Dinner?"

To her shock, he nodded. "Dinner would be appreciated, thank you."

Now I know he's crazy, she thought numbly. She waved the knife at him again. "Get the hell out of my house or I'll use this thing, damn it."

"I do not intend to hurt you," he repeated, "but I cannot leave. As you can see, I have no clothes."

"Yeah, I noticed that."

"It would be unwise of me to leave while unclothed."

"You'd probably be arrested for indecent exposure," she agreed.

"And wouldn't that be a pity?"

"I need clothing."

She was beginning to suspect he was not really dangerous. The simplicity of his answers was disarming. There was something almost childlike about him, despite his enormous size and obvious maturity. Just some poor lunatic escaped from a hospital, she thought with a pang of pity.

"Why don't you put on the clothes you had on?" she suggested.

"I have no clothing."

Her moment of pity faded, and she began to grow irritated. He was concerned about being picked up by the cops for indecent exposure now, but apparently that hadn't worried him when he broke into her house. She narrowed her eyes at him, revising her earlier opinion. Maybe he wasn't so harmless after all. Unless he had been wandering around the suburbs stark naked, he must have had clothes on when he came in, and the fact that he had taken them off meant he had plans for her. Plans she had no intention of facilitating by putting down her butcher knife.

"If you don't get the hell out right now," she said through her teeth, "I am going to call the cops."

He gave her a blank stare. "Cops?"

"The *police*, damn it!"

He shook his head, almost sorrowfully. "I'm sorry," he said with what appeared to be real regret, "but I really can't permit that."

He stepped toward her. Automatically, she swung the knife toward him in a savage arc. She had never wielded a knife in this fashion before--

the only thing she'd ever knifed was the Thanksgiving turkey--but she was damned if she was going to let herself be raped.

Unfortunately, he was quicker. He caught her wrist and twisted it, just hard enough to compel her to drop the knife. It clattered to the floor, leaving her defenseless.

She cursed and drove her knee into his crotch.

Pain radiated out from her knee and shot up her leg, and she gasped. He, on the other hand, did not seem in the least affected. She realized with annoyance that she must have missed her target, striking him in his very muscular thigh instead of the more vulnerable area she had aimed for. Her kneecap felt bruised.

He caught her other arm and held it, pinning her. She looked up into his face, seeing the high cheekbones, the thin, straight nose, and the startling blue eyes, framed by a shoulder-length mane of golden hair that glistened like a newly minted Sacagawea dollar. He was undeniably beautiful.

Just my luck, she thought grimly. *I find the most gorgeous man I've ever seen in my life, and he's a psychopath.*

"I think you have gotten the wrong impression," he said mildly.

His baritone voice flowed across her nerves like dark honey, soothing her despite herself. He did not seem insane, but she could think of no sensible reason why a sane man should be lurking naked in her kitchen. He *had* to be crazy, no matter how sanely he behaved. She decided to play along, to play for time, until she saw an opportunity for escape.

"What do you want?" she whispered.

"I need help," he said. "Clothing, to be precise."

"I can get you clothing," she offered hastily. Men's clothing, untouched since Steve died, still hung in the closets upstairs, but Steve had been more than half a foot shorter than this man. "I can purchase it for you."

He cocked his head quizzically, obviously suspicious of her sudden capitulation. "I could not repay you. I have no money."

Naturally, she thought wryly. *The most gorgeous man I've ever met is not only a psychopath, he's a broke psychopath.* "Yeah, I don't know where you'd be keeping a wallet."

He ignored her desperate attempt at levity, or perhaps he simply failed to notice it. "I need clothing that will permit me to blend into your society," he said gravely.

"My society?"

"I am unfamiliar with your world."

It was all Annie could do not to roll her eyes. Just what she needed to wind up the workweek, to be trapped alone with a science fiction freak who'd seen one too many episodes of *Star Trek*. Or maybe he was a *Mork and Mindy* fan. He certainly had Robin Williams' clueless alien routine down pat.

"If you'll let me go," she said, trying not to sound too eager, "I'll drive right over to the mall and get you some clothes. Jeans and a T-shirt, all right, or do you need a tux?"

"I require nothing elaborate."

"Marvelous. Jeans and a T-shirt, then. Levis okay with you?"

He hesitated, looking oddly blank. She would have sworn he'd never heard the term "Levis" before. "I will defer to your judgment."

"Great. Let me go."

He released her arms, and she backed cautiously away. She didn't dare make a dive for the fallen knife--he was too quick, she'd never reach it in time. She could try to make it up the stairs, lock herself in the bedroom, and call the cops, but she was pretty sure that a man with such incredibly long legs could outrun her. And given his bulging muscles, he certainly wouldn't have any difficulty in breaking down the door.

Getting him to let her outside the house was definitely her best option.

"I'll be back in half an hour," she said brightly, backing toward the front door.

"Before you go--"

She cursed inwardly. Damn it, she should have known he wouldn't let her escape so easily.

"Might I have some food?"

"Sure," she said, infinitely relieved. "Help yourself. There's some stuff in the fridge."

"Fridge?"

"The refrigerator," she said. The unrelenting tension of the situation made her more of a smart-ass than usual. "Or don't they have those on Vulcan?"

When he still looked blank, she waved a hand at it. "The big white thing."

"Oh," he said. While she watched, he stepped toward it, contemplated it thoughtfully, then placed his hand on the handle. And pushed.

That, more than anything, convinced her that his behavior was no act. Naked or not, he had a serious mental problem. There was something very wrong with the guy. Everyone in America knew how to open a refrigerator, for God's sake. She hesitated in her stealthy retreat, pushing aside her desperate desire to escape in her concern for this man.

"Have you been in some sort of accident?" she asked.

He looked at her and offered a slight smile. "You could say that." He tried to pull the handle, obviously as an experiment, and nodded with satisfaction when the door opened.

"You've lost your memory, haven't you?"

"My memory?" He bent and peered inside the refrigerator.

"Yes. You have amnesia. That's why you're acting so strangely."

"Not precisely," he said, pulling out a plastic container that held the long-dead remains of some anonymous casserole.

"Don't eat that," she said hastily. "It's been in there for weeks."

He blinked at the container and set it on the counter, then pulled out another bowl full of something that had been canned fruit in a former life.

"I wouldn't eat that, either. There's mold growing on it."

He frowned. "Is all your food in various stages of decomposition?"

"Yeah, a lot of it. I never clean out my fridge, okay?" She stepped forward, picked out the remains of yesterday's spaghetti dinner, and handed it to him. "Here. This won't give you food poisoning. I was going to have it, but I'll just have a sandwich instead. No big deal."

He looked at her oddly. "You would give your dinner to a stranger?"

Annie shrugged. "It's just spaghetti. Anyway--" She gave him a strained smile. "You've obviously got problems. Am I right? Amnesia? You can't remember who you are, can you? Are you lost?"

He opened the container and sniffed at it cautiously. "Actually," he said, "I remember perfectly well who I am and where I'm from."

"Oh, really. Please enlighten me, then. Who the hell are you?"

"My name is James." He stuck a finger into the spaghetti sauce and tasted it, then looked down at her. "I'm from the future."