

NEVER A BRIDESMAID

by

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to my dear friends, Ellen, Delmar, Mardell, and Tyson. Thank you so much for allowing my character to enter your lives as well as your home. Without all your help this book wouldn't have come to life so easily.

Chapter 1

Kelly sat at the table and watched as her sisters Kim and Kate danced the night away. She knew she should be happy for her sister, Kim. This was her special day, but inside, Kelly cried bitterly for herself. She couldn't stop the memories of the past few weeks.

When Kim first came to Kelly's apartment to ask for money to help finance her wedding, Kelly had been flattered. It didn't take her long to find her checkbook and write her sister a check for two grand. As she signed her name, she dreamed of being Kim's maid of honor.

"Who are you having stand up for you?" Kelly remembered asking.

"Kate is going to be my matron of honor and my friends Sue and Jean will be the bridesmaids. I want this wedding to be really special. I know that Mom and Dad didn't approve of me getting married the first time and they were right. Patrick was a jerk and I was unhappy from day one. Of course, that really nixed them helping me out for this wedding. We're doing everything on a shoestring, but we want it to be right. With the wedding in the park and the reception at the legion hall, we're really saving a lot. Oh, by the way, would you make the cake and cater the dinner?"

That's all I'm good for, Kelly silently lamented.

As it usually was at family gatherings, the food was excellent and the buffet table looked as inviting as the ones they served at any of the fancy restaurants in town.

“Everyone knows, if you want good food, just ask the fat woman to fix it,” she heard someone say. “That Kelly can certainly cook.”

Kelly wanted to cry. She knew if she made her exit now, no one would miss her until it was time to clean up. Since they had the hall rented until tomorrow morning, she would be expected to come back early to take care of it. For tonight, she’d had enough of everything. She’d set up the buffet table and put the finishing touches on the wedding cake, stayed for dinner and watched the toast, cake cutting and grand march. It was time to get out of here before she burst into tears and embarrassed herself.

No one stopped her as she left the hall. In the parking lot, she could hear the giggles of the young girls who had slipped away to the privacy of the darkness to engage in romantic interludes.

Just once, I'd like a romantic interlude but considering my size, who would want one with me? I'll just have to be content to help my sisters finance their weddings and dream of looking like a fairy princess rather than a fat frump.

Once she was back at her apartment, she signed on to her computer and checked her e-mails. When she finished, she went to the Big Beautiful People web site and straight into the chat room. Her usual Saturday night pastime was to chat with her cyber friends. Here, it didn’t matter what a person looked like. Everyone who visited the site was big like her. They were more concerned with her ideas and opinions than her appearance.

“You’re late tonight, Kelly,” the moderator typed. “I’m glad you made it. Where have you been?”

“My sister got married today. I prepared the food for the wedding.”

“What are you doing home so early?” JK typed. “Doesn’t the wedding party stay for the whole thing?”

Kelly knew JK came from California and was always present at the Saturday night chats. It was evident his existence resembled hers in many aspects.

“The wedding party does, but I’m not part of it. I couldn’t even buy a decent dress for the occasion. Everything I tried on looked like it was styled for my grandmother. I opted for a pair of black slacks and an oversized white top.”

“Why did you have to make the food for the wedding?” Marie, a girl from Georgia asked.

“It’s her second marriage and Mom and Dad wouldn’t pop for anything. As usual, I was asked to cater the thing, pro bono of course. Add to that the two grand I gave Kim for the rest of the wedding, and this was a very expensive evening for me. At least I had it to give her.”

“Then why weren’t you a bridesmaid?” Birdie from Arizona asked.

“Kim didn’t ask me. I’m sure it’s because of my size. My sister Kate is a tiny little thing and so are the other two girls who were in the wedding. Someone who looks like me would have made everything look lopsided. I can understand why she didn’t want me. It just hurts never to be considered good enough to be a bridesmaid.”

“My boyfriend just proposed,” Birdie typed. *“We’re getting married in June. I’d be honored if you could come to Phoenix to be my bridesmaid. I realize we hardly know each other, but I’m an only child and I don’t have many close friends. Mom suggested I ask my cousin, Lilly, but I don’t even like the girl. Would you consider it?”*

Never A Bridesmaid

Kelly's mind spun. *Why shouldn't I do something for myself? School will be out the first of June and I'll have the whole summer. Rather than babysitting, I'll take that trip I've been promising myself for so long.*

Chapter 2

“You’re going to what!” Kate exclaimed as they were eating lunch prior to Kim and Doug opening their wedding presents.

“I’m going to take a vacation this summer. I’ve been invited to be in a wedding in Arizona in June and then I’m going to see all of the places I’ve only read about in books.”

“But what about me? I was planning on you babysitting my kids this summer.”

“You’ll have to find someone else. I’ve been teaching for ten years and I’ve never taken a vacation. I think it’s about time.”

“What about your apartment?” her mother asked.

“I’ll sublet it for the summer. There are always college kids looking for a place while they go to summer school. I plan to contact the student housing authority in the morning. They should be able to help me.”

“Just who would ask *you* to be in their wedding?” Kim asked.

“Her chat name is Birdie, but her real name is Bernadette Andrews. She lives in Phoenix.”

“Is this someone you met on the Internet?” her father questioned.

“We’ve been in the same chat room for three years. I know her quite well.”

“Does she know what you look like?”

“We’ve all posted our pictures. It doesn’t matter what you think, I’m going to do something for myself this summer.”

Although her family asked more questions, bringing up everything from concern for her driving to Phoenix and who knew where else alone, Kelly stayed firm in her decision.

When everyone got up to go into the living room to watch the presents being opened, Kelly stayed behind. Even with using paper plates, there was food to be put away before it had a chance to spoil. It gave her an excuse to get out of watching everyone ooh and ah over the wedding gifts. They were all things she’d had to buy for herself when she moved to her apartment in the city. No one thought to help her out with fluffy towels, small appliances, or any of the other things people needed to set up housekeeping.

While her sisters had only the best one could buy, Kelly had made do with trips to *Goodwill*, the *Salvation Army* and whatever sales she could hit on her limited budget. Only now, ten years later, she was finally able to replace her things as they wore out with those of a much better quality.

“What are you doing out here all alone, dear?”

Kelly turned at the sound of Doug’s mother’s voice. “I was just cleaning up. That way Mom won’t have so much to do later.”

“You really should be in the living room with everyone else.”

“I’m more comfortable out here, really I am.”

“I know how comfortable you are in the kitchen. That dinner last night was excellent. I think you missed your calling. You should have been a chef. If I’m not being too nosey, how much did you charge the kids for last night? If it was reasonable enough, I’ll keep you in mind. I have several parties every year but none of the people I use can compare to you.”

“I didn’t charge them anything. I figured that would be my wedding present to them.”

“You must be a very generous person to cook all of the food they bought for nothing.”

Common sense told Kelly to just allow this woman to assume Kim and Doug had bought the food. Unfortunately, after last night and the talking to she’d received from her cyber friends, common sense no longer ruled.

“Just to set the record straight, Mrs. Walters, I bought the food. I also gave Kim two thousand dollars to pay for the wedding.”

“But why?”

“Because I’m a soft touch and I want my sisters to have things I’ll never be able to enjoy. This wedding was very important to Kim. She wanted everything to be perfect and she knew Mom and Dad wouldn’t help her pay for a second wedding.”

Mrs. Walters looked at Kelly as though she had grown two heads. Without saying anything more, she left the kitchen.

By the time Kelly dried the last dish, her mother and sisters came into the kitchen. “We wondered what happened to you,” her mother declared. “I thought we may have hurt your feelings at dinner and you left.”

Kelly held her tongue. She knew her mother was only making a production with her false concern. Everyone

knew where Kelly spent the time reserved for opening gifts. It was expected, just like last night's dinner had been expected.

"I didn't see a present from you," Kate said, as though she enjoyed rubbing salt into the wound. "What's wrong, couldn't you afford to give Kim and Doug a present, or didn't you care what it looked like when she didn't get anything from you?"

"Kelly gave me my present early," Kim said, before Kelly could blow off any steam.

"Well, what was it?"

Kate's snooty attitude was almost more that Kelly could stand. "If you must know, it was the dinner last night."

"Well, that's not much of a present. What good will that do her when she moves into her new apartment? You certainly can't use food that people have already eaten. If you ask me, you owe her a gift and a nice expensive one at that. We all know you have more money than you'll ever need, you're just being stingy."

"No, she's not," Kim said, coming to Kelly's defense. "If we'd had to pay a caterer, it would have cost us an arm and a leg. Kelly's gift is the best thing she could have given us."

Kim's statement made Kelly glad she'd helped her sister out. Thank goodness this would be the last wedding for the family. Everyone was happily married and completely settled now. No one else would be asking her to pay for their wedding and if they did, she would tell them the bank was closed.

"I'd like to stay and talk, but I have a lesson plan to finish for tomorrow. With having Friday off to prepare the food, I have to play catch-up. I'm not looking forward to

facing those kids tomorrow morning after they've had a substitute teacher."

Kelly made a big production of kissing her mother's cheek, then embracing Kim. With bullheaded purpose, she left the kitchen without so much as one word directed at Kate.

"Well, I never," Kate said loud enough for Kelly to hear. "She didn't even say good-bye to me. I never thought she'd be so rude."

I wasn't the one who was rude. I never considered letting Mom and Dad know who paid for that dinner last night, but I guess it's out of the bag now.

"Wait a minute, Kelly."

She turned to face her father.

"Just how much did last night cost you?"

"It doesn't matter, Dad. I had the money and I was glad to help her out. Thank goodness that's the last wedding this family will be having until its time for the grandkids to start getting married. By then, I may not be able to help out like I did this time."

"Maybe it is a good thing you're taking that trip this summer. You've helped everyone else out. You deserve a vacation."

Her father's words meant more than any amount of money he could have ever reimbursed her.

"Just how much did your sister hit you up for?"

"It doesn't matter, Daddy. I had it to give to her, but that's it. From now on, my money is for me. I was saving for a down payment for a house, but I think that will have to wait. I need to get away more than I need to own a home. That will come, in time. For now, the bank is closed to anyone but me."

“I really want to know. How much did you spend? Somehow, I’ll make certain you’re reimbursed.”

“It comes to about twenty-five hundred. I gave her two thousand and spent about five hundred on the food.”

“You can add another thousand to that for the time you spent and that still wouldn’t be anywhere near what a caterer would have charged them for a meal like that.”

“I wish you wouldn’t do anything to cause hard feelings. I know you and Mom can’t afford it.”

“Maybe not, but Doug’s folks can. They were appalled to think you did all that work for nothing. You should have your money back before you leave this summer. Just don’t let this weigh so heavily on your mind that you forget to come home in the fall.”

Kelly hugged her dad. He always knew the right things to say to make her feel better.

* * * *

The phone was ringing when Kelly entered her apartment. She quickly checked the caller ID before answering. She knew she would ignore the call and let the machine pick up if it came from anyone in her family. The ID read Jason Andrews with an area code she didn’t recognize.

“Hello,” she said, picking up the phone.

“Is this Kelly?” the woman on the other end asked.

“Yes, this is Kelly.”

“Good. I took a chance when the only listing I could find on 411.com was for a K. Masters. This is Birdie. Have you come to a decision about coming out for the wedding and being my maid of honor?”

“I was going to e-mail you tonight for the specifics. I’m going to take the entire summer off to tour the West and visit all the places I’ve always wanted to see.”

“Great! The wedding is set for the last Saturday in June.”

“What do you have picked out for dresses?”

“Absolutely nothing. I’m leaving that decision up to you. Just let me know what color you choose so Mom can coordinate the decorations and the cake. I only plan on one attendant. Chuck is only having JK stand up for him.”

“Do you mean Chuck and JK from the chat room?”

“The same. I thought you knew Chuck and I had been dating.”

“Somehow, I missed that. I thought Chuck lived in Culver City.”

“He did, but six months ago, his company transferred him here. We got together and as they say, the rest is history. Getting back to the dress, make it something you can wear again. I absolutely detest weddings where the bridesmaids wear those god-awful dresses they spend an arm and a leg for and the darn thing just sits in the closet gathering dust.”

“Anything?” Kelly was begging to envision herself in the pale peach lace dress she’d seen at the Fashions Plus store in the mall. She’d thought about it for Kim’s wedding and dismissed the idea. There was no way she could have justified spending almost two hundred dollars for the dress when the wedding had already cost her well in excess of twenty-five hundred dollars..

“I take it you have something special in mind.”

“I saw it when I was looking for a dress for Kim’s wedding. Of course, I couldn’t have ever spent that amount of money for a dress after what I spent on the food.”

“So what makes the dress less expensive today?”

“At the luncheon for Kim and Doug to open their presents, I found out that Kim’s mother-in-law is planning

to reimburse me and may even hire me to cater her parties.”

“So, what does the dress look like?”

“It’s a pale peach lace dress with a deep shade of peach for the silky underlay. When I first saw it, I knew it would be perfect for a member of the wedding party, but not the caterer.”

“Oh, I’m getting goose bumps. Peach is the color my mom said she wanted my cousin to wear. When I told her you were going to be my maid of honor, she was afraid you wouldn’t like the color, or maybe it wouldn’t be flattering to you. She’ll be so excited. I think she has some big plans about how she wants to decorate the hall as well as the cake.”

They talked for several more minutes making excited plans. When at last they hung up, Kelly realized she had promised to send a picture of herself in the dress to Birdie as soon as she went to the mall.

On an impulse, Kelly picked up the receiver and placed a call to Jean Thompson, her best friend from school.

“What are you doing tomorrow night after school, Jean?”

There was a brief pause and Kelly knew Jean’s answer would be that she was going to be busy. Jean always seemed to have plenty to do after she left work. Catching her on short notice was asking for conflicts with her friend’s schedule.

“Not a thing that I can think of, what’s up?”

Kelly went on to tell her friend about the wedding she had been invited to be in, as well as her quest to find the perfect dress.

“That sounds like a ball. Do I get to take a picture of you in it for your friend?”

“I was hoping you would. I got a new digital camera for Christmas but I haven’t had much to practice on. I did get some pictures of the wedding. I’ll have to get them downloaded and saved to my computer.”

“Let’s plan on going out to dinner afterwards and then I can help you do the download. Once you get the knack of it, you’ll have a ball. Besides, I want to hear all about this vacation of yours. We’ll definitely have to update your summer wardrobe. There’s no telling what handsome men you might meet while you’re gone. You’ll want to look your best.”

Once Kelly hung up the phone, she couldn’t stop smiling. There was no telling whom she would meet. It was a given that she would get to know Chuck Martin, but JK would also be there. From the information he’d posted on the site, she judged him to be about her age. She also knew he was a computer analyst with a large company. As such, he was probably quite shy. Could she bring him out of his shell? Would he be as interesting in person as he was on-line?

* * * *

Kelly couldn’t help but daydream all day at school. She knew the kids were getting away with murder, but she didn’t care. Thoughts of the peach lace dress filled her mind, as well as those of shopping for a new summer wardrobe. It would cost her a fortune, but she didn’t care.

On her lunch hour, she had called the head of the housing department at the university and listed her apartment for the summer. It pleased her to think that whoever rented her apartment would be paying the three months rent up front. Since the rent covered the cost of utilities, she would have nothing to worry about. Considering her apartment was located close to public

transportation and not that far from the University of Wisconsin campus, there would be no problem in getting it rented for the summer.

At last the bell rang signaling the end of the school day. By the time she got to her car, Jean was waiting for her to arrive.

“I’m so excited about this, I’m treating you to dinner tonight at Fuddruckers. Have you been there yet?”

Kelly shook her head. “I’ve heard about it, but haven’t had the opportunity to go. Have you eaten there?”

“Last weekend, Jack took me there to butter me up. He’s out of town all week on business, so helping you is really doing me a big favor. I even left my car at home and took the bus to work today.”

Kelly could feel her own excitement increasing. The trip to the mall took less than fifteen minutes, but finding a parking place was almost impossible. It wasn’t until Kelly remembered the weeklong sidewalk sale that started on the previous Friday evening that they realized why. Most shoppers were content to let the early bird bargain hunters’ crowd in and came out during the week, instead of on the weekend when things were so hectic. Added to that was the new blockbuster movie that had just opened and the pub located within the mall.

Fashions Plus seemed to blossom with color. The peach lace dress was displayed on the mannequin in the window while bright colored summer cottons lined every rack and all the shelf space built into the wall.

Jean seemed to be in her glory as she chose several pair of capris, as well as brightly colored tops to go with them. From there, she made her way to the table with summer shorts, the rack of sundresses and lastly, to the swimsuits.

By the time the clerk totaled the bill, Kelly had maxed out her store credit card and put more purchases on her VISA.

From Fashions Plus, they went to the shoe store and lastly, to the luggage shop. “You do realize that you’ve put me in hock for the rest of my life paying for this?”

“Why do you think I offered to pay for dinner? Besides, didn’t you say that your sister’s in-laws offered to pay you back for the money you spent on the wedding? That should easily cover what you spent tonight. Before you leave, I’m going to treat you to a makeover at my salon. You’re going to be the most beautiful maid of honor that Phoenix has ever seen. It’s high time you changed your hairstyle, to say nothing of a change in your make-up. Trust me, my sister, Alison, works there and she’s the best. Besides she owes me big time.”

Kelly laughed at her friend’s enthusiasm. It certainly was contagious. As they stood in line at Fuddrucker’s, Kelly thought of the clothes that were in the bags in the trunk of her car. She would wear none of them until she left on her trip. That was when the new Kelly would emerge from her shell and go from ugly caterpillar to beautiful butterfly.

Once they were back at her apartment, Kelly watched as Jean walked her through the steps to download the pictures from her camera. Images from Kim’s wedding and reception came to life on the screen. They brought back memories of all the hard work Kelly had put in to get everything ready. Even the picture of Kelly with her family brought tears to her eyes. It was evident that she was unhappy and she certainly looked out of place with her slender sisters in their form-fitting dresses.

The pictures that followed were taken at the dress shop. Kelly could hardly believe the difference in her appearance. The peach lace dress seemed to have been

Never A Bridesmaid

made especially for her. For the first time in her life, seeing a picture of herself didn't embarrass her.

"I'm almost beautiful," she gasped.

"Wait until my sister, Alison, gets done with you. You'll outshine the bride at that wedding. I've said it before, if you used a little make-up, you'd see a world of difference."

Chapter 3

The reflection that looked back at Kelly from her rearview mirror was about as alien as anything she'd ever seen. Jean had been right. The make-up softened her features and hid many of her blemishes. The most dramatic change was in her hair. The color was about two shades lighter than normal with streaks of highlights that brought the shorter style alive.

The congestion of city traffic soon gave way to the countryside surrounding the Interstate. It didn't take long before she was fumbling for change for the first tollbooth after crossing into Illinois. The last Rockford exit was where Highway 39 turned off and she was able to head south toward her first stop, the Wildlife Prairie Park just outside of Peoria, Illinois.

Over the years, she had heard about the park from various friends who found the place to be very relaxing. With it being a weekday, she'd had no problem in securing reservations to spend the night in one of the cabooses that the property offered.

On her way to the park, she noticed a small café where she could go for supper. She'd been told that breakfast and lunch could be purchased at the snack shop, but by suppertime, the facility would be closed.

As she drove through the main gate, a serenity she hadn't experienced in a long time set in. The young lady at the admission gate ran her credit card and gave her keys to the caboose, along with a map of the entire park.

After getting settled in, she drove back up to the main area to park her car. After watching the buffalo as well as the wolves, she started down the road that led to the aviary. Two hours later, awed by the many animals she had seen, Kelly made her way back to the snack shop. Intrigued by the buffalo that grazed just outside the building, she took her food out to the open-air tables where she could watch the great beasts as well as the elk, deer and geese that shared the enclosure with them.

It didn't take long for her overactive imagination to envision a great herd of buffalo thundering across the prairie as they returned to their summer grazing grounds and prepared to bring life to the people who inhabited the area before modern society encroached upon them.

For the first time in more years than she cared to think about, she was able to listen to the songs of the birds and enjoy the beauty of nature.

"May I join you?"

Kelly looked up at the sound of the man's voice. "Of course you can."

"Is this your first time at the park?" the man asked as he seated himself next to her on the bench.

"As a matter of fact, it is. This place is beautiful."

"I think so. I come here at least once or twice a week now that I'm retired. My wife is in the snack shop getting us some sandwiches. I'm Pete and my wife is Mary."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Pete. My name is Kelly. Where are you retired from?"

“I taught school in town for thirty-five years. My subject was American History and my wife taught third grade. What do you do when you’re not exploring the park?”

“I teach fifth grade in Wisconsin. This is the first time I’ve taken a vacation. I’m taking the entire summer to explore the west. This is my first stop.”

Kelly wondered why she had said so much to this man. Within minutes, his wife joined them. To Kelly’s surprise, she felt more comfortable with these strangers than she did with her own family.

With lunch finished, Pete and Mary gave her a guided tour of the park, pointing out much more than she could ever have seen on her own. She couldn’t help but smile when they insisted she go up to the train with them.

By the time they finished with the loop of the park, it was almost closing time. Kelly certainly didn’t want the day to end. It pleased her when Pete suggested she follow them out of the park to the Jubilee Café.

“You remind us so much of our daughter, Nancy,” Mary said. “She lives out in California now so we don’t get to see her often. I would imagine your folks will really miss you this summer.”

They’ll miss my money, to say nothing of my cooking. “My sisters live close by and they both have kids. I doubt Mom and Dad will even know I’m gone.”

“Don’t underestimate your parents,” Pete commented. “We didn’t see Nancy as much as we would have liked when we were working, but we certainly missed her when she got married and moved away.”

“I doubt that my parents will ever have to contend with me moving away. I’ve been out of school for over ten years

now and there's no wedding in my future. I'm content to let my sisters take the walk down the aisle."

Pete shook his head, then held open the car door for her. "A pretty girl like you should have lots of boys chasing her. I think you're telling us a little fib."

"No fib, Pete. Look at me. I'm no one's dream girl. I've never even been out on a date. I'm the one in my family who is always available to baby-sit on a moment's notice. I threw everyone into a tail-spin when I decided to take this vacation."

"What kind of a schedule are you on, dear?" Mary inquired.

"I have to be in Phoenix for a wedding at the end of the month, other than that, I'm free to go where and when I want."

"Good. We'd like to show you around this part of the country. We've been planning a trip to St. Louis this month. We can go anytime, so why don't we do it now? We can hook your car behind our motorhome and take you along with us. That way, you can save money on a motel, as well as gas. It will be fun showing you the places we enjoy."

Kelly hesitated for a moment. She didn't know these people. How could she allow them to take her with them on a trip? *You don't know Birdie, not really, and yet you're traveling over seventeen hundred miles to be in her wedding. Your judgment can't be that far off. If you find you're uncomfortable once you get on the road, you can always leave. It's not like you'd be their prisoner. You'll have your own car.*

The next morning, Kelly packed up her car and drove to the café where she had gone to dinner with Pete and Mary the night before. After breakfast, Pete hitched her car to the tow bar while Mary showed Kelly around the motorhome.

The small motel on wheels had all the comforts of home. While Pete and Mary would sleep in the king-sized bed in the bedroom, Kelly knew she would be comfortable using the pullout couch in the living room. The kitchen was well equipped with a stove, gas refrigerator and even a microwave oven.

“The kitchen in my apartment isn’t this well equipped. Are you certain I’m not imposing on you?”

“Not in the least. It’ll fun to be able to show someone all the places we so enjoy. Let’s see, if I know Pete, he’ll want to show you Cahokia Mounds, the St. Louis Arch, Busch Gardens, Merrimac Caverns, and Grant’s Farm.”

“Those were all places I’d planned to visit. It will be more fun with someone who knows the area. I was dreading doing all that sightseeing alone, but I promised myself I would take lots of pictures to use in the future for my classes at school. The kids are always interested in hearing about different places. Since I’ve never traveled before, I’ve been limited to what information I can get on the Internet.”

“We’re off!” Pete declared when he entered the motorhome. “I got your car hooked up to the towbar with no problems whatsoever. Our first stop will be Cahokia.”

“Before we start,” Kelly said, “I want to pay for one third of everything. It’s only fair, since you wouldn’t be taking this trip if it weren’t for me.”

“Nonsense, dear,” Mary assured her, “we’re always looking for an excuse to hit the road. But if you insist, one third will be acceptable.”

Kelly was glad that her host and hostess did not argue about her paying her way for the trip. No matter what it came to, it would be far less than the cost of motel rooms, food and gas for her car.

With each stop, Kelly found Mary and Pete to be the perfect tour guides. They had visited each area so many times, they knew everything there was to know and suggested only the best literature for Kelly to pick up in order to have good resources for her class.

Where Pete especially shined was at the Merrimac Caverns. He delighted in telling Kelly stories of how the James Gang hid out in the caves.

“We’ve decided,” Pete said as they were eating supper on what was to be their last night. “There is one more place in the area you must see. Tomorrow, we’re taking you to Hannibal. No self-respecting teacher would miss seeing the town Mark Twain immortalized. We can leave the motorhome here and take your car, if you don’t mind, that is.”

Kelly smiled. It would be good to be able to chauffeur Pete and Mary for a change. “If you hadn’t mentioned it, I would have completely forgotten about going there.”

“That’s what we thought,” Mary said. “With tomorrow being Saturday, it’s the perfect time to go. They have a reenactment and the weather is cooperating with us. You should have a great time. Plus, I promised my granddaughter I’d get her a book the next time I went there. I could buy it anywhere, but it means more when I can tell her I got it while I was in Hannibal.”

The next morning, they left the campgrounds as soon as they ate their breakfast. With the perfect weather, they were soon in Hannibal and Kelly was completely captivated by the sights and sounds of the town that so inspired Mark Twain.

Like Mary, Kelly purchased several books, as well as postcards in the gift shops. She knew no pictures she took could rival the quality of those depicted on the postcards.

Never A Bridesmaid

With the surprise excursion finished, Kelly knew it would soon be time for her to be heading southwest toward Arizona and her original destination. Tonight, they would not be hooking her car to the towbar and tomorrow, they would each head off in a different direction.

Chapter 4

Saying good-bye to Pete and Mary had been hard, but Kelly promised to keep in touch once she got home. During the trip, they had stopped at truck stops for fuel and so they could check their e-mails. Now they had insisted that Kelly keep them informed about her trip.

At the first truck stop Kelly saw, she stopped and fueled up, then went in to send Birdie an e-mail update of her plans.

Birdie—Just left Mary and Pete. Am heading your way. Will arrive by the end of the week. Tell your mom I'll be happy to help her with the cake—Kelly

Once she hit the send button, Kelly was again on her own. She found the drive exciting, but lonely. She missed Mary's constant chatter and Pete's descriptive narration of each stop they made.

The first night on the road, Kelly checked her e-mails and found one from JK. In it, he told her how excited he was about the wedding and finally being able to meet his cyber friends in person.

She immediately sent back a reply telling him how thrilled she was to be meeting everyone as well. In her mind's eye, she could see herself walking down the aisle

with JK holding her arm. For one special day, she would feel like a fairy princess.

After sending her reply to JK, she placed a call to her parents. She'd been gone just a week and as she had promised, she would call no more often than that. She wondered if her parents were really looking out for her finances, or if they just weren't all that interested in what she was doing.

Using the calling card she had bought at the last truck stop, she dialed her parents' number. Her dad answered on the third ring.

"Where are you, honey?"

"I'm just outside Dodge City. I'll be touring there tomorrow."

"I thought you would have gotten further than that."

Kelly smiled, remembering the time she spent with Pete and Mary. "I met some really nice people at the Wildlife Prairie Park and they decided I needed someone to chaperone me. It was nice to have them with me. They knew the area so well, it was like having my own personal tour guide."

"I'm glad you met nice people, but you should be careful of going off with strangers."

"I'm not a little girl anymore, Daddy. Besides, who would kidnap someone who looks like me?" She knew shouldn't turn her father's words against him, but she couldn't help it.

"You'll always be my little girl, and you know it. Just be careful and have a good time."

"I will. I'll call you when I get to Phoenix."

Before she could say good-bye, Kelly heard the click on the other end. It didn't matter, since now her excited e-mails to Pete and Mary generated the same kind of

excitement in return. She had found a surrogate set of parents who were more interested in her than in the way she looked.

* * * *

With taking her time, the remainder of the trip to Phoenix took the better part of a week. Whenever Kelly saw something that caught her eye, she stopped to investigate the obvious tourist traps, as well as places that were off the beaten path. She found several small towns that were filled with history and lovely local shops.

It was a little over a week before the wedding when she finally pulled into Birdie's driveway. It was evident the entire family had been waiting for her arrival as Birdie and her parents rushed out to meet her.

Kelly couldn't help but smile when she saw them. Birdie looked exactly like the picture that had been posted on the website. To Kelly's delight, Mr. and Mrs. Andrews were built exactly like their daughter. None of them were any taller than five foot four, making Kelly feel like a virtual giant towering over them by a good five to seven inches, depending on which member of the family she stood beside.

"I've been worried about you ever since you left Wisconsin," Mrs. Andrews declared as she embraced Kelly like a long-lost daughter.

"I've been doing all the things I've wanted to do since I was a little girl. It was fun. I was so happy to find that most of the truck stops had computers so I could keep up on my e-mails. I did miss the Saturday night chat, though."

"Everyone kept asking when you'd be back on," Birdie said. "This week's chat should be a real ball. Chuck and JK are coming over tomorrow night so we can all be on at the same time. They're bringing their laptops."

"JK is here already? Doesn't he have to work?"

“He works for the same company as Chuck, so he just asked for an assignment in Phoenix for the next two weeks. He got in this morning.”

At the mention of JK, Kelly got a funny feeling in the pit of her stomach. Although she had known him through the website and the chat room for several months, he was the one member of the group who had not yet put up a picture. Whenever he was questioned about it, he said he didn't allow pictures to be taken.

“Are you all right?”

“Sure. I was just thinking about JK. Want to give me any idea of what he looks like?”

“Not on your life. You'll meet him tonight. Chuck and I are taking you guys out to acquaint you with Phoenix.”

Kelly began to worry more about tonight than she had anything in her entire life. What if he turned out to be a real troll, or worse yet, a real hunk who was completely turned off when he saw her?

Around her, Birdie and her parents plied her with questions about the trip as well as life in Wisconsin. Although Kelly answered each question politely, she couldn't help but dwell on the man she would be meeting in a matter of hours.

During the entire trip, she had daydreamed of having a summer's romance with someone she met along the way. Now with JK in the same city and set to be her dinner companion, she was having second thoughts. What if he rejected her the way her family had been doing all her life? Could she be content to go home knowing even someone she considered a friend had rejected her?

* * * *

“This dress will be perfect for tonight,” Birdie declared as she helped Kelly to unpack.

Kelly looked at the black sundress with the white piping around the neckline. She had bought it because she liked the black and white print jacket that went with it.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. You’ll be a knockout and really make a great impression on JK.”

“I’m not so sure I want to make an impression on him. I know him and he knows me. What if he hates me and doesn’t want to hurt my feelings?”

“Like that’s going to happen. Now we have to hurry and get changed. The guys are picking us up in less than an hour.”

Kelly took special care with her hair and her make-up. Regardless of what happened, she wanted to look her best. She was certainly glad that Jean had insisted on her learning the right way to apply make-up and how to handle a curling brush as well as a curling iron.

As an accent to the stark black and white of her dress, she added a red necklace with matching earrings and a chunky red bracelet. She finished the look with a pair of red sandals.

As soon as she entered the living room, she was greeted by a low wolf whistle. She turned to see Birdie’s dad standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room.

“You are so lucky to have your height. You can certainly wear clothes well. Having always been short, I envy anyone who is tall.”

“Jason is right,” Birdie’s mother said, putting her arms around her husband. “I can hardly wait to take you shopping next week.”

“Shopping?” Kelly echoed.

“Didn’t Birdie tell you? We’re so thrilled to have you here I’ve planned a shopping trip. I know this great store and they’re going to fall in love with you. The manager is a good friend of mine and when I told her you were coming, she asked me if I thought you would like to be in her fashion show. I told her she’d have to ask you.”

“Fashion show?”

“She puts one on every other Sunday. It would mean that you would have to stay for an extra week, but I’d love to have you with us. I’m going to be lost without Birdie. JK is staying the extra week to take Chuck’s place while they’re gone on the honeymoon. That way, you’d have someone your own age to do things with. He’s even agreed to be in the show and model some of the things from the men’s line that Lillian has just put in.”

“I..I don’t know. I’ve never done anything like that before.”

“You’ll have a great time,” Birdie assured her. “I wish I was going to be here. I always do the show. For payment, she gives you your choice of the outfits you model and a great discount on anything else you buy that day. I have to admit, my credit card takes a real hit whenever I shop there, but it’s worth it.”

Before Kelly could answer, the doorbell rang, signaling that the guys had arrived for their evening out.

Chuck looked exactly like his picture. He was the perfect match for Birdie. Where she was five foot nothing, he was about four inches taller than her.

“You have to be Kelly.”

The booming male voice that called her by name caused Kelly to look beyond Chuck to his companion. JK stood in as direct a contrast to Chuck as she did to Birdie. He stood well over six foot tall and although he was big, he

wasn't what she would call fat. His bulk was in his frame along with his well-toned muscles. He could have had his pick of any girl in town, so why did he spend his Saturday nights at the BBP website?

For the first time in her life, Kelly was ashamed of her size. Just the sound of her name on JK's lips told her she wanted him in her life, but would he ever be content with someone like her?

Sheepishly, she held out her hand to him. "It's...it's a pleasure to finally meet you."

Boy did that sound lame. He must think I'm a real idiot the way I stammered over those few words.

"So, are you girls ready for a night on the town?" Chuck asked.

Before Birdie could turn to get her sweater, Chuck took her in his arms and kissed her passionately. The gesture left Kelly staring into JK's incredible blue eyes.

"Your picture doesn't do you justice," JK declared, pushing past Chuck and Birdie to stand by Kelly's side.

Kelly wished she could become invisible or sink into the floor. He was the most handsome man she'd ever met and she was still the ugly duckling of her family who was good for nothing more than giving everyone money. For the first time in her life, she wished she looked like her sisters. If she did, she could somehow begin to hope that JK would be interested in her.

"You'll have to excuse those two," JK said. "They just can't keep their hands off one another."

"Isn't that the way it's supposed to be when two people are in love and getting married?" Kelly managed to say once she found her voice.

"I guess it is. Let's go out to the car and give them some privacy."

“You...you don’t have to act as my date, just because...”

“Because what?”

“Well you know, because we’re standing up for Birdie and Chuck.”

“Is that what you think?”

Kelly looked down at her ample form before meeting his gaze. Tonight had all the earmarks of a mercy date. God knew well-meaning friends had tried to set her up on enough of those in her life. After the last time, she swore it would never happen to her again.

“Why shouldn’t I? I’m sorry, but I’ve been out with enough guys who don’t want to be with me. I don’t want to repeat the experience. It’s been a long day. I’d just as soon get to bed early. I’ll just...”

Before she could finish, she turned from JK so he wouldn’t see her tears of humiliation. After two years of online communication, she thought she knew him. Now she knew he had used the chat to humiliate the other members of the group that banded together for solace and companionship.

All she wanted was to get to her car and drive away from the humiliation so she could drown her sorrows at the closest burger joint. A couple quarter pounders, along with an order of supersized fries and a large chocolate shake would help to dissolve the hurt of knowing she could never compete with women like her sisters who would undoubtedly throw themselves at JK’s feet.

“You’ll just what?”

JK’s deep voice stopped her in her tracks.

“I’ll just grab a sandwich and get to bed early.” She didn’t dare turn around. If she did, it was entirely possible she’d turn into a quivering mass of jelly.

“You’ll do no such thing. I’ve been waiting for you to get here. What did I say to make you want to stand me up?”

His question took Kelly by surprise.

“Ah-nothing. I just don’t want to embarrass you.”

“And why would you embarrass me?”

Kelly again looked down. All she could see was a fat body. “Do you have to ask? Just look at me. I’m certainly not a carpenter’s dream.”

“A carpenter’s what?”

“You know, flat as a board and never...” Kelly could feel her face turning crimson at the thought of the rest of the saying.

JK put his finger under one of her double chins and lifted her face until her eyes met his. “And never been what?”

“Nailed,” she replied, the word stinging like acid on her tongue.

JK began to smile and then to laugh. “Now that’s one I’ve never heard before. Who says I want someone considered to be a carpenter’s dream?”

“Well you certainly don’t want someone like me.”

“I think it’s going to be a long couple weeks unless I can convince you I’ve been looking forward to meeting the girl behind all those great messages on the chat line.”

“Really?”

“Really and truly. I’ve enjoyed chatting with you for the past several years. To meet you in person is a real treat. That is it will be, if it was you behind those key strokes and not someone else.”

“But you’re so-so...”

“Are the two of you going to stand there talking, or are we going out to dinner?” Chuck asked from behind Kelly.

“If Kelly isn’t afraid to be seen with me, I think we’re going out to dinner.”

Kelly could only nod her agreement. For once in her life, her size didn’t matter. Someone wanted to be with her because of whom she was and not because they were being forced to do so.

She allowed JK to take hold of her arm and guide her to the van parked in the driveway behind her car. Birdie and Chuck were already seated in the front captain’s chairs, leaving the back for Kelly and JK.

“So, how was your trip from Wisconsin?”

“It was good. I did a lot of sightseeing. I figured since I had the whole summer, I’d do some of the things I’ve always wanted to do.”

“How do you rate getting the entire summer off?”

Kelly felt herself starting to relax. “I teach school, fifth grade to be exact. I’m lucky to live in a college town, so I was able to sublet my apartment for the entire summer. Without having to pay rent or think about work, I’m free as a bird until the last week in August. That’s when I have to report back to school.”

“That gives us almost two months to get to know each other.”

“Not by my calculations. You will be going back to California and I’ll be continuing on with my vacation.”

“Not if I persuade you to come back to California with me. There’s a lot to see there and I’ve got a spare room at my place where you could crash.”

JK’s invitation took Kelly by surprise. How could he so easily ask her to move in with him for the rest of the summer? She did have her standards and they certainly didn’t involve moving in with strange men.

“I think I’d be much more comfortable in a hotel.”

“Comfort isn’t the issue. If you insist on staying in a hotel, you could end up a whole lot poorer. Look, my sister and I share a three-bedroom apartment. Our roommate is on assignment in Europe for the summer. So you see, we have the extra room and everything will be proper. If it wasn’t, my sister would have my head.”

Kelly laughed at his comment. She had no illusions about being safe sexually. No man in his right mind would want her in that way. She was just worried about what her parents would say. Knowing his sister shared the apartment she could easily tell them that she was staying with JK’s sister without stretching the truth too badly.

“Before we come to any concrete decisions, let’s see how we get along here in Phoenix. You might regret making any offers once we get to know each other.”

To Kelly’s surprise, JK reached across the seat and clasped her hand. “I don’t think we’re going to have a problem. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you ever since Birdie asked you to be her bridesmaid on the night of your sister’s wedding.”

Kelly beamed at the compliment. No one had ever said they *wanted* to meet her. The fact that JK didn’t seem to meet the criteria for the BBP group still bothered her. Why would someone who looked like he did want to spend his Saturday nights with the group? Surely, he must have better things to do. Was that why he hadn’t posted a picture on the site?

Chuck turned into a brightly lit parking lot. Ahead of them, a Spanish style building advertised the fact they served the best Mexican food in town on the marquee.

“This is one of our favorite places,” Birdie said, once they got out of the van. “I hope you like Mexican food.”

“The only Mexican foods I’m familiar with are tacos and burritos from Taco Bell.”

To her surprise, JK put his arm around her shoulders. “Then you’re in for a real treat. Carlos’ Kitchen is famous not only in Phoenix, but also in Southern California. I recommend the Cancun Chicken.”

Kelly made no reply. In unfamiliar surroundings, it was best to allow someone who had been there before to make the choices for her.

Once inside the restaurant, her companions were greeted like long-lost friends. Everyone from the hostess to the bartender welcomed them warmly with hugs and handshakes.

“This is my friend, Kelly, from Wisconsin,” Birdie said, making the necessary introductions. “She’s come down to be in my wedding next week.”

“Ah, *Senorita*, so you are the lovely lady from Wisconsin we have heard so much about. I am pleased that my good friends Chuck and Birdie have brought you to my restaurant for your first night in Phoenix.”

Once they ordered, the waitress brought them each a margarita, compliments of the house. Although Kelly wasn’t used to drinking, she enjoyed the taste of the drink, but decided one would be enough to satisfy her.

Dinner was served with a flourish that could only be compared to a well-orchestrated production. Kelly had to admit, she enjoyed the entrée JK ordered for her. The chicken in heavy cream sauce was far from the spicy food she thought she would find in a Mexican restaurant.

The dinner conversation was general with the emphasis on Kelly’s life in Wisconsin. Birdie was especially interested in life growing up in a large family, while Chuck and JK wanted to know about the hunting and fishing in the area.

“I wish our honeymoon wasn’t set,” Chuck lamented.
“It might be fun to do some fishing in Wisconsin.”

“Not on my honeymoon we won’t,” Birdie teased.
“Maybe after we’re married for a year or so, we can go.
You can fish to your heart’s content and I’ll visit with
Kelly.”

The ease of the conversation pleased Kelly. She had many friends, but none she felt as comfortable with as these strangers. Although she knew all of them intimately from the website, they were still virtual strangers. The fact they were welcoming her into their inner circle without really knowing her was flattering.

* * * *

“So what did you think of JK?” Birdie asked once they were ready for bed.

Kelly pulled back the covers on the second twin bed in Birdie’s room. As she crawled between the crisp sheets, she contemplated her answer. “He confuses me. My god, Birdie, he’s incredibly handsome and not at all what I expected from talking to him in the chat room.”

“You thought he’d be big, like us. I did, too. Chuck told me that three years ago, JK weighed almost four hundred pounds. It was then that his doctor advised him to either lose the weight or die. Since he didn’t want to die, he lost a hundred and fifty pounds.”

“That explains why he looks like he does. What I don’t understand is why he stays with the group?”

“Chuck says it’s because he enjoys everyone. I think he’s really shy and meeting people who might condemn him is a turn-off.”

“Condemn him? Why would anyone do that? He’s a hunk.”

“Sure he is, but he still thinks of himself as being fat. No matter what the scale or the size of the clothes you wear says about you, it’s hard to believe you’re attractive when you’ve been like us for your entire life. I should know. When I was in high school, I took off fifty pounds. Even though everyone said I looked great, I still thought I was less than attractive. It didn’t take me long to allow the pounds to creep back on. That was when I realized I didn’t mind looking like this. I didn’t even care if the kids teased me. I was happy with myself.”

“I give you credit for trying. I never even did that. I would kill to look like my sisters, but I know it’ll never happen. I’m content with my life, even if I am the butt of every family joke. My kids at school don’t care what I look like, as long as I make learning fun for them. I can hardly wait for next year when they all get to take this trip with me.”

When Birdie questioned Kelly’s statement, she went on to explain how she was working on a lesson plan that included all the things she would see and do on this trip into her geography lessons.

It was well past midnight when they finally settled down to go to sleep. As Kelly drifted off, she remembered she had not called her parents since her arrival in Arizona. *Tomorrow*, she silently promised herself as she drifted off to sleep.

As soon as she slept peacefully, she started to dream about the next few days and the dates she would share with JK.

Chapter 5

“What did you think of Kelly?” Chuck asked the next morning when JK met him for breakfast.

“She’s everything I imagined and more. I don’t think she was overly thrilled with me, though.”

“What do you mean? I think she had a great time.”

“You didn’t see the way she looked at me when we first met. It was like I was an alien from outer space or something.”

“You have to admit, by you not posting your picture and explaining about your weight loss, your appearance does come as quite a shock. You aren’t exactly like the rest of us on the BBP chat.”

JK nodded. He remembered waking up in the emergency room of the local hospital in terrible pain. He didn’t remember passing out, nor did he remember the trip there. The beeping of the heart monitors was enough to scare him, to say nothing of the worried expressions on the faces of the doctors and nurses.

He’d been admitted to the hospital and subjected to a battery of tests. After a week of evaluation, he had met with the doctor. The general consensus was that if he didn’t lose weight, he would be dead within the year. Although he

didn't have a heart attack, this time, he was a prime candidate if he didn't change his ways.

Now he could smile at the three options he'd been given, but at the time, none of them appealed to him. The first was an expensive stomach staple. Just the thought of surgery bothered him. The second was checking into a fat farm for a month to jumpstart his losing process. Of course by doing so, he could easily lose his job for missing so much work. The last seemed to be the most practical and the one the doctor approved of as well.

On the recommendation of the doctor, he had joined a health club and hired a personal trainer. At first, getting into the habit of going to the club three times a week and doing the prescribed workouts was a pain. Slowly, the exercise, combined with the decreased intake of food, had worked. As the pounds slipped away, he became more and more encouraged.

Three months ago, he had hit his goal. Now he was readjusting his diet to stay on a maintenance program. He had even planned his stay in Phoenix so his hotel had a fitness center, pool, sauna and whirlpool he could use.

"I guess you're right. I hope she can get past my weight loss. I would really like to get to know her better. She's everything I thought she would be and more. I guess I didn't realize she was so involved in her teaching."

"I do envy the kids in her class. I'll bet she's the one teacher everyone loves to have."

JK could certainly agree with Chuck on that. In school, he had a teacher like that. Miss Crenshaw had been just out of college and still thrilled with the prospect of teaching kids. She'd done great projects with them, including moving her reading classes outside to take advantage of the

natural light and beauty. He could easily imagine Kelly doing things like that to make her classes more interesting.

Just thinking about her brought to mind the chat when she had been so down about not being asked to be in her sister's wedding. What kind of a family did this girl have, anyway? Couldn't they see the inner beauty she possessed? Were they so self-centered that all they could see was the size of her body, rather than the substance of her mind?

The answer came back as a resounding yes. Why else would they pass her over for the honor of being in their weddings? Why else would they insist she stay in the background and prepare the food? Why else would they think nothing of asking her for the money to finance their weddings and special occasions without a thought about her feelings?

As his thoughts continued to run wild, the girls entered the restaurant and made their way to the table where he and Chuck were sitting. JK couldn't help the smile that crossed his lips as he looked at Kelly. How long had he fantasized about meeting her? He remembered his parents trying to hook him up with girls from the neighborhood. It had been hard for them to understand that he had fallen in love with a woman he only knew through chats on the Internet. Somehow, he would have to convince her to come back to California with him so his parents could see for themselves what a wonderful person she was.

"Are we late?" Birdie asked once the girls had seated themselves.

"I think we're early," JK replied.

Once they were seated, the waitress brought them coffee and menus. "What is everyone having?" JK asked. "This one is on me."

Birdie and Chuck both ordered the special that contained pancakes, bacon, eggs, hash browns and toast, as well as juice and coffee.

“I don’t know what to order,” Kelly lamented.
“Everything looks good. What are you going to have?”

JK scanned the menu. Although he would have liked to duplicate Chuck and Birdie’s order, he knew it would be foolish. He didn’t need that much to eat and since losing the weight, he was extremely conscious of what he put into his stomach. “I guess I’ll have the eggs and toast with a side of fruit.”

“Umm, I wouldn’t have thought of that. I think that sounds like what I’d like as well. I usually either skip breakfast or eat the donuts they have in the teachers’ lounge. It wouldn’t hurt me to cultivate some healthier eating habits.”

“Stick with me, baby, and I’ll show you a whole new way of life,” JK said, unable to resist doing his “B” movie gangster impression.

They were still laughing when the waitress came to take their orders. Once she left the table, Kelly reached out to touch JK’s hand. “Birdie tells me you lost a lot of weight. I’d love to know how you did it.”

“It wasn’t easy. I doubt I would have done it if the doctor hadn’t put the fear of God into me. Losing weight isn’t easy under the best of circumstances. I never had any desire to do it, but when the man in the white coat tells you that you will lose weight, or you will die, it becomes a lot more attractive.”

“Do you have any pictures of the way you looked before you lost it? By looking at you, I can hardly believe you were ever fat.”

JK smiled and reached into his back pocket for his wallet. From it, he took out a picture of himself and his niece, Crystal, on the day of her christening. The tiny baby was almost lost against the sheer bulk of his body.

The expression on Kelly's face told him she could hardly believe the transformation he had undertaken. Of course, there was no denying that the gentle giant in the picture was JK. His facial features, although now smaller, still left no doubt as to his identity.

"I'd like to see that picture, too," Birdie said. "Chuck has told me about your loss, but it is hard to believe."

JK felt self-conscious about the picture being passed around the table, but he knew it was an oddity. His trainer had worked hard to prepare him for things like this. It was hard for him to show the world what he once looked like. It was one thing for him to talk about his weight loss, but quite another to show his transformation. That was one of the reasons he refused to post his picture on the BBP site. He had always been a private person. It was one reason he had majored in computer science in college. By hiding behind his mouse and keyboard, he could be anonymous to the people he dealt with on a daily basis.

"Why didn't you ever share this with the group?" Birdie asked.

JK considered his answer. "It's hard to admit, even to people who would understand, that I was so fat, I was in danger of dying. It was much easier not to even mention it to anyone. I'm no different since I lost weight than I was when I was fat."

"I wish we had more than a couple weeks together," Kelly said. "I certainly would like to learn a few of your secrets."

JK smiled. He was hoping she would want to spend more time with him. “Like I told you, my sister and I have an empty bedroom for the summer. It would be great if you would agree to occupy it while you’re doing your California sightseeing.”

Kelly looked as though she was deep in thought. “I think I’d like that, but only on my terms.”

“And just what are your terms, my dear?”

“I want you to show me how you lost your weight. More than sightseeing, maybe I should take this time to do something for myself. If I get on the right path, hopefully, I can keep it up once I go home.”

“And here I was all worried that you were going to ask me to something hard. I think I can get my personal trainer to find someone for you and you’ll be on your way. As for the cost, we’ll get you a summer membership at the club and that will cut it practically in half.”

Kelly’s pensive expression turned into a smile. Just seeing the delight in her eyes made him more excited about the summer than he had been just moments ago.

* * * *

Am I ready for this? Ready or not, I’ve committed myself. It ought to be an exciting summer.

Kelly knew that seeing any significant difference in the two months she would be spending with JK would be impossible, but if she could get on the right track, it would be worth it. Besides, the money she saved on hotel rooms, gas and meals out would more than cover the cost of a membership at his athletic club, along with a personal trainer.

“Do you swim, JK?” she heard Birdie ask.

“As often as I can. Why?”

“Because my folks have a pool. After we go to the mall for your fittings, Mom wants us to come over for a barbeque and pool party. I know Kelly swims, because I helped her unpack the most gorgeous swimsuit.”

“That would be great. Hard on my diet, but great.”

Birdie began to laugh. “Mom knows all about your diet. She’s planning to grill some chicken breasts and have lots of fresh fruit and veggies. It won’t hurt any of us to eat like you do.”

Kelly knew what Birdie was trying to do. She was being the perfect hostess in accommodating JK’s eating habits and at the same time, encouraging Kelly to embrace a new lifestyle, if that was what she wanted. Somehow, Kelly knew that JK’s suggestion of coming to California with him didn’t come as a shock to either Chuck or Birdie. It was possible they had embarked on a conspiracy to get Kelly out of her shell.

Whatever it was, she certainly didn’t object. Spending a summer with a handsome man in a place as exciting as California was a fantasy that she felt she wanted to try. For once in her life, she was about to do something completely out of character.

Throughout the meal, they discussed the wedding, the upcoming fashion show and the picnic Birdie’s mother had planned. For the first time in her life, food was not a high priority for Kelly. Just seeing JK and knowing that he had taken off the weight made her want to do the same. She’d never had a real incentive to work hard at losing weight before. Now that she saw the results that he had attained, she wanted to do the same for herself.

Before going to the shop, which was just at the other end of the mall from the restaurant, JK insisted on stopping

at the drug store and buying some water for both him and Kelly.

“If you’re intent on doing this, you can start by drinking water, just like I do,” he said.

“Isn’t that a bit expensive? I mean water is water, isn’t it?” Birdie inquired.

“Not really. How much do you spend a day on soda?”

“That’s different,” Kelly declared. “Soda is...”

“Filled with sugar, sodium and carbonation,” JK interrupted. “It doesn’t really quench your thirst, cleanse your body, or do you any good. The sugar rots your teeth and the sodium makes you retain water. By purchasing one bottle of water a day and refilling it at the faucet or water fountain, you not only save money, but you’re also doing your body a favor. Even if your intent isn’t to lose weight, it keeps you healthy.”

Kelly had to agree. She’d heard all of that before, but never in the way that JK said it. If it had worked for him, it might work for her as well.

The store that was sponsoring the fashion show was equally exciting. It surprised Kelly to find several flattering outfits that she liked. She chose a belted dress for the show. If she lost weight, it would be suitable to be worn with the belt tied tighter to accent what was now a nonexistent waistline.

By the time they left the store, she realized that she had drunk all twenty ounces of the water and was looking for a fountain to refill her bottle, as well as a restroom to get rid of what she had consumed. In the past, she had prided herself on not having to use the restroom for hours on end. If she was going to continue drinking this much water, she knew she would not be able to do so in the future.

* * * *

While the girls went back to Birdie's place, Chuck took JK back to his hotel to get his suit and suitable clothes for the picnic Birdie's parents had planned.

"I can't believe the change in Kelly from yesterday," Chuck commented. "It really surprised me when she said she'd go back to California with you for the summer. Of course, the biggest surprise came when she told you that she wanted to try and lose weight this summer."

JK nodded. It had surprised him as well. He didn't care if she lost weight, or if she stayed the way she was. It wasn't her body that interested him half as much as it was her mind and personality. He wondered if anyone had been interested in those things in the past, or if she had always just been considered the fat girl. If that were the case, he could sympathize with her. Before he'd lost the weight, he'd just been JK the fat guy. Since he had adapted to his new lifestyle, even his bosses were taking notice of his abilities, rather than his size.

"I hope she's ready to stick to her guns about losing weight for the right reasons and not because she thinks it's something that would make me happy."

"Only time will tell about that, buddy. For now, let's get over to Birdie's place. I know what a good cook her mother is. Even if it is healthy food, I'm certain it will be delicious."

JK shook his head. He remembered feeling the way Chuck did about food. Now, it wasn't as important as it had been years earlier. Now, all that mattered was that he had finally met the girl who had captured his imagination the first time she logged onto the BBP chat. He'd never expected to actually meet her and now that he had, he realized he needed to keep her in his life forever and always.

Chapter 6

The area around the pool looked more like an outdoor buffet than an informal pool party. Long tables groaned with the amount of food they held. Birdie explained that this was to be an informal bridal shower and all their friends had been invited.

The thought of meeting the Andrews' friends on only her second night in town was a bit overwhelming. If it weren't for the fact that JK would be there, she would have pleaded a headache and spent the evening in her room. It would be embarrassing that she didn't even have a shower gift to give to her friend.

"I wish you would have warned me about the shower, Mrs. Andrews," Kelly confided to her hostess. "I'm certainly not prepared. I don't even have a gift."

"I thought we had agreed that you would call me Sheila. Mrs. Andrews makes me sound like my mother-in-law. As for the gift, you've already given Birdie the best gift possible by coming all this way to be in her wedding. She's always been a loner of sorts. In school, the kids tended to gravitate to the cute, popular girls, you know the kind, the ones who were on the cheerleading squad and wore a size two. It bothered Birdie a lot, but as she got older, she realized that she had something they didn't; she had the top

grades in her class. College was better, but there was still little time for socializing.”

Kelly realized just how little she actually knew about her friend. It sounded like Sheila was talking about Kelly’s growing up years instead of relating Birdie’s experiences. It wasn’t until Kelly had gotten out on her own and started teaching that she had cultivated any close friends. If she were to get married tomorrow, she wondered who she would ask to be her bridesmaids. When the time came, she knew she would ask Jean, but not her sisters. They’d be lucky if she even invited them to the wedding.

Thoughts of her sisters reminded her that she needed to call home. She’d been in Phoenix for two days and had yet to let her family know she’d arrived safely. She excused herself and went into the house to place the call she’d dreaded making ever since her arrival.

Her mother answered on the second ring. “Hi, Mom,” Kelly said.

“Where are you? I thought you’d call earlier today.”

“I got to Phoenix yesterday afternoon and there has been so much going on, I haven’t had time to hardly think. Besides, we agreed that I should wait until Saturday to call.”

“Are you remembering your manners? I hope you’re helping Mrs. Andrews while you’re there and not just being a freeloader.”

As much as the words hurt, Kelly tried to ignore them. “No one here will allow me to lift a finger. Tonight, they’re having a big party out by the pool. All their friends are invited and it’s going to be a bridal shower.”

“So what are you giving her as a gift?”

“That’s the problem. I just found out about the shower a few minutes ago. I certainly don’t have time to do any shopping at this late date. I’ll have to get something next

week when we go shopping, even though Sheila says it's not necessary."

"And just who is Sheila?"

"She's Birdie's mother. Before you say anything, I was told to call her parents Sheila and Jason. It's not like I'm ten years old and going to play at a friend's house."

"How long will you be staying in Phoenix?" her father asked when he came on the line.

"I'll be here for at least two weeks. Sheila has arranged for me to be in a fashion show two weeks from tomorrow. After that, JK and I will be leaving for California." As soon as she mentioned JK, she knew her parents would wonder who she was talking about. Before they had a chance to question her, she explained. "JK is one of our chat buddies. He and Chuck, the guy Birdie is marrying, have been friends for years. JK has invited me to spend the summer with his family in California. I'll get to do lots of sightseeing and..."

"And nothing, young lady," her father demanded. Even long distance, his tone made her cringe. "Are you telling me that you're going to spend the summer with a man you hardly know?"

"I'm telling you that JK has invited me to spend the summer in Culver City. He lives in a three-bedroom apartment with his sister and a roommate. The roommate is gone for the summer and I would have his room. It wouldn't be any different if I were going to be spending the summer in an expensive hotel room. I'm a big girl, Daddy. I know how to handle myself. This relationship is..."

"Is that your dad?" JK said.

For the first time, Kelly realized that JK was standing in the doorway listening to her conversation.

"Let me talk to him."

Reluctantly, Kelly handed JK the phone.

“Mr. Masters, this is JK Ransom. I’ve been chatting with your daughter for about three years now and I assure you my intentions are honorable. I invited her to California because I want to get to know her better. If you’d be more comfortable with her staying in a hotel and spending up to or over a hundred dollars a day, I’ll take back my offer.”

Kelly waited through the long silence that indicated her father was giving JK a piece of his mind.

“I understand how you feel, Mr. Masters. If Kelly were my daughter, I’d be equally concerned. My sister and I share an apartment and our parents live within two miles of our place. Kelly will be much safer with us than in a hotel where anyone could take advantage of her.”

Kelly could feel a blush creeping into her cheeks. Didn’t anyone understand that she was thirty-three years old and maybe it was high time someone took advantage of her?

JK handed her the phone. For a moment, she held her breath in anticipation of what her father would say.

“He seems like a nice young man, Kelly. I just hope you will be paying your way while you’re out there.”

“Yes, Daddy. I was planning to pay for a third of everything, It would still be cheaper than staying in a hotel and I would be in a much more comfortable setting with my own private tour guide.”

When she finally hung up, she noticed that JK was still lounging against the doorframe. “Thanks for coming to my rescue, Sir Lancelot,” she said.

“Anything for a damsel in distress. I can understand your dad’s concern. You are a beautiful woman and he must be worried about you traveling alone like this.”

Kelly laughed at his comment. “My dad is more worried that I’ll spend all my money and won’t be able to help the nieces and nephews with their school shopping. I usually get the older kids ready for school. You know, supplies, school clothes, shoes and enrollment fees.”

“What do their parents pay for?”

Kelly couldn’t help but laugh. She’d been the one that had started the nonstop spending spree when her first nephew had started school. She’d been in her first year of teaching and still living at home, so she had gone all out in getting him ready. At the time, she could afford it and thought it was fun. It had snowballed after that until now, she sent checks to each of her brothers for their kids, as well as outfitted Kate’s two boys and Kim’s daughter from her first marriage.

“Unfortunately, this is something I brought on myself. I make good money and don’t have any kids to support, so I help out. It costs me about two thousand a year, but I have that put aside. It’s the least I can do since I make good money and they always seem to be struggling.”

“And what do you get out of it? Do they even say thank you, or is it just expected?”

Kelly hung her head. It was expected, just like the money she gave Kim for her wedding, along with the catering and the cake. No one thought they might be inconveniencing her or that she might have some other use for the money.

“That’s what I thought. I know you can’t cut them off without it this year but when you give it to them, make it clear that this is the last time. From now on, you will be using *your* money for *you*. I’m not trying to be bossy here, but you work hard for what you have and it’s high time you

reaped some of the benefits. If I don't miss my guess, you really had to scrimp to afford this trip."

"If Kim's in-laws hadn't paid me back for what I spent on the wedding, I would have. Thankfully, they came through with the money they promised me and then hired me to do two dinner parties for them. They paid me very well."

"It sounds like it's about time someone paid you for something. Since the other guests haven't started to arrive yet, I think it's time you met my folks and my sister, Allison. Unlike your parents, I told them I planned to invite you to spend the summer with us. Allison can hardly wait to meet you."

He took his cell phone from his pocket and placed the first call. Kelly wondered how the people on the other end of the line would take to this stray who JK insisted on bringing home for the summer.

To her delight, both his parents and his sister sounded as though they were thrilled to meet her and could hardly wait for them to return to California so that they could see her in person.

By the time they finished their conversation, the party was in full swing. Although Birdie had said she had no close friends, there were many young couples mingled among the guests at the pool. It seemed as though they were all aware of why Kelly had made the trip from Wisconsin to Arizona and were anxious to meet her and JK.

At the buffet table, Kelly watched to see what JK put on his plate and took the same. If she could ever hope to look as good as he did, she needed to start paying attention to the amount of food she consumed.

"Are you mimicking me?" JK asked.

“Hmm, could be. After seeing your weight loss and hearing your story, I think it’s high time I did something. Do you really think I could join your health club for the summer?”

“I don’t think, I know. I had Allison look into it today. That was one of the reasons I called her tonight. She’s already purchased a membership for you and found out that there is a club in Madison you can transfer to when you get home. She signed you up for two months with the option of taking a permanent membership when you get home.”

After voicing her appreciation, she turned her thoughts inward. He hardly knew her and yet he had taken her at her word about wanting to get fit and lose the weight. It could prove to be an interesting summer.

With dinner finished, Kelly couldn’t help but marvel at the gifts Birdie received. It was evident that these people were well off. No one gave her anything that remotely resembled towels or other linens. The gifts included a slow cooker, microwave oven, table lamps and even a gift certificate to a local furniture store.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” JK whispered as the gifts were opened.

“Very. What did you get them?”

“Nothing yet. Now that I see this spread, I wonder if I should try to top it, or go with my first impression of what to get them.”

“And that was?”

“There’s a nice bath shop not far from my hotel. I was thinking about bathroom towels.”

Kelly laughed, wondering how his thought could so closely monitor her own. “I was thinking along those same lines. What do you say we go shopping on Monday and see what we can find? There must be a kitchen shop near by.

With all of these wonderful, gifts, I don't see a dishtowel or kitchen utensil. It's great to have a microwave, but not if you don't have any dishes to put in it, or utensils to cook with. Knowing Birdie and Chuck, I would think that cooking would be a lot of fun for them. I know I certainly enjoy it."

"So I understand. I can't believe you cater professionally."

"Neither can I, but it really is a lot of fun. I'd like to look into doing it more often when I get back home."

"Oh, you mean, have pots and pans will travel?"

"Something like that. It might be fun as a sideline. I rarely do anything on the weekends and if I cooked the food in the people's homes, I wouldn't need a professional kitchen. With the extra money, I might have the down payment for a house within a year."

"I envy you. I'll be old and gray before I can afford a house in California. The prices are so high out there that even with the money I make, I couldn't afford to buy one."

"Are you two going to talk the night away, or join us in the pool?" Birdie asked once the presents were opened.

"It looks like we'd better join you," JK replied. "I certainly don't want to get on Sheila's bad side."

They all laughed at the joke.

It seemed like all of the partygoers had worn their suits under their shorts and tops. Soon, the deck chairs were loaded with discarded clothing as everyone prepared to get into the pool for a game of water volleyball.

Even though Kelly was an expert swimmer, she had never played games in the water. At home, she swam down at the creek and then, only when no one would see her. It was well-known that she was no beauty in a swimming suit. She chose to swim alone so she didn't have to listen to the

ridicule of her family. It was the same at the pool within her apartment complex. She always waited until late at night to enjoy the refreshing coolness of the water to avoid the stares of the children who lived in her building.

To swim with everyone else and even play volleyball was a treat. At home when such games were played, she would excuse herself to the kitchen to clean up after the meal. It was too embarrassing to be the last one picked, not to mention being the person no one wanted on their team. In the water, her weight didn't matter and she was able to play the game with no one caring that she was fat and awkward. While the water gave everyone buoyancy, it also hampered their movements. The players spent more time laughing than they did scoring points.

Chapter 7

On Monday morning, Kelly accompanied Birdie and Sheila to the bridal shop for the final fitting for Birdie's dress. Kelly decided she had never seen a more elegant dress in her entire life. Her head swam when she realized what it had cost. Sheila had insisted that it be special and had it designed especially for Birdie. If Kelly had thought she overpaid for the dress she bought in Wisconsin to be in the wedding, she was mistaken. She almost wished she had waited until she got here to make the purchase. If she had, she would have had something more elegant than the peach dress.

"And what will you be wearing, my dear?" the wedding consultant asked.

Kelly wished she hadn't listened to Sheila when she insisted that they bring her dress with them to the shop.

"I'll go out and get it," Sheila said.

Reluctantly, Kelly went into one of the dressing rooms and tried on the dress. Looking at it in the mirror, she realized it was elegant by Madison standards, but nowhere near as expensive as the ones on this showroom floor. By the time she stepped out of the dressing room, she had decided to pack this dress away and look for something different.

“It’s perfect,” the consultant declared. “You were right, Sheila, it just needs a minimum of accessories.”

Kelly watched as the woman scurried around the shop. When she returned, it was with an armload of accessories. By the time they finished, she had acquired shoes in a perfect shade to match the dress, lace gloves that would be dyed to match and a large hat that accented everything.

Before she could pull out her credit card, Sheila had already paid for the items.

“I wish you would let me pay for these,” she protested as the woman ran Sheila’s credit card through the machine.

“It’s the least I can do, considering what it cost you to make this trip. You being here means so much to Birdie and to us. Let me have my fun. It’s not like I can’t afford it.”

From the bridal shop, they went to the beauty salon, where the consultant took notes about what to do with Kelly’s hair and make-up before adding the information to those she had compiled about Birdie earlier.

After a final stop, this one at the florist, Sheila decided it was time for lunch. Kelly looked over the menu and wished that JK were there so that he could help her make healthy selections. As soon as the thought crossed her mind, she inwardly laughed. What was happening to her? How had he so easily invaded her thoughts and made her conscious of what she ate for the first time in her life?

Birdie and her mother both ordered burgers and fries that made Kelly’s mouth water. As much as she wanted the calorie-laden treat, she opted for a chicken caesar salad instead. Once their lunch arrived, she realized that it might not have been such a smart choice since her salad was huge.

“That looks downright yummy,” Sheila said. “I’m sorry I didn’t order that.”

Kelly smiled. "It's more than I'll be able to eat. Why don't you put some on your plate? I hate to see it go to waste."

Birdie and Sheila both took portions of the salad, leaving Kelly with more than enough to satisfy her hunger and yet not enough to fill her up completely. She remembered reading that it was best if you left the table before you were completely full in order to cut calories and lose weight.

With the meal completed, Birdie and Sheila ordered gooey desserts, while Kelly opted for a cup of flavored coffee.

"You really are serious about losing weight, aren't you?" Sheila asked.

"I guess I am. I saw the difference between JK's before picture and what he looks like now. I guess I'd like that for myself, as well. I know it won't happen overnight, but if I don't get a start on it, it never will."

"Well, good for you. I don't have the willpower. I guess I never did. I envy anyone who has the ability to take on a task and stick to it. While you're with us, there will be no more gooey desserts and high calorie food. We'll help you as much as you need."

"Please don't change your routine for me. It's time I learned to live in a world where I have to be the one to make the decisions about what and how much I eat."

* * * *

As soon as they walked in the door of the house, Sheila checked the answering machine. "We have messages," she announced. "I can't believe they're for me, so why don't you girls listen to them, while I put away some of the things we bought today?"

Kelly followed Birdie into the dining room where the answering machine blinked like a Christmas tree. The first message was from Chuck telling Birdie how much he missed her and how he was counting the days. Kelly could just hear her mother saying how sappy it sounded, but to Kelly, it was filed with love for the woman who would soon become his wife.

The second message came as a surprise, as it was from JK. “Hi, Kelly, it seems like our friends would like to be alone tonight. Since I don’t have a car here, would you mind picking me up at my hotel at, let’s say six? Give me a call at my office.”

While JK gave her the number, Kelly picked up a pen and jotted notes on the pad beside the phone. It didn’t matter that she would be the one driving, she had a date, a real true date for the evening. It wasn’t something that someone had planned, nor was it one of her relatives reluctantly offering to be her escort when she needed one. JK was real and he actually enjoyed being with her, no matter what she looked like.

As soon as the final message played, Kelly picked up the phone to call JK. Rather than going through the switchboard, Chuck answered.

“Hi, Kelly. JK is right here beside me. He was wondering if you would call him back.”

She waited while Chuck handed the phone to JK. “Hey, pretty lady, I was hoping you’d call. Do you think you can take an entire evening with me, without our friends as a buffer?”

Butterflies took flight in Kelly’s stomach and her knees threatened to buckle. No one had ever called her pretty lady before. The closest anyone ever came to something

like that was when people told her that she would be so pretty, if she only lost some weight.

“I think that could be arranged. What do you have in mind?”

“Chuck’s been going on and on about how beautiful the desert is at sunset. He even suggested a restaurant with a beautiful view.”

Kelly agreed and wrote down the directions to JK’s hotel. When she hung up, she turned to Birdie with tears in her eyes. “He wants to take me to a restaurant in the desert for dinner and to watch the sunset.”

“Then why are you crying? You should be the happiest girl on earth.”

“I am. I just can’t believe this is actually happening to me. It’s like a dream come true. I swear he likes me because I’m me. It’s odd to be going out with someone who hasn’t been forced into it.”

“You’ll get used to it. JK is a great guy and he really likes you. We all do. All you needed was to cultivate some new friends to find out what a special person you really are.”

* * * *

JK hung up the phone. He couldn’t help but smile at the prospect of being alone with Kelly tonight.

“Is the spider laying a trap for the fly?” Chuck asked.

“Something like that. I want to be with her so badly, it hurts. Do you realize she’s been in town for the entire weekend and we haven’t been alone?”

“I know what you mean. I’m looking forward to some alone time with Birdie myself. Don’t get me wrong, I enjoy having you guys with us, but the wedding is a week away and I want my girl all to myself.”

JK laughed at Chuck's statement. Never before in his life had he looked forward to taking out a girl. At home, the girls who didn't want to go out with him because of his weight, had clamored for his attention once he lost it. Then it was too late. He wanted them to like him for himself and not his physical appearance. He somehow knew Kelly felt the same way about the people she saw.

He didn't think five o'clock would ever arrive, but when it did, he was more than ready to leave the office. Since receiving Kelly's call, he'd been unable to concentrate on the program he was rewriting for the company.

As soon as Chuck dropped him off at his hotel, JK hurried to his room to shower and change. He was glad he had thought to pack his favorite white pants with his black shirt and cotton sweater. He had been told it got cold in the desert at night and wanted to be prepared. As he dressed, he remembered he hadn't told Kelly to bring a sweater or jacket. Glancing at the clock, he realized it was already too late to call her with the information. She was, more than likely, on her way to the hotel. If nothing else, the restaurant would undoubtedly have a gift shop where they could pick up a sweatshirt if necessary.

Seeing that he had time before Kelly was due to arrive, JK checked his messages. The first one was from his mother. "Hi, honey. I just got a call from your sister. She tells me that Kelly is coming to California for the rest of the summer. Do you think it's proper for her to stay at your place? Maybe you should make arrangements for her to stay with us."

The second was from his sister. "Hey, big brother. I'm getting ready for Kelly to get here. Shouldn't have told Mom, though. She's a worrywart. I'm planning to get some

more feminine bedding for Pete's room. When Kelly goes back to Wisconsin, I figure I can use it in my new place for the spare room. Now be a good boy and don't do anything I wouldn't."

As much as the message from his mother upset him, the one from his sister, Allison, made him laugh. By telling him not to do anything she wouldn't, she was giving him a lot of latitude. He knew that she and Ron had been close, and not just as friends, over the past year, especially since they were planning to be married at the end of July.

The bedside clock told him that he had only a few minutes to get down to the lobby before Kelly would be pulling up. To his surprise, she was waiting in the lobby.

"I didn't expect to find you waiting for me. Am I late?"

The melodious sound of Kelly's laughter put him at ease. "Hardly. I decided to come early and have a look see at your digs. This place must be costing you a fortune."

"Not really. The company is footing the bill this week and after the wedding, I'll be moving into Chuck's place to get things packed up and moved over to the house he and Birdie bought. Isn't that what friends do?"

"I guess it is. You really have a good company to work for if they allow you to come here for two weeks and still have a job to return to when you go back to California."

"I guess I do. Of course, it doesn't really matter where I do my job, it's all for the same company and being a programmer, I can work at any location. I've done a lot of traveling this year working in various offices. To me, it's great."

"It certainly isn't like being a teacher," she quipped. "I have the same old classroom day after day and year after year. It's the kids who make the difference."

He enjoyed the sparkle in her eyes when she talked about the position and the kids who were lucky enough to get her for their teacher.

“What say you drive?” she asked.

The question caught him off-guard. “Drive? As in, your car?”

“Sure, why not? I’ve had my fill of driving just getting here. It will be a treat to be your passenger. I promise you that my car won’t have a fit because a man gets behind her wheel.”

JK couldn’t help the smile that crossed his lips. He was very protective of his car. He didn’t even let Allison drive it and she was his sister. While his mind was still spinning, Kelly tossed him the keys to her car.

“I didn’t tell you that you should bring a sweater. They say it gets cold at night in the desert.”

“You didn’t, but Birdie and Sheila did. I have a jacket in the back. It never hurts to be prepared.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

Kelly looked at him, as though she feared the worst. “I don’t know why not. Ask away.”

“I’m pleased that you want to eat right and lose some of your weight, but are you doing it for yourself, or because you think it would make me happy?”

His question was met with a moment of silence that seemed to permeate the atmosphere of the car.

“A little of both, I guess. Ever since I learned that you were going to be here, I have fantasized about getting to know you. I’ll be honest; I’ve had a crush on you for a long time. When I saw you, I thought you would be happier with a much thinner girl. I didn’t know why you wanted to even be seen with someone like me. At that point, I decided that I wanted to make you proud of me. Then it hit me that for

the first time in my life, I wanted to do this for me. The story about you being taken to the hospital really hit home. That could happen to me and I really don't want to die."

"That's good, because I don't want you to die either. You're not the only one with a crush. I've been in the same predicament ever since you first logged on. I couldn't believe it when Birdie asked you to be her maid of honor. We should make a stunning pair on the dance floor. You do dance, don't you?"

"Not so that anyone would notice. There's never been anyone willing to be seen with me long enough to finish an entire dance before."

"Well, we'll remedy that tonight. Chuck tells me that this restaurant has an excellent dance band. Being a weeknight, there shouldn't be too many people there. It would be the perfect place to start your lessons."

* * * *

The restaurant was relatively quiet giving Kelly the opportunity to get to know JK even better than before. The salad had a light dressing that stood in direct contrast to the heavy bleu cheese she usually ordered. The sauce for the chicken was equally light and even though she had wanted the potatoes swimming in butter and cheese, she followed his lead and ordered the vegetables instead.

Through their conversation, she learned that his father worked as a cameraman for one of the studios in Hollywood, while his mother was a hairdresser at the same studio. His sister, Sharon, was married and had two small children who he adored, but didn't pamper the way she did her nieces and nephews. His older brother, Carl, was in the military stationed in Korea and his sister, Allison, was a teacher.

It all seemed more glamorous than her family, even though he insisted she tell him about them.

“My dad works at a local factory,” she began. “He’ll be able to retire in about five years. My mom sells Tupperware. Since Daddy works nights, she can spend her days with him and do her parties at night. My sister, Kate, rides herd on her kids while her husband drives truck. He’s an over-the-road driver, so he’s gone most of the week. Kim is a checker at a grocery store and her new husband is a bartender. My brother, Mike, is a security guard at the prison that isn’t too far from Madison and my younger brother, Dale, isn’t married yet. He’s stationed in Germany with the Air Force. It wouldn’t surprise me to learn that he plans to bring a German girl back with him. That’s all he can talk about in his letters.”

When she finished, she looked down at her place, almost embarrassed to look JK in the eye. How would he see her family? She hoped it wasn’t the same way she saw them. She was certain Kate’s husband was abusive when he was home for any length of time. She’d seen the bruises. As for Kim’s new husband, he enjoyed the money his parents lavished on him so much, that he would never be a success at anything. She knew he drank heavily and the last place he should be working was in a bar. Compared to the success of JK’s family, hers sounded like a bunch of bums, but they were her bums and she loved them all.

“Sounds like an interesting mix. So, how is it that you went to college and became a teacher rather than getting married and having a bunch of kids?”

Kelly looked up, shocked by JK’s question. “I was the valedictorian of my class and received a full scholarship to the University of Wisconsin in Madison because of it. That paid for tuition and books for the full four years. Living at

home and commuting saved on the housing and I had a part-time job to pay for the gas to get to school, as well as have spending money.”

“Your folks must have been proud of you.”

“I guess they were, but at the time, they were pretty busy with Mike, Kim and Dale. They are all younger than me. Kate is a year older. Mike also went on to school. He took a course in law enforcement at the vocational school. I always thought he would be a city cop, but this new prison opened up and he got in there. It’s a good job.”

“If it’s such a good job, why do you pay to get his kids into school?”

“I do it because it’s expected. I do it for Kim and Kate, I can’t very well leave him out.”

JK reached over and covered her hand with his. “You can and you will. Hopefully, this summer will change your life in more ways than one. You’re generous to a fault, but it’s time you started doing things for yourself. What was their reaction when you told them you’d be taking a trip this summer?”

Kelly laughed. “They were horrified. Both Kate and Kim were planning on me watching their kids, for free, of course. I must have been having my first independence day, since I flat-out told them that they would have to pay a sitter this year.”

“Good for you. That calls for a toast.” JK held out his water glass and touched it against the side of the one Kelly held out. “To the independence of a beautiful woman.”

She knew she blushed at his compliment, but didn’t have much time to dwell on it, since the orchestra had started playing. JK held out his hand and encouraged her to join him on the dance floor.

This was what she had dreaded. How could she be light on her feet, when she'd never had the opportunity to practice her dancing skills?

To her amazement, with JK as her partner, she literally floated across the floor. Each move that he wanted her to make was guided by the pressure of his hand that rested on the small of her back. After two or three awkward steps, she soon picked up the rhythm of the music and moved with it.

“Now, what’s all this nonsense about you not being able to dance? You make a wonderful partner. I’ve been taking lessons at the club and I think you should, too.”

“Me take dance lessons? Are you out of your mind?”

“That’s what I said when my personal trainer suggested them. I found that they were very helpful. They certainly improved my posture and were a lot of fun.”

“I’ll take them on one condition, and that is if you’ll be my partner. I can’t imagine dancing with anyone else.”

“I wouldn’t let you. Do you think I want every guy at the club holding you close?”

His words were ones she had dreamed of hearing all her life. Could it be that the cyber friend she had fantasized about had turned out to be someone who could become special, if only for the summer?

Chapter 8

The morning of the wedding dawned bright and clear with the hint of a breeze from the east. It promised to be the perfect day for Birdie and Chuck to begin their lives together.

The night before, they had participated in an unprecedented Friday night chat with the BBP people so that everyone could wish the happy couple well.

At the salon, Kelly watched as she underwent a transformation, not unlike the one she'd had gone through in Wisconsin weeks earlier. The beautician touched up her color, added new highlights to her hair and then proceeded to do her make-up while a nail technician gave her not only a manicure, but also a pedicure. The thought of Sheila spending so much money on her was more than she could comprehend. She had learned, early in the week, not to question Sheila's spending. Instead, she rather enjoyed the pampering she never thought she would experience.

The church resembled a Spanish mission and was decorated in more flowers than Kelly had ever seen at a wedding. From the back of the church, she watched as JK and Chuck took their places. Chuck wore tails and a top hat, while JK wore a gray tuxedo with a shirt trimmed in peach with a peach cummerbund. She couldn't help but

think how handsome he looked and how much she wished she were walking down the aisle to be joined in marriage to him, rather than play maid of honor to his best man.

The music changed, just like they had been told it would at the rehearsal, and Kelly began the walk down the aisle. She took a step and then brought her other foot slowly forward to prolong the walk, the way she had seen her sisters and friends do so many times in the past. The time it took seemed to be an eternity, but at last, she was standing at the front of the church, waiting for Birdie to begin her own walk down the aisle.

Again the music changed and the entire congregation got to its feet. Birdie was radiant and if she was as nervous as she had professed earlier, no one noticed.

Kelly listened intently to every word the minister as well as Birdie and Chuck spoke. She wanted the entire scene etched permanently on her memory. It was amazing how different her perspective was when she was part of the wedding party rather than a guest in one of the pews.

When it came time for Birdie and Chuck to exchange their vows, Kelly laid her bouquet on the altar and lifted Birdie's veil before taking the bridal bouquet from her friend. She also discreetly gave Birdie the ring that would soon grace the proper finger of Chuck's left hand.

Once her immediate duties of maid of honor were finished, she stepped back to her assigned position. She listened intently as her friends spoke their vows. She prayed that Birdie's soft voice would be audible throughout the church.

"I, Bernadette, take you, Charles, to be my husband."

Kelly smiled at how well Birdie's voice projected. There would be no doubt as to what she said, even by those in the back of the church.

With the vows spoken and the rings exchanged, Birdie and Chuck turned to face the congregation. Kelly knew this was her cue to hand back the bridal bouquet and pick up her own.

“It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you Mr. And Mrs. Charles Martin.” After the minister’s introduction, the congregation began to applaud while Chuck took Birdie in his arms and kissed her tenderly.

While the applause continued, they made their way to the back of the church, followed closely by Kelly and JK. She could feel a tremor of excitement go through her body the moment JK took her arm. *What would it be like if he were to kiss me the way Chuck just kissed Birdie?*

Once at the back of the church, Chuck kissed Birdie again before they went back to the front to act as ushers and greet their guests, rather than standing in a receiving line. Kelly couldn’t help but smile at how they had taken her offhanded comment about how her friend had done the same thing at her wedding to heart. At the time she said it, she never expected them to latch on to the idea so quickly, but it was a unique concept. It also freed JK and Kelly from having to greet people they didn’t know and had no idea what to say to them.

“I’m glad they took you up on your suggestion,” JK said. “I hate reception lines. Besides, it gives me a chance to do something I’ve wanted to do ever since I first met you.”

To her delight, he took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly. To say she was sweet sixteen and never been kissed had stretched to she was thirty-three and still waiting for her first kiss, at least the way JK kissed her.

“Wow,” she said once they parted.

“My sentiments exactly,” JK whispered.

“You two do make a lovely couple.”

Kelly turned, her face flushed with not only the excitement of being in JK's arms, but also embarrassment at being caught. She soon saw the woman who had spoken the words was Birdie's grandmother.

"I suppose the next wedding will be for the two of you. Be sure you catch the bouquet at the reception." The older woman winked before moving on with the rest of the crowd as they made their way out of the church.

"I like the sound of that," JK said.

Kelly only smiled. She knew he was saying what she wanted to hear, but she didn't care. For today, she would fantasize about being Mrs. JK Ransom. She knew it was little more than a pipe dream. When the summer ended, she would return to Madison to begin the school year and JK would become little more than a sign in on the weekly chat, but she didn't care. For this summer, she would be Cinderella waiting for midnight, or, in her case, September to come.

* * * *

The reception was as elaborate as the shower had been a week earlier. JK never stopped being amazed by the money that Birdie's parents so freely spent. From the chats, he would have never expected them to be wealthy. His own parents were well off, but when his older sister got married, the reception had been nothing like this.

"Quite a bash, isn't it?" one of the women who worked in Chuck's department asked, when she approached him.

"It certainly is," he agreed. The overtures she had made toward him all week hadn't gone unnoticed. She was very petite, cute and evidently out to add him as another notch on her belt.

"Did you save me a dance?"

“Sorry, Jenny, I didn’t. My partner is the maid of honor.”

“That cow? Why would you want to be saddled with her, when you could be dancing with me?”

“Because I happen to like her. We’ve been cyber friends for years and now that I’m finally able to meet her in person, I find she’s everything I ever thought she would be and more.”

“Well, she certainly is *more*. I just can’t understand...”

“I didn’t ask you to understand, Jenny. Unlike some men who only look at outward appearances, I happen to be interested in a woman who has inner as well as outer beauty. Now if you’ll excuse me, I promised Kelly this dance.”

The look on Jenny’s face was priceless. He knew he would pay for what he had just said to her when he returned to work on Monday, but he didn’t care. The woman was a cat and just the type of person he had encountered many times since he lost weight. It was evident that men weren’t the only ones looking for trophies.

He found Kelly on the other side of the hall engaged in conversation with one of Birdie’s aunts. “I think this is our dance,” he said, as he approached her.

Kelly excused herself and stepped onto the dance floor with him. “Thank you for the rescue. It’s hard not knowing anyone and having to make small talk with strangers. If I have to tell people how Birdie and I know each other one more time, I might just scream.”

“I know what you mean. Several people from work have cornered me and to be truthful, I have absolutely nothing in common with them.”

“Nothing?” Kelly inquired. “That little blonde seemed like she wanted something in common with you.”

JK laughed. “She did, but I didn’t. She’s the type of girl my friends back home keep pushing at me. I can’t seem to make any of them understand that I’m not interested in having a trophy wife. I want a girl with something between her ears other than air.”

“Then what are you doing with me?” she teased.

“I’m dancing with a wonderful woman who has intrigued me since she typed her first words on the chat line. For me, beauty is what’s inside a person and not outside. You’re the type of woman I want to get to know better. I can hardly wait to get back to California and introduce you to my family.”

He felt Kelly relax immediately. He liked having her in his arms, but he wanted so much more. Perhaps by the end of the summer, they would become more than just friends. Perhaps they would become lovers.

The thought had come out of nowhere but was far from unpleasant. As a kid, he had wanted to jump into bed with every woman he saw, even though they didn’t want him. As a thirty-something adult, he was still a virgin, mainly because of his weight but also because he hadn’t found a woman worth going to bed with. When he did lose his virginity, he wanted it to be with someone he not only loved but also respected, rather than a one-night stand.

* * * *

Kelly felt more like Cinderella than she had earlier. She was in the arms of a handsome prince charming and he was looking at her as though she was the only woman on earth worthy of his attentions. She prayed the feeling would never end.

Dance after dance, they dominated the floor, until she knew she would spend the night with leg cramps from all of the activity she wasn't accustomed to doing.

It didn't matter. She was the belle of the ball and for the first time in her life, she wasn't shunning the attention.

"I told you, Sheila," Birdie's grandmother said when the band took a break and they had returned to the head table. "These two make a lovely couple. Mark my words, we'll be dancing at their wedding before the end of the year."

Kelly smiled, but inwardly, the tears flowed freely. *With the end of August, I'll be going home and all of this will be nothing but a beautiful memory. JK will again become my cyber friend and life will go on with very few changes.*

The very thought of leaving JK behind to return home made her realize that she was only playing the part of a woman in love for the summer. With such notions running through her head, she excused herself to go to the ladies' room.

With such an excuse, no one questioned her need to leave the party, if only for a few minutes. Once inside the closed stall, she gave way to the tears she had refused to release in the reception hall. She was so lost in her own self-pity, that she didn't hear someone enter the room.

"Are you all right, Kelly?" Sheila asked.

Kelly sniffed loudly. "I'll be fine in a minute."

When she stepped out into the area that was like an elegant sitting room, she found Sheila waiting for her.

"You most certainly are not all right," Sheila said as soon as Kelly stood in front of her. "You've been crying. Now tell me all about it."

"There's not much to tell, really. I suddenly realized that at the end of August, it will be all over. This is going to

be such a special summer, I don't want any of it to come to an end."

"Then quit your job and stay in California. I know that would make JK very happy."

"I couldn't do that. I've signed a contract and I'm committed for the next year. Then there's my family to consider. It's best if when the summer is over, I go back where I belong. JK will have no problem in finding dozens of girls to keep him company."

"Now that's nonsense if I ever heard it. You put those negative thoughts out of your mind once and for all. This is going to be an exciting summer for you. Enjoy every minute of it, but don't make any decisions until you're completely certain that they're the right ones for you."

Kelly hugged Sheila. "You're right. I guess I was just indulging in my favorite activity, having a pity party. No more of those, at least not until I get back home."

The music had again started playing when they returned to the reception hall. Even though she hadn't been available and JK could have asked someone else to dance, he stood alone, as though waiting for her to return.

"I was starting to get worried about you," he said. Instead of going back out onto the dance floor, he headed toward the door and the warmth of the summer evening.

"I really was worried about you," he explained as soon as they were alone. "All of a sudden, you got so quiet and then you excused yourself. Was it something I said?"

His question came as a surprise. She had hoped her change in attitude had not been noticeable. "It wasn't anything anyone said. Tonight, I've felt like Cinderella and you're my Prince Charming. I merely realized that when the summer ended, it would be like the stroke of midnight

and I would turn back to being plain old Kelly Masters, the teacher who puts her family in front of herself.”

“Well, then we’ll have to work on changing you into the new and improved Kelly Masters who stands up to her family and resists the temptation to go back to her old ways.”

JK didn’t wait for her to reply. Instead, he took her in his arms and kissed her with more passion than she thought possible. He really did love her and she loved him. For this summer, she would enjoy being Cinderella and when it was over, there would be no regrets, only fantastic memories that would last a lifetime.

“Hurry up, you two,” Chuck said as he joined them. You can play kissey face for the rest of the night. For now, it’s time for me to retrieve the garter and for Birdie to throw her bouquet.”

JK took Kelly’s hand and led her back inside. “We thought the two of you were lost,” Birdie’s dad commented when they returned to the brightly lit hall.

“Not lost,” JK replied. “Just enjoying the evening.”

His comment brought laughter from everyone in the room making Kelly wonder if it was so obvious that she had just been kissed, and in all the right ways.

Someone had put a chair in the middle of the floor and JK went up to sit down. He was immediately followed by Birdie, who sat on his lap. The band began to play a song that reminded Kelly of one played in a movie about a strip joint she had once seen. As it played, Chuck got down on his knees and stuck his head under the skirt of Birdie’s wedding dress in order to retrieve the garter that Kelly knew was positioned right below her friend’s knee.

When he finally stood up, the blue and white garter was in his teeth. The crowd cheered as he took it from his

mouth and triumphantly twirled it on one finger. Someone produced a blindfold and put it around his eyes. Once they were certain he couldn't see, Birdie began to spin him around in order to make him dizzy.

Kelly smiled to see JK among the bachelors who were vying for the garter. She watched as the piece of elastic, lace and ribbons left Chuck's hand and flew toward the waiting male guests. As though it had been thrown directly at him, JK caught it with little effort. Everyone cheered and Kelly couldn't help but notice the smile on the lips of the little blond who had been talking to him earlier. It was evident that she intended to catch the bouquet.

Chuck took off his blindfold and put it around Birdie's eyes, then proceeded to spin her around in the same fashion as she had done to him moments earlier. Even though Kelly knew she had no chance whatsoever of catching the bouquet, she joined the group of anxious young women who were waiting to gain the prize of the evening. She knew they wanted not only the bouquet, but also the chance to dance with JK.

Once Chuck stopped twirling Birdie around, she wobbled for a moment and then tossed the bouquet over her shoulder. Kelly knew she should allow the others to scramble for the prize, but when it came right at her, she reached out and grabbed it in midair before the irritating little blond could reach it.

The fact that she actually caught the bouquet didn't sink in until JK appeared at her side and put his arms around her. "I knew you wouldn't let me down," he whispered in her ear.

The music began again and Kelly enjoyed being swept across the dance floor in JK's arms, her trophy clutched tightly in her hand.

“This dance is dedicated to the couple who caught the garter and bouquet, Mr. JK Ransom and the lovely Miss Kelly Masters,” the lead singer announced. “May the legend of the garter and bouquet come true for them.”

Silently, Kelly prayed that he was right. How she longed to be the one in the long white dress beginning a fairy tale existence with her handsome prince charming.

Chapter 9

Kelly awoke and reluctantly got out of bed. The throwaway bouquet sat on the dresser as a poignant reminder of the wonderful evening she spent dancing in JK's arms.

Before going out to join Jason and Sheila, she showered and dressed for the day. Once dressed, she stepped into the airy living room to find she was the only one up. A glance at the clock told her that she needed to get busy in the kitchen, as it was already nine and people would be arriving at one for lunch and to watch Birdie and Chuck open their gifts.

As she worked in the kitchen, Kelly couldn't help but think of the gift she had brought for the newlyweds. Over the winter, she had started crocheting a tablecloth to be put in her hope chest, of course, she referred to it as her hopeless chest. The delicate design of the tablecloth was a pineapple pattern and she knew it was the perfect gift for her friends. She had worked on it during every free minute and finished it just before she left on her trip. Although she hadn't starched it the way she would the doilies she made, she knew it didn't need to be stiff. It was meant to grace a table and drape over the sides. Having seen Birdie's new

home, she knew it would be the perfect accent for the dining room table.

“Good gracious,” Sheila exclaimed as she entered the kitchen. “Why didn’t you wake me? It’s almost ten and I…” She stopped short when she saw the amount of food Kelly had already prepared.

“I hope you aren’t upset I got started without you. Since I knew what you planned to prepare, I didn’t want to bother you. I figured you needed your sleep more than you needed to be stuck in the kitchen.”

“I’m not at all upset. This is wonderful. It’s no wonder that woman wanted you to cater her parties. Everything looks great.”

“I’m glad you like it. Since I’m already in the midst of this, why don’t you go in and relax? It’s the least I can do considering you’re letting me stay here rent-free and feeding me in the bargain. This is where I shine and I’m having a ball.”

“Well, if you insist, but I do feel guilty having you do all the work.”

Kelly couldn’t help but compare Sheila’s comment to those of her family. No one ever felt guilty about her doing the work. It was expected. Unlike at home, here, she was doing this because she wanted to.

“Did you remember to call your folks?” Jason asked when he entered the kitchen.

Kelly shook her head. In all the excitement of the wedding, she had forgotten her Saturday call to her parents. “I’ll do it as soon as I finish here.”

“What’s their number?” Jason asked. “I’d like to talk to them and thank them for sharing their wonderful daughter with us.”

Kelly groaned. In no way could she refuse to give Jason the number. She just hoped her parents would be on their best behavior, or better yet, not be home to answer the call.

While Jason dialed the number on the speakerphone that sat conveniently on the center island of the kitchen that served as additional counter space as well as a breakfast bar, Kelly poured them all steaming cups of coffee.

She heard the phone on the other end ring twice before her father picked it up.

“Hello,” he said, his voice sounding strange as it came through the speaker, rather than the receiver.

“Mr. Masters, this is Jason Andrews. In all of the excitement of the wedding, we realized that Kelly didn’t call you yesterday.”

“Hmm, I guess she didn’t. She would have only gotten the machine as we were out shopping all day.”

Kelly’s heart sank. They hadn’t even realized that she hadn’t called them.

“Kelly was going to call when she finished in the kitchen. She’s been such a great help to my wife in getting the wedding preparations done.”

“That’s good. We were afraid she wouldn’t pull her weight out there. Of course, pulling *her* weight is no easy feat.” Her father laughed as though he had made a really funny joke, while she inwardly cried bitter tears of shame at his words.

“I’m afraid you don’t know what a gem you have. We’ve begged her to sit back and enjoy her vacation, but she has insisted on helping with everything. It has been a delight having her in our home.”

“Well, I’m glad she’s helping out. The one thing that girl does well is cook.”

Kelly looked at the shocked expressions on Jason's and Sheila's faces. "Thanks for the compliment, Daddy," she said, trying to sound as though she was enjoying his jokes at her expense.

"How much longer will you be in Phoenix?"

"I'll be staying until a week from today. Sheila has arranged for me to be in a luncheon fashion show. After we're finished, JK and I will be leaving for Los Angeles. If we're out of here by three, we should be back in Los Angeles by ten at the latest and he won't have to miss a day of work."

"Together?" her father questioned, his voice filled with sarcasm

"JK flew out, so we'll be driving back. He turned in the other half of his ticket and said he'd rather use the money for gas so I don't get lost."

"Well, that's right gentlemanly of him considering what you'll probably be giving him in return."

"What a thing to say!" Sheila exclaimed.

"Kelly knows what I mean. I just worry that he plans to take advantage of her."

"Look, Daddy, I'm thirty-three years old. Maybe it's time someone took advantage of me in a way other than asking me to cater their weddings and pay for them as well. It's time for me to start living. Once the kids have their money for school this year, the bank is closed."

"I...didn't mean to upset you so. You know how much your sisters need your help."

"Well maybe it's time they started helping themselves. I've been trying to save up to buy a house for years. This time, no one is going to take my dream from me."

Hot tears flowed down her cheeks and she ran from the room without saying good-bye to her father. For the rest of

the summer, she wouldn't think about the people back home. His words had hurt enough that she planned to enjoy herself and pay the price for it when she returned in the fall. Perhaps it was best if she didn't make the Saturday calls for a while to give everyone a chance to cool off.

"I am so very sorry," Sheila said when she came into the bedroom to console Kelly. "I can't believe your father talked to us and to you that way."

"I can. He doesn't look at me in the same light as he does my sisters. They're both thin and beautiful, plus happily married. I've always been the ugly duckling of the family. It's not like I don't know how they feel about me. It just hurts when they think nothing of voicing their opinions to strangers."

Sheila rubbed Kelly's back reassuringly. "I do wish there was some way you could get out of your contract with the school system. It would be much better if you were in California and close enough so we could keep an eye on you."

Kelly turned to face Sheila. "You've been wonderful to me. I don't even know if California will work out for me. In any case, my life is in Wisconsin. I would miss my nieces and nephews terribly if I were so far away. I've dealt with their attitude all my life. I'm just sorry that my dad said those things to you and Jason."

Sheila laughed out loud. "I'll bet he's sorry, too. When I left the kitchen, Jason was telling him exactly what he thought in no uncertain terms. He's managed his own business for a long time. When he blows, employees scatter."

The thought of someone telling her father off in no uncertain terms was suddenly so funny, that Kelly couldn't stop laughing. "Maybe it's for the best that I decided not to

call home for the rest of the summer. I'll let them stew in their own juices for a while. When I get back, it's just possible that they might be happy to see me."

"Well if they aren't, you just call us and we'll start looking for a teaching position for you right here in Phoenix for next year. I know that would certainly make Birdie and Chuck happy to have you so close. It might even convince JK to transfer to this area. The four of you are such good friends, it would be wonderful if you were close to each other rather than separated by nearly two thousand miles."

Kelly turned and hugged Sheila tightly. If she had done such a thing with her own mother, she knew her mom would have pulled away. It always seemed as though her mother's affections were reserved for the rest of the family, rather than Kelly. Instead, Sheila hugged her back with more affection that she had ever enjoyed at home.

"Hey, where is everyone?" JK called from the living room. "I knocked but no one answered."

Sheila got up from the bed and went out to greet JK while Kelly retreated to the bathroom to splash her face with cold water and wash away the traces of the tears she had shed.

"There's my girl," JK greeted her when she finally joined them. "I thought you were hiding from me."

"Not hiding, just making myself presentable."

JK laughed at her statement. "I doubt that took much work. I can't imagine you being anything but presentable at any given moment."

His words, as well as his reassuring hug, told her she'd made the right decision about her parents. If things worked out in California, she would start looking for a job out there for next year and not sign a contract in Madison when it was offered.

* * * *

At Birdie's insistence, JK took Kelly out to the pool area. Something was wrong, and he knew it had nothing to do with him.

"Are you all right?" he finally asked.

Kelly looked at him, but he knew she was thinking about something other than the wonderful summer he had planned for the two of them. "Ah, I was just thinking about..."

When she left the rest of her sentence unsaid, he wondered if she was having second thoughts about coming to California with him for the summer.

"What Kelly can't manage to say is that there was a big blowup with her folks over the phone this morning," Jason said.

JK turned to see him bringing a serving cart loaded with food out to the pool area to be put on the buffet table that had been set up.

"When we got up, Kelly was working in the kitchen," Sheila continued when she came out to join them. "We encouraged her to call her parents and let them know why she didn't call yesterday. Jason put the call on speakerphone and we were shocked at the way her father talked to her."

"Well, I doubt that will happen again," Jason declared. "I gave him a piece of my mind and told him that if he didn't want Kelly for anything other than money and food preparation, she was welcome to come and live with us for as long as she wanted. I think it shocked him to hear someone tell him off like that."

JK looked into Kelly's eyes and saw the hurt that lay behind them. About to take her into his arms, he stopped when the guests started to arrive.

With the hubbub of guests and the opening of the gifts, JK had no time to even talk to Kelly. It wasn't until the newlyweds left for the airport and everyone else was gone that they had a moment alone.

"Are you all right?" JK asked when she walked him out to his rental car.

"I'm fine. I'm used to my dad's barbs concerning my weight."

"What did he say?"

"It doesn't matter. It's ancient history. For the rest of the summer, I plan to enjoy being Kelly and not worry about my family. Maybe a summer without me checking in, to say nothing of chipping in, will make them appreciate me more."

As much as JK wanted to know what had been said to so upset her, he held his tongue. Eventually, she would tell him. For now, he had to be content to have her with him. Come fall, he knew she would return to Wisconsin. He hoped that during the summer, he would be able to build her self-esteem.

"Well, for now, we'll just concentrate on your vacation. What do you have planned for this week?"

"I thought I'd go Old Tucson and take some pictures for my class, then explore more of the Phoenix area. Who knows when I'll ever get back here again?"

"So that takes care of your days; what about your nights?"

She giggled as though she were a schoolgirl. He liked the sound of it. "I have a feeling there's a handsome Prince Charming who would be willing to be with me. I'm even planning on preparing him a meal. I think it's best if he samples my cooking before he fully agrees to the summer arrangements. If I don't miss my guess, both you and your

sister work days, so I plan on having dinner on the table when you get home.”

He started to protest, but she put her finger to his lips. “Let me do this for you. It might be the only chance I ever have to play Suzie Homemaker. Since cooking and cleaning are my specialty, let me do the things I’m good at.”

As much as JK wanted to protest, he didn’t. His plans for the summer certainly didn’t include her cooking and cleaning for him. He wanted to show her his part of the world, not only Los Angeles, but all of Southern California, including a trip up the coast to San Francisco and beyond. He had some vacation time coming and he planned to take at least a week to make the drive that he so enjoyed and wanted to share with Kelly.

“It’s late,” Kelly finally said. “You have to get up early for work tomorrow and I promised Sheila that I would clean up the mess out by the pool while she and Jason are at work.”

“I’ll go, but only on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

He liked the way her eyebrows went up in questioning his motives. “I want to take you out to dinner tomorrow night. Just the two of us, like the night we drove out into the desert. Chuck told me about a beautiful little restaurant which just happens to be very quaint. I don’t want to share you with anyone.”

“Your condition sounds fair. Until tomorrow night.”

She allowed him to take her in his arms for a goodnight kiss. As much as he wanted the kiss to be a passionate one, he resisted. She wasn’t ready for that kind of a kiss at this point. The memory of her father’s biting words, whatever they were, was too strong. She needed to relax more

before he could even consider making Kelly his in every way.

* * * *

Kelly watched as JK pulled away from the curb. The one place she had dreamed of visiting was San Francisco, as well as the wine country to the north. Now JK was laying that prospect at her feet. She couldn't help but wonder how she would ever be content to return to Wisconsin and the routine that she had done her whole life.

"That was a wonderful party," Jason declared when she entered the living room. "Sheila tells me you are planning to do the clean-up tomorrow morning. I don't think I can allow that. Let me call in a professional cleaning service."

His statement left her in shock. "And waste all that money? I think not. It's the least I can do. I need a day to get back to reality before I start sightseeing in earnest. Cleaning is something I do well. Let me do this for you."

"We want you to relax," Sheila said, as she entered the room carrying a tray with three glasses of wine. "I feel terribly guilty asking you to work so hard on your vacation."

"Well, don't. I need to keep my hands busy. I certainly can't sit around here and watch someone else do the things I should be doing."

"Well, if you insist," Sheila relented. "Since I only work on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, why don't we go to Old Tucson together on Tuesday? It's one of my favorite places and I would love playing tour guide. I'm certain we can find one of those places that take your picture with you poking your head through a cardboard cutout. It would be a lot of fun and we can both dream of being tall, slender and outrageously sexy as a couple of saloon girls."

“That sounds like a plan. I have a feeling it will be the one and only time I’ll ever have a picture of myself looking tall, slender and outrageously sexy.”

By the time they finished their wine, Kelly was having problems keeping her eyes open. Yawning broadly, she excused herself to go to bed.

Once she slid between the crisp sheets, she found she couldn’t shut off her mind. JK’s kiss and promise of a wonderful summer together replayed behind her closed lids. Unfortunately, her father telling her to pull her weight and making crude comments regarding any man wanting to be with her because of her size overshadowed both the image and the words.

Chapter 10

“So where are you taking her for dinner?” Sally, the older woman who worked in the same department as he did, asked.

“What are you talking about?” JK questioned, rather than answer her directly.

“You know perfectly well what I’m talking about. That lovely young lady you were with at the wedding. Isn’t her name Kelly? You two make a wonderful couple.”

“It’s funny. I’ve been thinking the same thing. I was planning to take her to the little Mexican restaurant that Chuck and Birdie took us to the first night she was here.”

“Nix that one,” Sally said in protest. “I have friends who run a delightful Tex-Mex restaurant downtown. I’ll call and make reservations. On a Monday night, the place won’t be crowded. Just leave it all to me. Before you go home tonight, I’ll get you the directions.”

JK shook his head. He hardly knew what to expect from a Tex-Mex restaurant, but he was willing to try anything, anything that is but something so spicy, he would never need his tonsils removed.

“Don’t look so scared,” Sally teased. “We don’t like our food overly spicy either.”

“How did you know that was what I was thinking?”

“Easy, you have very expressive eyes. They tell everything. I’ll call my friends and reserve a table and I’ll even order for you. You don’t have a problem with beef, do you?”

“None whatsoever. I enjoy a good steak and my mom makes the best pot roast in the world.”

“Good, then it’s all settled. Call Kelly and tell her to dress casually. This is a jeans type of place. I’m positive you’ll both love it.”

JK thanked Sally. She was like his mother, a matchmaker to end all matchmakers. Thank goodness she wasn’t trying to set him up with Jenny.

Once Sally left to make the arrangements, JK called Kelly.

“What’s up?” Kelly questioned when she recognized his voice.

“One of the girls here is making reservations for us for dinner at her favorite restaurant. It’s Tex-Mex and she’s even ordering for us.”

“That sounds scary. Are you sure we won’t be running for the nearest emergency room because the food is too hot?”

“Positive. I said almost the same thing to her myself and she laughed at me. She knows about my diet and promised we’d be very happy with the meal.”

“Well, if you say so, I’m game. What time should I be ready?”

“She’s making reservations for us at seven, so I’ll pick you up at six. I hope you aren’t overdoing things by cleaning up after yesterday’s party.”

“Not at all. This is minor compared to the clean-up I had to do after Kim’s wedding. Then I could have used about three pairs of extra hands and I did it alone. This is a

piece of cake. I've got to go, the dishwater is getting cold. I'll see you tonight."

"Dishwater?" JK echoed. "I thought they had a dishwasher."

"They do, but the serving trays are silver. I don't want to put them in the dishwasher. Once they're clean, I want to polish them and put them back in their protective bags."

"Well, that certainly is above and beyond. Look, we'll talk about this tonight. I'd better get back to work and stop concentrating on my best girl."

* * * *

Kelly hung up the phone and concentrated on the task at hand. While she washed the trays and started to polish them, she couldn't help but think of JK calling her his best girl. No one had ever called her by such an endearment before and it felt good.

She had just finished the last of the cleaning when she heard a car pull into the carport. It surprised her when Sheila walked into the kitchen.

"I thought you were working all day," Kelly commented.

"For me, all day is until three. I'd hoped to get here in time to give you a hand with the cleaning, but I see that I'm too late. This place virtually sparkles."

Kelly watched as Sheila looked around the room. As she did, she seemed to pay close attention to the protective bags that held the silver trays and the bottle of silver polish that sat on the counter. "Don't tell me you polished the silver today."

"Okay, so I won't tell you, but I did. I couldn't put it away without a protective layer of silver polish. It makes for less work when you need to use them again."

Sheila shook her head. "I usually just wash them and put them back. I'm always too tired after a party to do that. It's something I do when I get them out. What a timesaver that will be for me."

Kelly smiled at the compliment as she put the trays on the top shelf. She knew Sheila would need a step stool to reach them when she needed them again but that was where Sheila said they were to be put. "There, it's all done. How about a nice glass of iced tea? I just made a pitcher and really need a picker-upper. Besides, JK said tea is as good to drink as water."

"You certainly are taking JK's suggestions seriously. I know how hard dieting and exercise is. Do you think you'll be able to keep it up?"

"With a role model like JK, it won't be hard. He's a real inspiration."

"I can't argue with you there, just don't get discouraged when the weight doesn't fall off. This is going to be hard work, but it will be worth it. So where are the two of you going tonight?"

"Someone he works with suggested their favorite Tex-Mex restaurant. I don't even know what to wear."

"I do. For a place like that, it's jeans and plaid shirts. Let's go and see what you brought with you."

Kelly sighed. She certainly didn't like the way she looked in a pair of jeans, even though she had brought a pair with her. She envied her sisters who looked so cute in their tight-fitting jeans when hers looked like she had gone to Omar The Tent Maker in order to buy hers.

Sheila looked at the jeans that Kelly had purchased several years earlier and shook her head. "These will never do. We have to go shopping."

"Shopping?"

“Of course, shopping. A new outfit is far less than I would have paid a cleaning service to do what you did today.”

Kelly sighed deeply. She knew there was no use in arguing with Sheila. After cleaning up and changing her clothes, they were off to Sheila’s favorite boutique.

To Kelly’s surprise, she found a cute pair of denim capris pants as well as a camel colored tank top and a short sleeved plaid shirt to complement the outfit. The price tag made her gasp, but she said nothing to Sheila.

“This outfit will work well, especially since Sheila says you’re losing weight. If you look in the waistband, you’ll see tabs that you can use to make them fit as you lose. The shirts will work, since most people prefer to wear their tops a bit large. What do you think?”

Kelly looked in the mirror. Although she had taken the size she normally wore, she knew she would need a size smaller. She decided it must be the cut of the clothes.

“I need to try these in a smaller size,” she said once she decided that the pants were just too large.

“How much weight have you lost since you left home?” the owner of the shop asked.

“I doubt any.”

“Look, these pants usually run small. I was doubtful when you took your normal size because of that. I think it’s a good idea for you to check out Sheila’s scale when you get home.”

“What scale?” Sheila questioned. “That’s the one thing I don’t allow in my house.”

The clerk began to laugh. “Well, then, I think I can help you out, Kelly. There’s a group of women who meet here once a week and try to lose weight. There’s a scale in the back. Are you willing to give it a try?”

The thought of losing weight and looking as good as JK was intriguing. Of course, she had only been following his diet for a little over a week. She couldn't have lost that much weight.

"Sure, why not? I think it might be interesting to have a starting point as of right now. I know what I weighed when I left home. Unfortunately, I doubt I've lost much weight. Maybe a pound or two."

"A pound or two wouldn't make this much difference. Let's see exactly what you've lost."

Kelly tried on the smaller size and was surprised at how well they fit. When she was again dressed in lighter weight clothing, she followed the clerk and Sheila into a back room of the shop. To her amazement, the scale read that she had lost a total of fifteen pounds.

"How can that be? It's only been a week and..."

"And you were traveling before that. I bet you weren't eating like you do at home and you were getting a lot more exercise. It's a good start, but don't get discouraged when you hit the first plateau. It happens to everyone who tries to lose weight. It isn't just dieting, it's changing your entire lifestyle. At least that's what they say at the meetings."

"If this is what you want, I'm pleased for you," Sheila said. "Now, we have to get you home and dressed for your date tonight."

Kelly smiled at the word date. She had never been on a real date. There had been times when her friends had set her up, but as soon as the guy saw what she looked like, he backed off. JK was real and he didn't care if she looked like Kelly or Twiggy. He wanted to be with her, fat or slim. She vowed to make him proud of her. It was something she wanted to do not only for him, but also for herself. She knew carrying the excess weight was not good for her

health. She could only imagine how surprised her doctor would be when she arrived for her yearly physical.

* * * *

Sally assured JK that the reservations were set for seven and that she had taken the liberty of ordering for both of them. JK had to admit he was a bit apprehensive, but he trusted Sally's judgment. He had no doubt that her selections would suit him well, but he didn't know about Kelly's tastes in food. What if her Midwestern palate wasn't used to Tex-Mex cooking?

Almost as soon as he took his finger from the doorbell's button, the door opened. Jason was grinning like a Cheshire cat, making JK wonder just what was going on. The moment he stepped into the foyer, he knew what prompted Jason's smug smile. Kelly looked lovely. She had evidently gone shopping and wore a pair of denim Capri pants topped with a plaid shirt and yellowish tank top. It was evident that the outfit was new. It was also evident, by the fit, that Kelly had lost weight.

"You look fabulous. Is it my imagination, or have you started losing weight?"

Kelly beamed. The smile on her face was an adequate answer, even though he knew she would put her feelings into words.

"I can't believe it. These pants are a full size smaller than I usually wear. At the shop where I bought these, they have a scale and it says I've lost fifteen pounds. I can hardly believe it. I guess eating the way you eat is doing some good. I can hardly wait to get to California and join your health club."

Although JK told Kelly he was excited about her working out with him as well, he knew what lay ahead for her. She wasn't used to the regiment that belonging to a

health club demanded. He remembered his first few weeks of working out. There had been many times that he had wanted to flat-out quit. It was the same when his sister joined and it would be the same with Kelly. He made a mental note to call the club tomorrow and talk to Judy. She had been his sister's personal trainer and he wanted her to do the same for Kelly. She wouldn't push until she was certain Kelly was ready.

On the drive to the restaurant, Kelly told him of all that she had done during the day. It amazed him that after the excitement of the weekend, she wasn't exhausted. The amount of work that she accomplished was almost unbelievable.

"So, what does Sheila have planned for you tomorrow?" he asked once they were seated.

"She wants to go to Old Tucson. I wish you were able to go with us."

"Me too, but you know the old saying, there's no rest for the weary. We'll have lots of time to explore this summer. Back home, I can make my own hours, and I usually go in at about six so I can be home to enjoy at least the late afternoon sun. I'm usually home by three."

"When do you go to the health club?"

"Usually on Saturday mornings and I go in two nights a week after work."

"Don't you go every day?"

Her question took him by surprise. "There's no use in overdoing. Besides you'll understand once you meet Judy. She's going to be your trainer. The club suggests you only work out three times a week and that you do it every other day. The schedule works well for me and I'm certain it will for you as well. Don't kid yourself, it's not a piece of cake. It's a lot of hard work."

Before he had a chance to elaborate further, their dinner was served. As Sally promised, everything was delicious with just the right amount of spice.

“That was wonderful,” Kelly said, once he paid the bill and they were outside. “The only thing is that I’m stuffed.”

JK checked his watch. “It’s still early. Why don’t we go for a walk before we go back to Jason and Sheila’s place?”

She reached down and took his hand in hers. “I think that sounds like a wonderful idea. Even though most of the stores are closed, this looks like a wonderful area to go exploring.”

As they walked up and down the streets peering into the shop windows, JK enjoyed the warmth of Kelly’s hand in his. This was something he had dreamed about ever since Birdie asked her to be in the wedding. He wondered just how long he had been in love with the woman who wrote the wonderful messages during the Saturday night chats. For him, it had been forever. Although he had dated many women, the one who had dominated his dreams was eighteen hundred miles away and to her, he only existed on the screen of her computer. He prayed that the next few weeks would change things. Even though she was committed to her family and her job, perhaps he could persuade her to come out to California once her current contract was up and become his wife.

The thought no more than crossed his mind than he realized what it was. He wasn’t ready to get married. He had no desire to be saddled with a wife. Wasn’t that what he had told his parents when they pressed him about giving them grandchildren? Early on, he had vowed to remain a bachelor. The last thing he wanted was the responsibility of a wife and kids. So why had the thought crossed his mind?

“Isn’t that just the most beautiful tablecloth you’ve ever seen?” Kelly asked, her question drawing him back to the present and the peach cloth that was displayed in the window of the linen shop. “It would be perfect for my kitchen table.”

The mention of her kitchen table brought him back to reality. He would remain a bachelor forever, just as he’d planned. They would have this summer and then she would return to Wisconsin. It was doubtful that she would make the trip to California again. With her newfound independence as well as her new look, there would be other areas she would be more interested in exploring. He would make the most of this summer and have only a digital photo album to remember her by.

“It looks like they’re open. Do you want to go in and get it?”

“I shouldn’t but I just can’t resist. My kitchen is so stark, this would really brighten it up.”

He followed her into the store and watched as she fingered the delicate linens that appeared in every color imaginable. Bright oranges and red mingled with the pastels to make the room virtually come alive with color.

“I can’t believe how reasonable these things are,” she said as she selected bright orange napkins and a matching table runner to go with the tablecloth. Before she finished, she had added a set in shades of blue, one in green and a third in purple to her purchases.

“Well that takes care of Christmas for my mother and sisters. We all like our tables to look nice.”

“Christmas!” JK exclaimed. “I can’t believe you’re thinking about Christmas in June.”

“So, when do you think about it?”

“How about December twenty-third?”

“Now you sound like my brother Dan. That’s when he does his Christmas shopping and it drives me right up the wall. I can’t believe guys wait until the last minute.”

“Maybe it’s the last minute, but we get better prices. All the sales are on.”

Kelly laughed at his comment. “Maybe so, but I can’t believe they’re any better than the price I just got.”

She handed him the charge slip. It amazed him to see that she had spent less than twenty dollars for each set of linens.

“Probably not as good a quality as the big stores, but the price certainly is right.”

She looked at him indignantly. “I’ll have you know the one thing I look for is quality. These are as good as any I’ve ever gotten at Kohls or the Boston Store. Better, in fact. I just happened to get lucky that this shop was having a sale.”

Before she could take the bag with her purchases from the counter, he picked it up. He knew the linens would be heavy and they still had to walk back to the car. He was used to carrying heavy loads. It wouldn’t hurt him to help her out a bit.

* * * *

Kelly felt guilty when JK took her package and refused to allow her to carry it. The purchase was, perhaps, a foolish one, but she knew the reaction of her family on Christmas Day would be worth the money she had just spent. She would have to keep a close watch on the date so she could send a payment to the credit card company on time. She certainly didn’t want her account to become delinquent. She’d worked too hard to obtain her high credit rating to screw it up just because of this trip.

By the time they reached the car, she was glad she had allowed JK to carry her bag. She realized she certainly

wasn't used to so much walking and the extra weight would have made things worse.

"It looks like we got here just in time," JK quipped. "We shouldn't have walked so far."

"But I'm glad we did," she replied. "If we hadn't, I wouldn't have found that wonderful little shop. Hopefully, by the end of the summer, we will have done enough walking that it won't be so tiring."

"Well, I just hope I haven't tired you out so badly that you don't enjoy Old Tucson tomorrow."

"I doubt that. After a good night's sleep, I'll be ready to go. I don't intend to waste a minute of this vacation." The words sounded hollow to Kelly's ears and she prayed that they didn't sound that way to JK. With not being used to physical exercise, she knew that she would be not only stiff, but also sore in the morning.

Chapter 11

Kelly heard Jason's alarm go off. Rather than turn over and go back to sleep, she reached for her robe. She knew that Sheila would be ready to leave for Old Tucson as soon as Jason left.

To Kelly's amazement, she was neither stiff, nor sore. She actually felt great. Maybe her friends were right, exercise was good for her.

After a shower, she dressed in the capri pants Sheila had purchased the day before, as well as the matching shirt and went out to join Sheila for breakfast.

"Are you ready for our adventure?" Sheila asked as she set a plate of bacon and eggs in front of Kelly.

She knew that this was more than she was used to eating for breakfast, but justified it by the fact that they would be doing a lot of walking and the calories could easily be worked off.

With breakfast finished and the dishes loaded into the dishwasher, they got into Sheila's SUV and headed out of Phoenix for the adventure that Sheila had promised Kelly they would embark on today.

As they drove toward Tucson, the changing landscape awed and amazed Kelly. The lush greenery that had been brought to the area by the snowbirds soon gave way to the

stark brown of the desert that was dotted with the huge saguaro cactus that seemed to spring up like weeds everywhere she looked.

They had driven for about an hour, when Sheila stopped at the Gila River Pima Indian Reservation. The people who occupied the village displayed their souvenirs and smiled at the tourists who stopped to look at what they had to offer.

Kelly made her way to one of the women who had laid her Kachina dolls on a blanket for people to examine. The beauty as well as the quality of these handmade dolls intrigued her so much, that she bought one for herself as well as one for each of her nieces. She knew she would have to do some extensive research, but the doll she had purchased for herself would be used in her classroom as well.

At Sheila's insistence, they visited the Catholic church where they were told that the mass was performed not only in the native language of the people, but also in Spanish, while the music was provided by a mariachi band. Even though Kelly wasn't Catholic, she was awed by the beauty of the building and chose many of the postcards from the gift shop, since photos were not allowed to be taken.

All too soon, Sheila was pulling her toward the exit, as they had to continue on to Old Tucson. Kelly wished she would have had an entire day here instead of just under an hour, but she realized that this was not their original destination, and she really wanted to see the town where so many of her favorite television shows had been filmed.

As they drove toward Tucson, Kelly couldn't stop talking about the beauty of not only the church, but also the people they had just visited. She'd read about the Pima

people but never in her wildest dreams had she thought that she would actually get to see these gentle folk.

At last, they pulled into the parking lot just outside of Old Tucson and Kelly realized that she had been holding her breath through the winding narrow mountain roads that they had just driven. Before leaving the car, she said a silent prayer that the drive back would be less terrifying.

Once inside the park, Kelly realized that it looked like many of the Old West towns she had seen in the movies and TV shows she had watched. She stared in awe as she suddenly realized she was standing in front of the town of Sweetwater.

“This is Sweetwater!” she exclaimed as the realization of what she was seeing hit her like a ton of bricks.

“What are you talking about?” Sheila questioned worriedly. “Has the drive and the heat been too much for you?”

“Not at all. This is the town of Sweetwater from the show *The Young Riders*. I used to love that show when I was a kid. I always wanted to be like Lou in the show. She pretended to be a boy, but in reality, she was a girl. Of course, I was always too fat to be taken seriously. Everyone would have known I wasn’t a boy, especially since I developed at such an early age.”

“Oh, the TV show that was about the pony express. I remember Jason watching it, but I was never into the westerns that seemed to be on every channel we turned to. I read my books instead.”

Kelly looked around to see if there was a guide to take them through the myriad of buildings, but soon realized that everyone was just wandering through the area on their own. It was evident that this portion of the trip was a self-guided tour.

On the outskirts of town, she was shocked to see a small replica of the beautiful hacienda from the old western, *The High Chaparral*. She hurried up to it and peeked into the windows. To her surprise, it reminded her of the inside of a dollhouse rather than the exquisite living room of the home she had so loved as a child. Watching the reruns of that show had made her pretend she was the beautiful Victoria and all of the furnishings of the house belonged to her, when in reality, she lived in a small farmhouse on the outskirts of one of the farming communities outside of Madison.

“You look like you could stand to get something to eat plus something cold to drink,” Sheila observed. “Let’s see if one of these saloons caters to ladies of our caliber.”

Reluctantly, Kelly pulled herself away from the small house and followed Sheila back to the main street of town. Music sounded from the insides of the many saloons they passed before coming to one named *The Long Branch*.

“Just as I thought, every old town has to have a saloon called *The Long Branch*. Do you think we’ll find Miss Kitty inside talking to Matt, Doc and Festus?”

“Not unless there’s someone here doing those characters today. I do know this particular saloon has some of the best food in town. This is where Jason brought me the first time we came up here. I know this is Birdie’s favorite as well.”

After entering through the batwing doors, Kelly and Sheila found a table toward the center of the room where they could watch the goings-on. The menu was complete with thick steaks as well as barbeque ribs. Although they were tempting, Kelly chose a salad with strips of steak on the top, while Sheila opted for a steak sandwich with greasy fries on the side.

“Would you ladies like to go outside and find a table?” the waitress who was dressed like a saloon girl asked. “You’ll find it much cooler and the view is fantastic.”

Sheila nodded and asked if their order and drinks could be delivered to the table. Although the girl nodded and Sheila made her way toward the door, Kelly had her doubts about it being much cooler outside. The summer sun beat down on the dusty wooden planks of the street and sidewalk, making the temperature rise to an unbearable level.

To her surprise, there was a slight breeze that made the one hundred and five degrees the thermometer registered feel like an eighty degree day back home. Kelly reminded herself that this was, indeed, a dry heat, rather than the humidity-filled summers she usually endured in Wisconsin.

With their drinks served, Kelly sipped her iced tea through the straw while she gazed at the mountains that loomed in the distance. As she did, lightning played across their tops giving her a view like none she had ever imagined possible. Just seeing the phenomena made her realize that she was seeing mother nature’s light show, rather than the laser show she so enjoyed when she made her way to the observatory on the UW campus. She hoped she could find a postcard depicting the event to show everyone at home. The pictures that she could take with her camera would never do it justice.

She was still awestruck when the waitress returned with their food. She had thought she was safe ordering a salad, but soon realized that it contained more food than she could ever hope to eat. Out of curiosity, she looked over to the sandwich that Sheila had ordered. She smiled to see how large it was and gasped at the size of the dish of fries that accompanied the sandwich.

“I thought the only place where things came this large was in Texas,” she commented as she stuck her fork into the salad that was dripping with the most delicious dressing she had ever tasted.

“They make cowboy-sized portions here as well,” Shelia replied. “I think that’s why Jason likes this place so well. He can get a sandwich that’s big enough to accommodate his appetite.”

“Maybe it accommodates his, but I don’t think I can eat this much food. What a waste. If I would have known this was so large, I would have asked to have a much smaller one made.”

Kelly could hardly believe that Sheila ate everything on her plate and even some of the salad Kelly left. She wondered how the woman could hold so much food.

Face it, a few weeks ago, you could have eaten everything as well. You’ve decided to change your life and now you realize that smaller meals are just as satisfying.

Kelly had to agree with the voice of reason that sounded in her head. As she did, they pushed their chairs away from the table and made their way to the bleachers where people were getting ready to watch the shoot-out reenactment that was scheduled to begin in just a few minutes, according to the paper they had read while they were eating their lunch.

Even though the bleachers were made of wood, they were well heated by the sun. Kelly gingerly sat down, careful not to touch the hot structure with the bare skin of her legs.

Around her, several families were taking their places getting ready to enjoy the show. From nowhere, a group of teenagers ran up the planks to obtain a seat at the very top of the bleachers.

With the rest of the spectators, Kelly watched as the two men faced each other in the dirt street and drew their guns. The shots they fired echoed across the desert making her realize just how loud gunfire was. As much as she would have liked to live in the Old West, she knew that if there were daily gunfights, she would surely have gone deaf in no time whatsoever.

The show ended and the cowboys got up from the dusty street to take their bows. Before Kelly could start down the steps, the teenagers came rushing past her, pushing her out of the way. As she struggled to keep her footing, she twisted her ankle and went to her knees against the wooden plank beneath her feet.

“Are you all right?” a man with a thick southern drawl asked, as he helped her get up.

“I think so,” she said as she looked down at her skinned shins. Blood dripped from the scrapes that had gone deep into her flesh. Just the sight of the blood reminded her of the number of skinned knees and shins she doctored throughout the school year.

Once she was back on her feet, she winced at the pain that shot through her ankle. Looking down, she realized it had started to swell.

“Are you sure you really are okay?” the man who had helped her to her feet asked. Without waiting for her to answer, he continued, “We need to get you to the first aid station and report those kids to the authorities.”

Kelly didn't argue. She knew it would do no good, since Sheila was crying hysterically and the man was so solicitous. She also doubted that it would do any good to talk to the authorities, since the only law officers she had seen were merely actors.

She leaned heavily against the man who had become her savior as they made their way to the first aid station. To her surprise, the building was actually air-conditioned and the doctor as well as the nurses looked as though they knew what they were doing.

While the nurse washed off the dirt and pulled splinters from the scrape, the doctor examined her ankle. “I don’t have an x-ray machine here, but I don’t think anything is broken. It’s a bad sprain though. I’m going to wrap it and give you some crutches to get you home. Then I suggest you see your own doctor. As for any bills, those will be covered under our liability policy. My nurse will help you fill everything out and get you copies to take to your own doctor.”

Kelly watched as the doctor, who was dressed like Doc Adams from the TV show *Gunsmoke*, wrapped an ace bandage around her injured ankle. She was so humiliated she just wanted to die. Why was she the clumsy one, the one who always made a spectacle of herself?

She heard the door to the outer office open but paid little attention. It was probably just another guest who had been injured. To her surprise, the door to the examination room opened and a tall man with broad shoulders entered the room.

“I hear we have a bit of a problem here,” the stranger said, his voice softer than she would have expected for such a big man.

“We certainly do, Marshall. It seems we have a group of teenagers being rather disrespectful. They gave this young lady a shove and the end result is a badly sprained ankle. I hope you can catch them.”

“I have my deputies out looking for them now, with the help of Mr. Parker. He’s the gentleman who helped our

young friend here. They'll be brought here as soon as they're found. I do need to get a statement from you Miss... I'm sorry we really haven't been properly introduced. I'm Marshall Matt Dillon."

The irony of the situation made Kelly laugh. "Sure you are, and I'm Miss Kitty."

"I really am Mathew Dillon. My mother was a big fan of *Gunsmoke* and she thought it was the perfect name for me since our last name is really Dillon. Now I don't honestly believe that your real name is Kitty Russell, even though you are pretty enough to play the part."

Kelly lowered her eyes and could feel a blush creeping into her cheeks. Since coming here, JK, along with Jason and Sheila, had called her pretty. It was something she knew they were expected to say, but this was a complete stranger. The compliment was a welcome relief to the tension of the situation.

"I'm Kelly Masters, from Wisconsin. I know how kids are, they can be rather cruel when someone isn't perfect and I know I'm far from that. They were in a hurry and I was in their way, end of story."

"Not really," Matt replied. "Around here, we don't tolerate rudeness from our guests."

She again heard the door to the outer office open and sensed that several people had entered the building. "We found them, Marshall."

She immediately recognized the voice of the man who had become her rescuer and who she now knew was named Mr. Parker.

Unceremoniously, three teenage boys were marched into the examining room making Kelly feel as though she was being put on display for all to see. In addition to Mr. Parker and two men Kelly decided were deputies, were the

boys as well as their parents. She wondered just how many more people would be able to crowd into the small room.

“Don’t know why we’re here,” one of the boys said. “It ain’t like we killed anyone. She’s just a fat broad who got in our way.”

As much as Kelly wanted to correct the boy’s English, she refrained. Partly, it was because his words hurt so much that if she opened her mouth to speak, she would surely burst into tears and partly because the boy’s father grabbed him by the arm and whispered something in his ear that caused his face to go completely white.

“Would you like to press charges, Miss Masters?”

“Charges?” she questioned. “Do you really feel that’s necessary? They’re just kids having a good time. I’m certain they didn’t mean...”

“And I’m certain they did,” the father of the boy who had spoken said. “This was supposed to be an educational trip for these three. We’re all neighbors. After today, I’m ashamed to say I know any of these boys and the other fathers agree with me. If you don’t press charges, we will. It’s time our sons learned just what happens when they’re disrespectful.”

Kelly agreed. “If I do press charges, what will happen to them?”

“They’ll be taken to the jail here. We’ve had similar situations and each time, someone has volunteered to spend the night in town and watch over the offenders.”

“You mean we can’t go back to the hotel with our folks?” a second boy asked.

“Not tonight. Maybe a night on a hard cot with less than desirable food will teach you what we haven’t been able to,” the boy’s father replied.

The boys were led away, each in a pair of antique handcuffs and taken to the jail, while Kelly signed the necessary paperwork.

“I thank you for doing this, Miss Masters,” the first father said, as he extended his hand. “Kurt thinks that everything is a big game and that there are no consequences when he’s caught. As soon as I heard they were looking for three boys who had pushed a woman while exiting the bleachers, I knew who was involved. My friends and I started looking for the boys right away. To be truthful, this is the best thing that could have happened to them. I’d like to get your address so we can keep in touch and let you know if our sons learned a lesson from this.”

He handed Kelly a piece of paper. “I’m afraid I won’t be at my home address for the rest of the summer. I’ll be traveling until it’s time for school to start, but I can give you my e-mail address. I check it every day to see what’s going on with my friends.”

The man took the paper that Kelly handed him and frowned at the address of fatgal@kmasters.com. “Whatever possessed you to take a handle like that?” he asked.

“My bedroom mirror played a big part in it. I know I’m not like everyone else. When I first took it, I did it as a joke and...”

“And nothing. I hope by the end of the summer, you see a new you and decide to change your address. Anyone who is as lovely as you deserves a better e-mail address than that. When you do change it, please let me know so I can make the changes as well.”

Kelly wondered if she would ever get used to people complimenting her. At home, she was just fat Kelly, good for cooking and writing checks. Here, she was

complimented and praised. The feeling was one that was entirely new for her.

* * * *

JK pulled into the Andrews' driveway behind Jason. Earlier in the day, they had spoken on the phone and decided they would get together and cook supper for Sheila and Kelly.

"Good to see you, JK. I was hoping to get here ahead of you, but it took longer in the grocery store than I expected."

JK went over to Jason's vehicle to help him unload the bags of groceries that occupied the trunk area. "What did you do, buy out the store?"

"Not really. I decided that we should do chicken on the grill and I had to get the ingredients for my famous marinade. Along with that, I got some fresh fruit and some vegetables for a salad. I thought I'd put you in charge of the salad and fruit, while I concentrated on the meat."

Once they were in the kitchen, JK began to help Jason unload the bags. "What's this?" he questioned when he pulled a round plastic container from the bottom of one bag.

"It's dessert."

JK looked at the sweet treat skeptically.

"Don't worry, I asked the lady at the deli if she had anything for people who were counting their calories and she suggested pineapple fluff torte. She said they developed it for their diet conscious customers and assured me that it's a big hit."

JK hoped that Jason was right, since the dessert looked like it tasted marvelous. Of course, it was a given, since it contained his favorite fruit, pineapple.

They were just getting ready to take the chicken out to the grill, when they heard a car pull into the driveway.

“We’d best go out and help the girls,” Jason suggested. “If I know my wife, she didn’t just go sightseeing, she bought out half the stores between here and Old Tucson.”

JK laughed at Jason’s statement, but knew he made sense. Sheila Andrews was definitely addicted to shopping.

As soon as they stepped outside, JK knew something was wrong. Sheila was already out of the car and hurrying to the passenger side to assist Kelly. Instead of opening the front door, she opened the back and produced a pair of crutches.

“What happened?” Jason demanded, while JK assisted Kelly.

“It’s a long story. For now, let’s get Kelly in the house and off her foot.”

“Are you all right?” JK asked when Kelly got out of the car.

“Oh, you know Sheila, she’s making a big deal out of nothing. I took a fall and sprained my ankle. Tomorrow when she gets home from work, we have to go to the walk-in clinic and have it looked at. They didn’t have an x-ray machine at Old Tucson.”

“Tomorrow nothing,” Jason declared. “As soon as we have supper, we’re going over there tonight. They’re open twenty-four hours a day. I want it looked at by a professional tonight.”

“A professional did look at it. He said that it was a bad sprain and that I should follow up tomorrow.”

Jason continued to insist that they had to do it tonight and JK knew there would be no arguing with the man.

Supper was more like the Spanish inquisition with Jason asking questions of both Sheila and Kelly about the

accident and what had been done to the boys who were responsible.

“I think we should call your parents, Kelly,” he finally concluded. “They should know that you’ve been injured.”

“Oh, Jason, that’s not necessary. You must remember how my folks are.”

“Of course I do, but if the positions were reversed, I’d want to know if something like this happened to Birdie.”

JK could tell that Kelly wasn’t happy about Jason calling Wisconsin, but he also knew that Jason was not someone to argue with. Before anything more could be said, Sheila went into the house and brought out the kitchen phone. He couldn’t help but smile at the long cord that allowed the speakerphone to be brought out to the pool area. It certainly reminded him of being at home. His mother had several portable phones as well as one that had a long enough cord to reach halfway to San Francisco if need be.

They all sat around the table at the pool and listened as the phone on the other end rang twice before a woman answered it.

“Mrs. Masters, this is Jason Andrews.”

“I’m afraid I have no idea who you are.”

“I’m Birdie’s father and your daughter has been staying with us.”

“Oh that’s right. I’d forgotten your last name.”

“What I called for is to tell you that Kelly was injured today.”

“So, what do you want me to do about it? If she wants me to fly out there, she’ll have to send me the money. I certainly can’t afford a trip like that.”

“I don’t want you to fly out, Mom. I didn’t even want Jason to call you. It’s just a sprained ankle.”

“Then why did you call?”

“We called,” Jason began, exasperation sounding in his voice, “because we thought you would want to know about this. I know if it were my daughter, I’d want to be informed.”

“Look Mr. Andrews, Kelly is a big girl in more ways than one. I’m certain she can handle the situation without having to call home to Mommy and Daddy. I do appreciate the call, but from this distance, there isn’t much we can do.”

JK watched as Kelly picked up the receiver so that everyone couldn’t hear her mother’s biting words. He listened to her side of the conversation and could hear the hurt in her voice. It was evident that everything she had said about her parents was true. He prayed that a summer spent with his folks would show her what it was like to be in a loving family for a change.

Chapter 12

For the remainder of the week, Kelly heeded the doctor's advice and stayed off her feet as much as possible. She was pleased that the sprain wasn't as bad as the doctor in Old Tucson had thought and by the end of the week, she was walking with a cane rather than the crutches.

Every night, JK came to the Andrews home as soon as he was done with work. Although they had both said that they should be going out rather than imposing on Sheila, their hostess was adamant that she loved cooking for company.

Along with her daily visits from JK, she also received three e-mails from Austin Walters, the man who had insisted on keeping in touch with her after the incident at Old Tucson. Each e-mail thanked her profusely for pressing charges against the boys, as after a night in the old-time jail, their behavior had changed drastically.

"Are you ready for the fashion show?" JK asked when he came out to the pool where she was sitting enjoying the morning sun.

"I'm starting to have second thoughts about this. Something tells me I'll look like a real frump hobbling across the stage with my cane."

“Nonsense. The cane makes you look cute, no, make that dignified.”

Kelly laughed out loud. “And just what if I don’t want to look cute or dignified?”

“It doesn’t matter, we’re on the program, then tomorrow morning, we’ll be leaving for Los Angeles as soon as I turn in my rental car.”

“I have a question to ask. Did you really buy a round trip ticket, or was it a one-way from the beginning?”

JK squatted down beside her chair. “It was a one-way,” he confessed. “Since I decided to fly at the last minute, it wouldn’t have mattered if I had gotten a round trip, it would have cost the same. I was really hoping that I could convince you to come back to Los Angeles with me.”

Kelly beamed at his comment. She wanted to be with him and against her better judgment, found herself falling in love. *It’s foolish*, her mind cautioned when the ‘L’ word entered her thoughts. *After this summer, you won’t see him again.*

So why shouldn’t I have a summer fling? She silently countered. *It may be my only opportunity to do something like this.*

“Did you hear me?” JK asked, bringing Kelly out of her mental conversation.

“I guess my mind was elsewhere. What did you say?”

“I hope I was with you, wherever you were. What I said was that we should be getting ready to leave for the store, but before we do, I have a surprise for you.”

“A surprise? I love surprises. What is it?”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

With great ease, he helped her to her feet and handed her the wooden cane that Jason had told her once belonged to his father. Once they were back in the house, he took the

cane from her hand and replaced it with a beautiful ladies' walking stick.

"This is wonderful. It's much more feminine than my other cane. Where did you ever find it?"

"I told Sally about your accident and she suggested this little shop, not far from the office. I had a terrible time deciding on which one to buy, but then this little number called to me and said that it needed to be with you."

Kelly laughed at the thought of the walking stick calling to JK, but as soon as she wrapped her hand around the ornate rounded top, she understood completely. This walking stick felt as though it had been made to fit her hand alone. She turned around and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror that hung over the couch. When she did, she realized that she looked more like an elegant lady than a frump. *Maybe this fashion show won't be half bad.*

* * * *

JK watched as the models walked the length of the store and back again with their escorts. He worried about Kelly being able to make the entire circuit.

"Nervous," he whispered as the couple who were to make the walk ahead of Kelly and himself were introduced.

"As a cat, but this is actually fun."

He looked at the dress she wore. It was something that he knew she would be able to wear throughout the summer and into the fall when she entered her classroom. Just the thought of her being back to work in Wisconsin made him realize just how little time he would have to convince her to either stay in California, or return once her contract ran out. The latter was not something he wanted to think about. If she was as committed to losing the weight as she said, by the time she returned to Wisconsin, there would be

any number of young men ready and willing to take her out. She'd forget all about him.

"Our next couple," the announcer said, "are visiting us from out of state. I know you usually expect to see Birdie and Chuck at this time, but I'm told they're on their honeymoon cruise and won't return until tomorrow. In their place are the maid of honor and best man from their wedding, Kelly Masters from Wisconsin and JK Ransom from California. We persuaded them to join us today and postpone leaving for California until tomorrow morning."

JK took Kelly's arm and stepped out onto the stage. As he did, the announcer described the outfits they were wearing, right down to the accessories Kelly wore and the shoes the store had provided for both of them.

As they walked around the store, he was surprised to see Sally standing with Sheila and Jason to watch them as they showed off their new clothes. Usually, he didn't like being the center of attention, but with Kelly on his arm, he felt as though he was one of the movie stars his sister often went downtown to watch. For the first time since losing the weight, he realized he was no longer the overweight man who hid behind his computer screen. He had gone from ugly duckling to handsome swan and the beautiful woman beside him attested to the fact.

* * * *

After the show, Jason and Sheila took them out to dinner. The restaurant was elegant and the prices on the menu made Kelly's head swim. Back home, she would never consider going to such an expensive place, but of course, she wasn't in Madison and it was Jason and Sheila's choice.

She was surprised to learn that JK had left Chuck's apartment before coming to pick her up. At Jason's

insistence, JK would be spending the night at their home so he and Kelly could get an early start the next morning.

“When we’re done here,” Jason said, “we’ll take you girls home and then return JK’s rental car. There’s no use in you kids having to return it in the morning when you’re anxious to be on your way.”

Kelly agreed with his logic. The thought of JK driving her car to California brought a smile to her lips. By this time tomorrow night, they would be in Culver City and she would begin her summer with JK and his sister, Allison. This would be a vacation to remember and one that was entirely different from what she had planned.

As she thought about what lay ahead of her, she remembered her parents’ reaction to it when she first told them of her plans. They had both gone ballistic on her for even considering spending the summer with JK. What they didn’t understand was that she was an adult who had never had the experiences of dating and falling in love. For this one summer, she was going to do what she wanted and not what her family expected of her. After the conversation with her mother concerning her sprained ankle, Kelly knew it was best if she didn’t have contact with anyone back home until she returned to Madison. If they wanted her badly enough, they would call on her cell phone, but she would be damned if she would initiate the call.

“Hello,” JK said, dissolving her mixed thoughts. “Are you with us, or somewhere in outer space?”

Kelly laughed at his comment. “I guess I was in outer space. I was thinking about what a wonderful summer we’re going to have.”

“There must have been more to it than that. I doubt that frown on your face was caused by good thoughts.”

Kelly knew she'd have to explain and yet talking about her parents and their attitude toward her hurt more than she ever expected it to. "When I started thinking about this summer, I remembered my parents' reaction. It was less than enthusiastic. I've come to the decision that if they want to talk to me, they know my number. I need this summer to cool off. There will be plenty of time for fence mending when I get back to Madison."

From the look on JK's face, she knew he didn't agree with her, but at this point, she really didn't care. Their families were as different as day and night. From what he had told her, if there was a problem, he would talk it out, while she would only fester on it.

With dinner finished, JK and Jason took them back to the house. Once the guys left for the car rental station, Sheila suggested they relax out at the pool. Evening was falling and the heat of the day subsiding. It was the perfect time to enjoy the beauty that surrounded them.

"I heard what you said about your folks and to be honest, I don't blame you, but don't let this fester all summer," Sheila said.

"It's been festering for a long time. It's time I finally came to grips with it and led my own life for a change. By the time I get home in August, it will all be forgotten and I'll go back to being Kelly with the open checkbook. I guess that's the Kelly they want. I just wonder if it's the one who will return. As soon as I can, I plan to start exercising at JK's club and maybe shed a few more of these pounds. I know I'll never be svelte, but I can try. If I get into the habit of exercising and watching what I eat over the summer, it should be easier for me to continue once I return home."

“All I have to say is that I hope you’re doing this for the right reasons. I know you’d like to lose the weight for JK, but do you want to do it for Kelly?”

For a long moment, Kelly pondered Sheila’s question. *Am I only doing this for JK? I don’t think so. This is something I want for me. I’m tired of being called ‘Fat Girl.’ I want people to look at me and see me as a person and not just a fat blob they don’t consider worth taking seriously.*

“At first, I think I wanted to do this for JK, but I’m beginning to realize that I want it for myself as well. I’m a teacher and a damn good one, but no one ever takes me seriously. When I get home, I’m planning to start working toward my masters and show the world that I’m not just the fat girl who can cook and cater parties. I’m going to show them that I have a lot more to offer than that.”

“Well, good for you. As for that business about your open checkbook, I think it’s time you closed it. Let your family stand on their own, or fall on their faces trying. You have to think about your future. I know you want a house and once you get your masters, you’ll be able to afford it. Just don’t lose sight of your dream when your family comes to you crying hard times.”

“Where are you girls?” Jason called.

His intrusion gave Kelly time to concentrate on what Sheila had said. Her getting what she wanted out of life wasn’t selfish. It was what she deserved. She worked long and hard for her money. She shouldn’t be expected to spend all of it on her brothers and sisters. She needed it for herself so that she could make her life complete. It was unlikely that she would ever marry, so having her own home meant more to her than it would to most young women.

Chapter 13

Kelly's travel alarm went off at exactly four. She was thankful she had packed the previous evening, as Jason and Sheila had insisted on taking them out to breakfast before they began the long drive from Phoenix to Los Angeles.

By the time she showered and dressed, JK was waiting for her in the living room. "I have the car all packed. Are you ready to take off?"

She looked around the house where she'd spent the past two weeks. As she did, she realized that she considered this place home. It was something she couldn't say about her parents' house, even though she had grown up there. She often wondered if her parents had really wanted her in their lives, or if she had been an unwelcome surprise. Kate had been only a year old when she was born. Perhaps having a toddler took away from the joy of their new baby.

"Are those tears in your eyes?" JK asked, as he wiped them away with his thumb.

"I guess they are. I'm going to miss Jason and Sheila. They've become like a second set of parents to me."

"I know what you mean. I think it's just their way, but I've been completely comfortable in their home as well. I hope you feel the same way about staying with Allison and me this summer."

Kelly nodded. She knew that this summer would be exceptional, especially with JK showering her with the attention that she craved and never received at home.

“Are we ready to leave?” Sheila asked when she joined them.

“I guess so,” Kelly replied. “I’m sorry to get you two out of bed so early just to see us off, though.”

“Nonsense,” Jason responded. “I’m usually up at four and it doesn’t hurt Sheila one bit to join me on occasion. Now we’re off to breakfast. There’s a great truck stop just off the highway. The atmosphere leaves a lot to be desired, but the food is excellent. It’s just the ticket to get you all fueled up for your trip.”

Kelly gratefully slipped into the passenger’s seat of her car and allowed JK to do the driving. When they reached the truck stop, she was pleased to see that they featured the brand of gas she always used in her car. That meant she would be able to charge the purchase to her gas credit card, rather than her Visa.

“I’ll go in with you to order and while we’re waiting for our food to come, I’ll come back out and fill the car so we can leave as soon as we’re done eating. I’d like to be in LA before it gets dark tonight.”

Kelly agreed. Even though the trip would only take a few hours, she knew that he wanted to do some sightseeing along the way. To do that, getting an early start was imperative. She reached into her purse to retrieve her gas card, only to have him put his hand over hers.

“The gas is on me. It’s a lot cheaper than having to buy an airline ticket and I’ll have a lot better company than I would with a seatmate I don’t know.”

“I guess it wouldn’t do me any good to argue with you. Besides, it will help my budget. I’m afraid that my credit cards will all look like the national debt when I get home.”

Once they were seated at the table inside the truck stop, JK ordered a Spanish omelet before going outside to fill the car. Following his lead, Kelly ordered a vegetarian omelet.

“We’re really going to miss the two of you,” Sheila said as she wiped a tear from her eye with her napkin.

“We’ll miss you as well, but just remember, by the time you get home tonight, Birdie and Chuck will be back from their cruise. They’ll keep you so occupied, that you won’t have time to miss us.”

“Don’t be so certain, young lady,” Jason teased. “We expect you to call us as soon as you get to LA and we want at least two calls a week after that, even when you get back to Wisconsin.”

Jason’s request brought a smile to Kelly’s lips. Why couldn’t her own family be more like this?

With breakfast finished and their good-byes said, Kelly and JK headed toward the highway. The sun was up promising a beautiful day for the drive to California making Kelly glad that the air-conditioning in her car worked perfectly.

About midmorning, JK pulled off the highway so they could get coffee and stretch their legs. After spending about half an hour enjoying the scenery, they were back on the road until lunchtime.

The truck stop where they stopped for lunch was typical of any such place along the highway. A gift shop catered to truckers and a sign at the checkout counter indicated that the showers and computers were located at the back of the store. As much as she wanted to look

around, Kelly knew that she should save her money for shopping in California. By the way things were going, her Christmas shopping would be finished before she returned home in August.

After a lunch that was far healthier than what she would have expected at a truck stop, they were again on the road. "I was impressed by the food at that place," she confessed. "I've always heard that the food was good in truck stops, but somehow, I had the idea they weren't called greasy spoons for nothing."

"I used to think that same way until a friend of mine said that many of them were catering to the women who were driving truck now. They want their meals to be more nutritional and with more variety than just burgers and fries. I'll be truthful, I did know about this place because I looked up a listing of the best truck stops in the area on the Internet."

As soon as they pulled out of the parking lot and back onto the highway, they began to talk about what their lives had been like growing up. It seemed that Allison and JK had been the ones teased in their family. They had both been big as children and continued at that size throughout their teens and into their adult years.

"After I wound up in the hospital, we both decided it was time to do something about our weight."

Kelly was surprised to learn that Allison had been almost as heavy as JK. "So has Allison lost as much weight as you?"

JK laughed. "Not really. She's down to a manageable weight, but she wasn't told to diet or die. She works out and watches what she eats, but the weight doesn't come off as quickly for her as it did for me. The trainer warned her about it happening. She said that women burn calories

differently than men. When we first heard that, we laughed at it, but when Allison hit her first plateau and I didn't, we stopped laughing. Allison gets discouraged and quits for a while, but when the weight starts coming back, she knows she has to return to the gym and do the things Judy suggested."

They grew silent, allowing Kelly to enjoy the scenery all around her. All her life, the Southwest had held an attraction for her and now she knew why. As much as she loved Wisconsin with its changing seasons, the area they were driving through was fascinating.

It was late afternoon when they finally pulled into an alley that led to the parking area where JK and Allison kept their cars. Kelly worried that there wouldn't be legal parking for her vehicle, but he assured her that there was definitely room, as their other roommate was gone for the summer and so was his car.

Allison waited for them and rushed out to greet her brother. As JK had said, she hadn't shed as much weight as he had, but she still looked lovely.

"Oh, Kelly, I'm so glad to finally meet you," Allison gushed as she embraced Kelly. "JK has talked about you so much, I feel like we're old friends. I can tell from the pictures that I've seen on the Internet that you've lost weight. I hope you haven't invested in a whole new wardrobe."

The statement bewildered Kelly. "I've just bought a couple of new pieces. Why do you ask?"

"Because everything I have stored away will fit you perfectly. It won't be long before you can start dropping sizes and I have all of those as well. Besides, it's foolish to spend so much money on clothes you won't be wearing long."

“But you did,” Kelly countered.

“Guilty as charged, but I did a lot of my shopping at thrift shops. That way, I didn’t drop a bundle. Unfortunately, if you aren’t from around here, it’s hard to know which shops are the best. Why I’ve hung onto them, I didn’t know until JK told me about your weight loss. I guess I kept them for you. Anyway, let’s get in out of the sun. We only have a few minutes before we have to be at Mom and Dad’s.”

“Mom and Dad’s,” JK echoed. “Why?”

“You know Mom, she’s dying to meet Kelly. She says it’s about time a young lady caught your eye and she wants to be one of the first people to welcome her to California. You bring in the bags and I’ll show Kelly where the shower is so she can freshen up.”

Allison’s take-charge attitude took Kelly by surprise. If she were back home, she would be the one giving the orders when something needed to be done. Kate and Kim always seemed to be in the dark when it came to originality.

Kelly enjoyed her shower. Once she was dry and dressed in the terrycloth robe that Allison had left her, she dried her hair before heading for the bedroom that Allison had said would be hers for the summer.

The room was definitely male dominated, but Kelly didn’t mind. It wasn’t costing her as much as a hotel and she wouldn’t be lonely at night when she returned from sightseeing.

To her surprise, Allison was waiting for her. “JK is in the other shower, so I thought this would give us a chance to get to know each other.”

For some reason, Kelly felt trapped. “How...how dressy should I get for tonight?” she asked in the hope of

relieving the tension she could feel mounting between her and JK's sister.

"I'm just wearing jeans."

That bit of information made Kelly feel better. She quickly unpacked the new denim capris that she had bought for her 'date' with JK at the Tex-Mex restaurant.

"Oh, those are perfect. I wish I could find a pair that cute. I suppose you bought them in Wisconsin."

"No, I got these in Phoenix at the shop where JK and I were in the fashion show yesterday. That was when I first got on the scale and realized that I had started losing weight."

Allison nodded. "JK tells me that you teach school. I have a feeling, poor old JK will be outnumbered again."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, I'm a teacher and so is Dan, our roommate. We both get off during the summer while JK has to work. I think there are times he envies us. Of course, we envy him, because he gets sent all over to troubleshoot in other branches."

"You mean like he did in Phoenix?"

"Exactly. They've wanted him to go down there for months now, but he insisted on waiting until it was time for Chuck's wedding. I guess he was planning to mix business with pleasure. It's a national company, so he never knows where they'll need him next."

"What a great opportunity. I have to scrimp and save to be able to take a vacation and his company sends him everywhere with an expense account. I can certainly see I chose the wrong profession."

Both of the girls dissolved into laughter at the thought of either of them doing what JK did for a living.

“Why is it I get the impression that I’m the butt of your joke?” JK questioned when he entered the room.

“Of course you aren’t,” Allison declared once she stopped laughing. “I was just telling Kelly how you go around the country troubleshooting and she said we had chosen the wrong professions. I guess she’s right, but neither of us could ever dream of doing what you do. Just being with her for these few minutes, I can tell she’s like me. She lives for the kids in her class. If she was stuck behind a computer screen day after day, she’d go crazy, just like I would.”

“Well, that’s good, because this family only has room for one computer geek and that’s me. Did Mom say what she’s fixing for dinner? I’m starved.”

“Knowing Mom, it’s probably chicken with grilled vegetables and rice. You know how she loves rice.”

“Hope you like chicken and rice,” JK said as he put his arm around Kelly’s waist. “It’s Mom’s specialty. When she was a little girl, her folks had a Spanish cook and she learned to love Mexican dishes. Since they were forced on us, we turned to burgers and fries and look where it got us. Just a word of warning, don’t call them Mr. and Mrs. Ransom. They prefer Rand and Carolyn.”

“Is his name Rand Ransom?” Kelly asked.

“Hardly,” Allison said, answering the question before her brother could say a word. “His real name is Vernon, but he hates that. I think his friends started calling him Rand in college.”

Kelly enjoyed the easy banter between brother and sister. She’d seen it with her brothers and sisters, but never experienced it firsthand. She had always been the one who was left out of the family fun because of her size. Instead, she had learned to cook, clean and to study. Just thinking

about that part of her life saddened her. Even her top grades in high school and college hadn't made her one with her family. Kate had dropped out of school to get married and Kim had made it by the skin of her teeth. When her brothers got top grades, they were praised and rewarded leaving Kelly to wonder just why her parents didn't give her credit for her accomplishments. By the time she had landed her first teaching job, it didn't matter any more. She was on her own and adored by not only the children in her classroom but also respected by her colleagues.

* * * *

JK listened as his mother gushed over Kelly. It wasn't like he'd never brought a girl home before. There had been Patti Sue Barrow in the sixth grade and Martha Richmond who had been his date for the senior prom. As he thought about it, he realized it had been over fifteen years since he'd been interested in a girl, or more to the point, that a girl had been interested in him.

After he lost the weight, there were a lot of women who showed an interest in him and he had been on several dates, but the bottom line was that he was in love with Kelly. Even though they hadn't met, he was taken with her personality, as well as the picture that he had made his screen saver at work. Fat or thin, it didn't matter, she was the girl he wanted in his life. He just hoped that a summer together would convince her to say to hell with the contract she signed and move to California on a permanent basis.

"I think you found a winner in this one, son," his father said as he slapped JK on the back. "I can certainly see why you weren't interested in all those other women your mother and sisters have been pushing on you. She's a gem. Not only is she pretty, but she has a great personality and I

think she's a match for your mother in the brains department."

"I know what you mean. I fell in love with her on the Internet and meeting her in person hasn't changed my mind. The biggest problem is her family and the commitment she has to the school district in Madison."

"I can understand the school district, but what's the problem with her family? I would think they'd want to see her happy."

"So would I, but I've talked to them and they certainly aren't receptive to anything that doesn't allow Kelly to be generous with her money. She pays to get her nieces and nephews started in school each year, baby-sits through the summer and even helps them out by catering their weddings and giving them money to finance them. I'm surprised that she was able to afford this trip with they way they bleed her dry."

"Don't they work?"

"I'm sure they do, but they expect her to help out whenever they ask."

"That takes care of the siblings, but what about her parents?"

"When she sprained her ankle last week, Sheila insisted she call home and let her folks know what had happened. She didn't want to call, but Sheila insisted. Her mother said that there wasn't much they could do about it but if Kelly wanted her to come out to Phoenix, she would have to pay for the airfare."

His father shook his head in disbelief. JK knew if he had been the one injured, his parents would have insisted on being on the first plane out, no matter what he said or how much he protested.

After dinner, the entire family gathered around the pool and the conversation flowed, as it always did at such functions. Even though Kelly kept saying she would be happy to clean up the kitchen, his mother would hear none of it. Instead, everyone insisted that she should take one of the chaise lounges so she could put her foot up.

JK tended to agree with his family. The swelling he had expected to see wasn't there, but her eyes belied her exhaustion.

"I think it's time we got going, Mom," JK finally said. "It was a long drive and I have to be up and into the office at six tomorrow morning. You'll have all summer to get to know Kelly better."

Amid protests from his family, he got to his feet. Kelly was quick to join him, but it was evident that Allison would have liked to stay longer. Instead, she joined them as well.

"Thank you," Kelly said as JK held open the door for her.

"For what?" he inquired.

"For insisting that we should be leaving. I'm beat. Allison said we'd be going to the club tomorrow, so I think I need to get to bed."

"Do you think you should start that with your ankle and all?"

"Really, it's feeling better all the time. Besides, I think some of the exercises will actually strengthen it, at least that's what Allison says."

Although JK remained skeptical, he didn't voice his opinion. He knew that Judy would be at work by seven, so he would give her a call from work and explain the situation. There was no need for Kelly to know that he had run interference for her on this one.

Chapter 14

Kelly awoke in a strange bed. It took her a moment to realize she was in JK's apartment. The thought of waking up in the same house with the man she had dreamed about for so long brought a smile to her lips.

From the kitchen, the aroma of fresh coffee brought her to full attention. A glance at the bedside clock told her that it was after eight. With her appointment at the club set for ten thirty, she'd have to get her body out of bed and hustle to be ready on time.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," Allison greeted her. "I hope you like fresh squeezed orange juice. Around here, it's a must. In case you didn't notice, Mom and Dad have several orange trees on the property, so they keep us supplied with fresh fruit. What I really need to know is what would you like to eat?"

"After the dinner your mother put on last night, I can't think about food. Juice and toast will be fine."

"Lesson number one, breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Around here, we don't skip it."

"Not even JK? I didn't smell any food cooking earlier."

"He usually has yogurt and granola. No cooking required. Then he grabs his coffee at the shop on the corner

before he goes to work. So what do you want? I'm having an omelet."

"Yogurt and granola sounds good to me. It's not too heavy and it's just about all I can handle. I'm still stuffed from last night."

Kelly cringed when Allison brought a carton of vanilla yogurt from the refrigerator. She had never eaten plain vanilla yogurt before and didn't know if it was something she would enjoy. She had a hard enough time eating the flavored stuff. Instead of spooning it into a bowl, she put some into a blender and added fresh fruit. In a matter of seconds, she spooned the mixture into a bowl for Kelly and put a canister filled with granola on the table.

After adding some granola to her yogurt, Kelly tasted the mixture. It was certainly a lot better than the brand she usually bought at home. It had to be the fresh fruit. She would have to remember that. Even during the winter, she could buy frozen fruit pieces at home and have them to mix in with her plain yogurt for a delightful breakfast.

With the morning meal finished and the dishes cleaned up, Kelly and Allison made their way to the gym and Kelly's appointment with the personal trainer. To say she was apprehensive was an understatement.

After stopping at the reception desk for Kelly's summer pass, they went into the actual gym area. People ran on treadmills, rode stationary bikes, climbed on stair steppers and worked out on a variety of machines that lined the walls of the room. In the distance, she could hear the whack of the competitors on the handball court.

They were almost back to the office area, when a young woman came to greet them. "You must be Kelly," she said, as she extended her hand. "I've heard a lot about you from both Allison and JK, so I guess it's time we got

down to business and started the paperwork, do a bit of history and introduce you to some of the machines. Allison, why don't you get started on your routine? By the time you finish, we should be done as well."

Judy led Kelly to an office where the main pieces of furniture were two chairs, a desk and a scale. At Judy's insistence, Kelly sat down in one of the chairs, all the time, she eyed the scale. *Do I really want to do this? Do I want a stranger knowing how much I really weigh?*

"Both JK and Allison have told me a lot about you," Judy began, dispelling the questions that crowded Kelly's mind. "I have a few questions I want to ask and then we'll take a trip to the scale. It's not as frightening as it sounds. I just need a base so we can chart your progress."

Kelly nodded weakly. She had been the one who insisted on joining the same health club as JK, the one who envied his weight loss and wanted the same thing for herself, so why was she getting cold feet all of a sudden?

"Good, then we can get started. What was your birth weight?"

"Nine pounds four ounces."

"Have you always been heavy?"

"When I was little, my mother says she was ashamed to put sunsuits on me because I was so skinny. I guess that was when she started feeding me more and more. I remember being about nine or ten when my uncle called me three belly Kelly. The name stuck."

"Have you tried to lose the weight before?"

"When I was in high school, I tried one of those diet drinks. I lost about fifteen pounds and then got deathly sick. The doctor said it was from the stuff I was drinking, so I decided I was just destined to be fat."

“Hardly,” Judy said when she stopped laughing. “You just tried something that wasn’t right for your body. What we’re going to be doing is changing your lifestyle, not only your diet. And another thing, the word *fat* no longer exists. It’s a stereotype, something other people use to put you down.”

Kelly had begun to relax and decided the interview was going well. “So how do I do this?”

“To begin with, I want you to keep a food diary. I want you to write down everything you put in your mouth, right down to a stick of chewing gum. As you can see, these sheets are marked off in twenty-four hour periods and each hour is divided into four equal parts. The first step on the road to weight loss is to realize what, when and why you’re eating. Once that’s established, then we can come up with a computerized diet that’s right for you.”

“I understand, but by looking at all the equipment in the other room, it isn’t all diet. I don’t know if I’ll be able to do that much exercise.”

“You don’t start out on everything at once. JK told me about your accident, so I’ve had time to decide exactly what is right for you. To begin with, we’re going to be working on machines that focus on your upper body. For one day a week, I want you to do the exercises we’ll go over today. The second day, I want you to water walk and along with that, join the water aerobics class. On the third day, I want you to have fun. Do you like to swim?”

Kelly could feel a smile crossing her lips. “I love to swim. Just before I left on this trip, I bought the first suit I’ve had in years. My family always made so much fun of me, I usually just wore shorts and a tee shirt when I went with them to the lake.”

“Well, that suit is going to get a real workout here. One day a week, I want you to concentrate on swimming. We have both an indoor and an outdoor pool here, so you have your choice. You may enjoy the outdoor pool, since the weather is usually nice. I know that JK likes to swim on Saturday mornings. He does his aerobics during the Wednesday night class and weight training on Monday evenings. Of course, when he’s out of town, he makes certain his hotel has a pool and workout area that he can use.”

“How long do I need to work out and why not do it every day?”

“I want you to work out for an hour three times a week, because anything more than that is putting too much strain on your body. On the days you do the workouts in the pool, you may want to ride the stationary bike or walk on the treadmill as well. Of course, that won’t start until I’m convinced your ankle is completely healed.”

Kelly knew she was going to like this woman. The questions weren’t meant to humiliate her, nor were they embarrassing to answer.

“Now, one last question and I want you to be brutally honest. Why do you want to lose the weight?”

Kelly thought for a moment. This was a question that had many answers. “To begin with, I was impressed with JK’s weight loss and how good he looked. At that point, I wanted to do it for him so he wouldn’t be embarrassed to be seen with me. It didn’t take me long to learn that he didn’t care what I looked like, because he liked me for myself. The more I thought about it, I decided that I wanted to do it for me. Hearing JK talk about being taken to the hospital scared the bejebers out of me. I’ve had several episodes when I’ve been short of breath after walking up a

flight of stairs, or merely taking my books into my classroom. I don't want to die young."

"Those are great answers. I expected you to say you were doing it for JK and if that was where it had stopped, I would have told you not to even get started on the program. I see too many women who want to lose weight for a boyfriend. When the boyfriend disappears, so does the desire to be slim. I think we're on the right track here."

Kelly agreed. When she stepped on the scale, she was disappointed that it registered only two pounds less than the one in Phoenix a week ago. "Only two pounds," she lamented. "I can't believe I didn't lose more weight since the last time I weighed myself."

"Let's see if I can explain this. Any weight loss is good and we recommend two pounds a week, even though at the beginning, you'll lose more. You weighed on a different scale and you were probably dressed differently. Sweats tend to add ounces and even pounds since they are made of a heavier material. Of course, you haven't been active this past week because of your sprained ankle. That will make a difference as well. This is a good base to work from. From here on in, it's up to you and your eating and exercise routine."

Kelly agreed and followed Judy into the exercise area. They started by using five machines that stood around the outside wall of the room. On each machine, they tested the amount of weight that Kelly could easily use before Judy instructed her on how to use it. For each machine, she did anywhere from five to fifteen repetitions of the movement. As she did, Judy marked down the exact machine and the number of repetitions that were needed to gain the desired result.

When they finished with the last machine, Kelly was surprised to realize that she wasn't in the least bit tired. In fact, she was actually invigorated.

"This won't take me a full hour. Should I increase the repetitions?"

"That wouldn't be wise. When your ankle is healed enough, you can take up the rest of the time on the stationary bike and the treadmill. For now, when you work out on the machine, you can spend the rest of the hour in the pool doing some water walking. That will give you the exercise you need with very low impact on your injury."

Kelly nodded. It made sense not to overdo and burn out on any one exercise. She watched as Judy put her file into the drawer with hundreds of other files and listened closely to her instructions of how she should pick up her file when she came in and do the exercises exactly as they were written down.

The last thing they did was to enroll Kelly in the same water aerobics class as JK. With that done, Judy gave her a hug and told her to hit the showers.

The women's shower room was a world unto itself. Brightly painted lockers lined the changing rooms, while showers and a hot tub dominated another area. In yet another room, mirrors lined the walls, each with a sink below it, a hair dryer beside it and the counter filled with combs, perfume, deodorant and hair spray. Even her own bathroom wasn't this well equipped.

Once she was dressed in street clothes, Kelly went out to wait for Allison, as she was just getting into the shower when Kelly was leaving. Instead of taking a seat in the waiting area, she walked around the club. Even though Judy had given her a tour earlier, she knew she wanted to check out the facility on her own. The pool looked so inviting, she

could hardly wait for the aerobics class she would be taking with JK the next evening.

By the time Allison found her, Kelly realized that she was leaning heavily on the cane JK had gotten for her. It was a sign that she needed to get off her feet for a while and rest.

“I know you haven’t had a chance to look around much,” Allison began once they were in the car. “I’ve got tons of places that I want to take you, but they can wait. For now, let’s go back to the apartment and cool off in the pool.”

“Your apartment has a pool?”

“The complex does. JK prefers the one at the club, but I like to hang out by the one at the apartment, even if I don’t do much swimming. After I take my initial dip, I lather up with sun block and just relax with a good book. Do you like to read?”

“Now that’s a silly question. I love to read.”

“Well, I have a ton of books. I keep meaning to take them to Goodwill, but never seem to get around to it. I suppose I’ll have to get that done before the wedding.”

“Wedding?”

“Didn’t JK tell you? I’m getting married the first weekend in August. Of course, you’re invited. JK is trying to decide if he wants to try and find another roommate, or move to a smaller apartment. Dan said it didn’t make any difference to him, so our place could easily be up for rent soon.”

The information was overwhelming to Kelly. Things seemed to be moving too quickly for her tastes. Had JK brought her out here in the hopes that she would relocate and become the third roommate for him and Dan? If so, he had another think coming. As much as she was enjoying

Southern California, she had commitments in Wisconsin. She couldn't just call out to the school district and say that she was sorry, but she had decided to remain in California.

* * * *

It was time to go home and JK cleaned off his desk. It had been good to get back to the familiar. As much as he enjoyed troubleshooting in the other branches of the company, he enjoyed coming home as well.

He whistled a tune with no meaning as he made his way to the parking garage that housed his car during the day. In a few minutes, he would be back at the apartment and once again with Kelly. To say that he missed her while he was at work was an understatement. He knew he only had a few short weeks with her before she returned to Wisconsin and he intended to make the most of them.

More than anything else, he wanted her in his bed, but he knew he would have to go slow. It was evident that she was still a virgin and as such, would not be willing to have a summer affair.

He, on the other hand, had dated several women who had been more than willing to share his bed. Although the experience would be pleasurable, he knew it was one best reserved for someone he cared about as a man loved a woman.

Traffic was unusually heavy, making the drive back to his apartment longer than usual. When he finally pulled onto his street, he relaxed his grip on the steering wheel. As much as he loved his Southern California home, he hated the traffic. It seemed to get worse with each passing year. It was no wonder his parents were planning to move from the congestion of the city to one of the smaller communities to the south of Los Angeles when they retired in a few years.

The apartment was completely deserted when he came in. A glance out the patio door told him the reason was that both Kelly and Allison were out at the pool enjoying the afternoon sun. He didn't have to worry about any of the young men, who were usually out in the afternoon as they worked third shift, hitting on Allison, since they all knew she was engaged to be married. He did worry about Kelly. These guys could spot a pretty girl a mile away. It wouldn't matter to them if she was a delicate flower, or one in full bloom. They were only concerned with one thing and that belonged to him, if he ever got up the nerve to ask Kelly to share his bed.

After changing into his swim trunks, he opened the patio door and stepped from the cool air of the apartment's air-conditioning to the heat of the California afternoon. As he thought, the vultures, as he called the young men at the pool, were circled around the lounge chair where Kelly sat.

"I see you gentlemen have met our houseguest," JK said as he approached the group. "Kelly is a very special friend of mine, if you get my drift."

The young men scattered in search of other young women to ogle. Just the fact that they were afraid of him brought a smile to his lips.

"If I didn't know better," Kelly said as she got to her feet to greet him, "I'd say you were jealous."

"You're darn tootin' I'm jealous. I don't want those mooches latching on to you."

"I wouldn't call them mooches. They told me that they work nights at one of the studios as night watchmen."

"Well, they do, but I don't like them watching you."

Kelly kissed his cheek. "I don't think there's any cause for worry about that. I'm not exactly what guys like that are looking for."

“Well, you’re what I’m looking for. How about taking a swim with me?”

Even though Kelly nodded before diving into the pool ahead of him, he caught a look of apprehension on her face. *What did I say to take the smile from her eyes and replace it with clouds of doubt?*

He swam vigorously in order to catch up to her. When he did, he pulled her into a tight embrace and kissed her tenderly. “I missed you today,” he confessed.

“I honestly didn’t have time to miss you. Between the time at the club and the book I was reading before you arrived, the time seemed to fly. I am glad you’re home. Allison and I are planning a special dinner for you.”

“And just what might that be?”

“We’re marinating chicken for a barbeque and tossing a nice fresh salad. Does that meet with your approval?”

“I think you’re a mind reader. Since it’s far too early for dinner, what do you say about the two of us taking a nice long walk to work up an appetite?”

He wondered if it was his imagination or if she seemed to shy away from the idea of taking a walk alone with him. As quickly as the cloud of doubt filled her eyes, it was replaced with a smile of approval.

“I think a walk is an excellent idea. Just give me time to get my cane.”

JK wanted to kick himself for not remembering Kelly’s sprained ankle. He’d have to remember to take it slowly and not let her get overtired. He wanted her ankle to heal so they could do some major sightseeing over the weekend.

“Maybe a walk isn’t such a great idea after all.”

“Nonsense. It will do me good to get some exercise. Besides, I’m looking forward to resting tonight while we go down to the beach to watch the volleyball games. We don’t

have anything like that at home. At least I don't think we do. The college kids could get up games down by the lake, but I never go there. I just don't belong with the beach crowd."

"We'll change that in a hurry. Everyone around here belongs to the beach crowd. It's like a community thing. I think you'll enjoy watching some of the players. If we're lucky, we might even get to see Mardell play. She was a star player for the Loyola Marymount University team a few years back and was recently inducted into the Hall of Fame. She even played professional ball in Europe for a while. It's a real treat to watch her play."

As he changed into shorts and a tank top, he thought about Mardell. She was every guy's dream. Tall and athletic, she was a star on and off the court. Rumor had it that she had done some work in China and while there, had traveled around the country by herself. He didn't know if he would be that worldly in a country where he didn't know the language or the customs. The last he heard was that she was selling real estate. He wished her well and hoped that she would find someone as special to her as Kelly was to him.

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With supper out of the way, Kelly was excited about going down to the beach. Living in Wisconsin, the only beaches she saw were those of the lakes around her Madison home. Once she had traveled to Milwaukee and seen Lake Michigan and she had spent a few days at a conference in Door County and saw Green Bay and Lake Michigan from a different perspective. Even though they were beautiful, she knew they couldn't begin to compare to the beauty of the beaches that lined the Pacific coastline of California.

The beach was the largest expanse of sand Kelly had ever seen. Everywhere, volleyball nets were strung on sand courts. Young people were in abundance. Those who were not engaged in the games were rollerblading, biking, walking or running along The Strand, which JK explained was the street along the beach that looked like an actual road for cars as it had yellow dotted lines down the middle. Instead of car traffic, its intended use was for bikes, rollerblades, scooters or running only.

Everything about the area thrilled Kelly. At home, people played in the parks and used the bike paths, but she had never been part of the group of college students that dominated the area. Even though she had gone to school in Madison, she hadn't lived in the dorm. She was someone people saw in class, but never socialized with since she returned home to her family's farmette every evening to study.

"There she is," JK said, as he pointed to a tall girl on the volleyball court.

Kelly squinted in the late afternoon sun. The girl was good, there was no doubt about that and she was pretty enough to be a movie star. Kelly wanted to hide, but it was too late. How could JK proudly introduce her to his friends when they looked like the California Girls in the song by the same name.

Beyond the young men and women stood the ocean. The never-ending water was not calm like the lakes back home. Instead, the waves broke before they reached the shoreline leaving only the white foam they had produced to gently kiss the sand of the beach.

A cheer of victory sounded from the game where Mardell was playing. It was evident from the reaction of the players that her team had won. While two other teams took

the court, Mardell ran over to where JK and Kelly were standing.

“Where have you been?” she asked as she gave JK a hug of greeting and kissed his cheek.

“I told you I was going to Arizona for Chuck’s wedding.”

“Oh, that’s right. How is Chuck? I can hardly believe that he’s married. What’s she like?”

“One question at a time. First let me introduce Kelly. She was the maid of honor and came all the way from Wisconsin for the wedding.”

“Wisconsin?” Mardell echoed. “I have family in Wisconsin. My dad comes from Watertown and my mom grew up in Milton. Two of her best friends still live in Janesville. It really is a small world. I’m really pleased to meet you, Kelly. Of course, I don’t expect you to know any of my mom’s friends, but I feel like we know each other already. Do you play volleyball?”

Kelly took Mardell’s hand but instead of meeting her gaze, she looked down at her body. “I was never into sports much. Just didn’t have the body for it.”

“Well, I think that’s about to change,” Mardell said, winking broadly at Kelly. “Do you rollerblade?”

“I used to rollerskate when I was a kid, but I haven’t done anything like that in a long time.”

“We’ll get you back into it. I bet Allison has a pair of rollerblades that she wouldn’t mind loaning you. You’re about the same size. I rollerblade every Saturday morning, I’d love it if you and JK would join me.”

JK held up his hand. “Something tells me that you’d turn my Saturday mornings into girl talk. You two go ahead. I’ll continue going to the club to work out if you don’t mind.”

Kelly was astounded at Mardell's offer. Could it be that she had made a friend so easily? She certainly hoped so. She liked Mardell.

From the courts, someone called Mardell's name, inviting her to come back to the game. "I've got to run, but I'll meet you here Saturday morning at eight. That isn't too early, is it?"

"Not at all. I'm looking forward to it."

"So, what do you think?" JK asked, once Mardell rejoined her friends.

"She's great. How do you know her?"

"We met while we were in college. We were in a couple of the same classes. That's when she met Chuck as well. Of course, Chuck and I were already friends. Our folks had houses next door to each when we were growing up. When they moved to Arizona, he transferred to be closer to them. By that time, he had met Birdie through the chat and she played a part in his desire to relocate."

Kelly nodded. She wished she could be so attractive to a man that he would pull up stakes and move to another state just to be close to her. Of course, she knew it would never happen. She and JK would spend a delightful summer together and that would be all. When she returned to Madison, she would do so with wonderful memories and the anticipation of talking to JK online every Saturday night.

Chapter 15

By the time Saturday arrived, Kelly was beginning to get worried about rollerblading with Mardell. She hadn't been on a pair of skates in years. "What if I can't keep up with Mardell, or worse yet, make a complete fool out of myself by falling flat on my face?" she lamented, as Allison made sure she had a helmet, as well as knee and elbow pads.

"You'll do just fine. I'd go with you, but I have plans today. At least my skates fit you relatively well. I only had to put one sock in each toe so they'd work."

"Tell me again why I'm doing this?"

"Because Mardell is a great gal and she likes you. Besides, it's great exercise. You know, something you can do when you're not at the club. I bet they even do this in Madison in the summer."

Kelly nodded. She had often seen people rollerblading in the park when she went down to the lake to read. It was something she had always wanted to try, but everyone told her that she'd only be a hindrance to the college kids and young professional couples that were so adept at the sport. She had to admit, she certainly didn't look like the tall, slender men and women that sped past her on their skates.

After the short drive down to the beach, Kelly found Mardell waiting for her as she had promised. Once they got on their skates, Mardell instructed her in the best way to negotiate The Strand. Although they started out slowly, Kelly soon found her stride and was surprised at how easily she kept up with Mardell.

“I knew you’d be a natural,” Mardell declared when they arrived back at the cars. “You do know that Allison and JK set you up, don’t you?”

Kelly looked at her new friend in shock. “Set up?” she questioned.

“JK’s been talking about this wonderful woman he met on the Internet for months. When he told me that you were going to come to Arizona for the wedding, the look on his face was priceless. I just didn’t know you were from Wisconsin, or I would have pumped him for more information. Last week, Allison came down to watch me play and told me that you were coming here for the summer. She said that JK would appreciate it if the two of us could meet. The rest, as they say, is history. I can see why he’s so enchanted with you.”

Kelly could feel a blush creeping into her cheeks. “I think I’ve been smitten with JK ever since I read his first post. You have to admit, I’m no one’s dream girl, but I’m working on it. I joined the health club and am eating the way JK does. I want to be tall and slender like you. All my life, I’ve been called ‘Fat Girl’ and I’ve hated it.”

“Is that the reason you want to get in shape, or is it for JK?”

Kelly pondered her answer for a long moment. “Of course I want to do this for JK, but once I get home, I plan to continue. JK will be little more than a pleasant memory. Just hearing him say that the doctors told him to diet or die

brought to mind my own health. My doctor keeps telling me that I should lose weight, but he's never put it to me so dramatically. My health is important to me. I want to be there to see my nieces and nephews grow up. I also want to be able to say that I'm teaching my students' children sometime in the future. If I don't take care of myself, I won't be able to do that."

Mardell nodded, as though pleased with Kelly's answer. "I'd love to stay and talk," Mardell said, "but I have a house to show at noon, so I'd best get home and hit the shower. I'll see you down here for the Fourth of July, though. Otherwise, I think we have a standing date for Saturday mornings at eight."

Kelly watched as her new friend made her way to her vehicle. She sat on the bench where they had taken off their skates for a long time, just looking out at the ocean. The immense expanse of it was enough to hypnotize her with its beauty.

"I thought I'd find you here."

Kelly looked up at the sound of JK's voice. As she did, she realized that the sun was much higher in the heavens than when she had sat down.

"I must have lost track of time."

JK sat next to her and put his arm around her shoulders. "This place has a way of doing that to you. I used to spend hours here when I was a kid. Are you up to taking a walk along the beach?"

"I am as soon as I take the skates back to the car."

It took only a moment for Kelly to securely lock Allison's skates in the trunk. Once she did, JK suggested they take off their shoes and walk barefoot in the sand.

"I haven't done something like that since I was a kid and we'd go to my uncle's pond or the lake to swim."

“Welcome to your second childhood.”

The sand that had been warmed by the sun felt good beneath Kelly’s bare feet. Back home, she often envied her nieces and nephews their carefree youth. As an adult, she was expected to leave her shoes on when they went on picnics. It was the one thing about adulthood that bothered her the most. Why couldn’t people keep a few of their childhood pleasures alive when they grew up without being criticized for it?

“There’s something I need to tell you,” JK said as the incoming water lapped against their ankles.

“If you’re planning to tell me how you set me up with Mardell, you don’t have to. We talked about that this morning.”

“Then you aren’t mad?”

“Mad? Why should I be mad? I like Mardell and it takes some of the pressure off Allison. It has to be hard for her to be stuck entertaining me all the time. Besides, if you hadn’t set me up, I would have never learned how to rollerblade. One of the first purchases I intend to make is my own skates and safety gear. I think I’ll be spending a lot of time down here enjoying myself during the day.”

As though he completely agreed with her plans, JK pulled her into his arms and kissed her tenderly. Kelly leaned into the kiss and enjoyed the sensations that were running rampant through her body. For some reason, she had been granted one summer of complete pleasure and she decided to enjoy every minute of it.

They had just finished lunch when JK’s cell phone started ringing. After the second ring, Kelly looked at him questioningly.

“Are you going to answer that?”

“If it’s important, they can leave a message. I don’t want to miss a minute with you.”

“That’s sweet, but if it really is important...” Before she could finish, JK unhooked the phone from his belt and answered it.

She tried not to listen to his personal conversation. While he talked, she wondered why he hadn’t want to take the call. Could it be that he had a girlfriend who had tracked him down? If so, then everything he had told her about wanting her with him for the summer had been a sham. If that were the case, another question entered her mind. Why?

“That was Mardell,” JK said when he ended the call. “She must be some wheeler dealer. The property she showed today already sold. The people offered two hundred thousand dollars over the asking price, Mardell called her clients and they accepted. She’s throwing a party at her place tonight to celebrate.”

“Did I hear you right? These people offered more than the asking price? Are they out of their minds? Why would anyone pay more than they had to for a house?”

“This wasn’t just any house. It was on the beach and I know that Mardell had at least two other couples interested. Out here, people will overpay to be able to get what they want. I know Mardell told me that her brother lost out on a couple of good condos in San Francisco because he didn’t offer enough over the asking price. Things are different here.”

“They sure are. Back home, everyone tries to get a house for the lowest price they can get. I can only think of one person who was offered their asking price and I think that was because they had the property priced too low in the first place.”

“Get used to it. That’s the way things are done out here. As for the party tonight, we’d better get moving. I told Mardell we’d pick up some fruit and cheese, as well as some wine on the way over there.”

Kelly looked at JK in amazement. “Just like that, Mardell decides to throw a party? I’d need several days to prepare all the food. And no one would think to offer to bring something. Of course, I wouldn’t ask either.”

Kelly followed JK back to the apartment, then got into his car for the trip to the grocery store. While they were there, she picked up the ingredients for her special taco dip, along with some nacho chips. She figured it was the least she could do considering that she would be attending this party along with JK and Allison.

After Kelly finished making her contribution to the party, she put it into the refrigerator to chill. She was surprised to find JK on the computer already engaged in the weekly BBP chat.

“Isn’t it too early?” she asked when she pulled up a chair to the desk that held his desktop unit.

“You have to remember, you’re in California. It’s eight o’clock your time and everyone is arriving. Even Chuck and Birdie have signed in.”

She’d completely forgotten about the time change. If she’d remembered, she would have insisted on being prompt for the chat.

Everyone was excited to hear about Chuck and Birdie’s honeymoon. Although she thought of them as a couple, she missed the fact that she didn’t see Birdie’s sign in. Instead, they signed in as C&B, which she knew had become their new handle on the chat. Just thinking about that made her realize that her sign in would be missing as well. Her opinions would not be voiced, as JK was already signed in.

“I’ve got the laptop set up for you,” JK said when she entered the room. “Everyone’s been asking where you are. I told them you were in the kitchen making something wonderful to take to the party tonight.”

Kelly sat down on the couch and put the laptop on the coffee table. As soon as she signed in, she was greeted by all of her cyber friends. The only difference was that tonight, she would be with JK and not waiting anxiously for him to sign on.

“How was your trip to LA?” Birdie typed.

“It was wonderful. Since I got here, I’ve been doing things I never thought I would have the chance to do.”

Others asked her to explain and she told them about rollerblading, joining the athletic club and walking with the waves of the Pacific Ocean lapping at her ankles.

JK bragged about all the good meals Kelly had prepared and that it was great having her as his houseguest.

By the time the chat ended, it was time to go to the party. Kelly realized that if she were at home, she would be heading for bed. It would take her a while to get used to having a social life and friends who really wanted her to join them.

* * * *

JK enjoyed introducing Kelly to his friends. There were several people at the party he had known from school as well as the beach. Mardell was a popular girl and everyone in the area was always welcome in her home.

Before JK left for Arizona, there had been talk that Mardell wanted to sell her condo and buy a house on the beach. If he thought that Kelly would be content to leave Wisconsin and move to California, he would consider buying it. Of course, he knew there was little chance of her

leaving her family and the job she loved. How could he expect her to move in with a virtual stranger?

“Did you notice these hardwood floors?” Kelly asked, when they had a moment alone. “It must have cost Mardell a fortune to have something like that installed.”

“You have to know her family,” JK replied. “Her dad and his buddy came down and installed them for her. I have to admit, when she does put this place on the market, they will make a good selling point.”

“Who made this dip?”

The question was one JK had been hearing all night. He’d laughed when Kelly insisted on mixing together chopped black olives, onion, tomato, green chilies and oil, but he had to admit, the finished product was exceptional. It was lighter than most of the salsa he was used to and wasn’t creamy like the cheesy chili dips that his friends made.

“Kelly made it,” he heard Mardell say.

“Kelly?”

“She’s visiting JK and Allison from Wisconsin. I just met her, but I think we’re going to be good friends.”

JK watched as Kelly beamed at the compliment. From the things she had said about her lifestyle back home, he doubted that she ever went to parties or just hung out with friends. The only Saturday night chat she had ever missed was when she went to her sister’s wedding and he knew what a disaster that had turned out to be.

As the evening wore on, the wine took effect on most of the people. He was glad that he had opted not to drink so he could be the designated driver. Kelly was working on her second glass and Allison had consumed enough wine to make it unsafe for her to drive home. He knew it didn’t

matter for most of these people, since they lived within walking distance.

It was late when the party finally broke up and everyone headed toward home. Since Kelly insisted on helping Mardell by cleaning up the house while she said good night to her guests, they were the last to leave.

“I can’t believe you actually did up the dishes and cleaned up the mess,” Mardell said when she came back into the house after seeing the last of her guests on their way. “I would have just left everything until morning.”

Kelly’s smile at being appreciated seemed to light up the entire room. “This is what I do best,” she commented. “I’m really a homebody. When my family has parties, I usually not only clean up, but cater them as well.”

“If that dip you brought is any indication of your cooking skills, maybe you should give up teaching and move out here. I know any number of people who would hire you in a heartbeat to cater their parties.”

Although Kelly laughed at the suggestion, JK knew it was something that wouldn’t be acted upon. Kelly was one of those people who loved her family, even though they treated her like a doormat with an open checkbook. She could no more give up living close to her family, than she could give up teaching. She was like Allison. The kids were what gave her satisfaction. Even though JK loved his job, he didn’t get the joy out of it that Allison did. He worked on computers, wrote programs and got people out of messes while his sister and Kelly received handmade cards and thought out gifts from the little ones who sat in the classroom day after day.

“Well, it’s late and tomorrow is another day. I think it’s time for us to get going,” Kelly said. “By the way, where is Allison?”

JK chuckled. He hadn't expected Allison to stay at the party as long as she did, especially considering Alan Hardin had arrived. She and Alan had been seeing each other for over a year. He was certain that while he'd been in Arizona, Alan had been at their apartment. Tonight Allison would stay at Alan's place and give him and Kelly some much-needed privacy.

"She ran into her boyfriend. I'm certain she'll be spending the night at his place."

From the blush on Kelly's face, JK realized that she would never consider spending the night in a man's bed. It made him wonder if he would be able to change her mind over the summer, or if she was one of those girls who were content saving it for marriage.

Once back at the apartment, JK selected some soft music for the CD player before joining Kelly on the couch.

"It was a perfect evening," she said, when he put his arm around her shoulders. "Back home, I would have gone to bed when the chat was over. Everything out here is so different."

"It could be different at home as well," he replied, hoping he'd said the right words.

"I doubt it. There, my only friends are the other teachers at school and they certainly don't want an old maid as a third wheel at their parties. I know they entertain, but I've never been invited."

"That could all change if you join the athletic club when you get home. That's where I met a lot of my friends. Of course, I know Mardell from college but the majority of the people at that party we've met at the beach. Once you get out and socialize more, you'll find you have a lot more friends that you ever thought you did."

"I hope so," Kelly said, stifling a yawn.

To his delight, she snuggled closer to him. He knew it was too soon in their relationship to initiate any lovemaking. Instead, he enjoyed the sensation of having her close enough so that he could smell the lingering scent of her shampoo.

Chapter 16

Kelly found her days and nights so full, that she was surprised when the Fourth of July crept up on her unexpectedly. The day before the big event, Kelly and Allison prepared food to be put in the cooler to take with them down to the beach.

On the morning of the Fourth, JK was up early to pack the car so they could get a good spot to watch all of the holiday activities. He had one cooler filled with water, soda, beer and wine coolers, while the other contained the food. Along with that, the car was loaded with chairs, blankets, a large picnic basket, swimsuit cover-ups and warmer clothing to change into to watch the fireworks once it was dark.

Even though Kelly thought it was way too early to head for the beach, the expanse of sand was already becoming crowded with partygoers.

“I’m going to teach you to bodysurf,” JK declared when they finally set up their blanket and beach chairs.

“You’re going to teach me to do what?” Kelly questioned.

“Bodysurf. Just watch, see how it’s done. Watch Mardell, she’s an expert at this.”

Kelly watched as her new friend ran into the surf, caught a wave and rode it into shore. *It looks like fun, but considering my size, it could be quite dangerous. What if I'm so heavy, I sink rather than stay afloat?*

It took a couple of tries before Kelly perfected the art of bodysurfing, but once she did, she realized that she rather enjoyed allowing the wave to carry her as though she weighed next to nothing.

When she finally came back to their blanket to relax, the volleyball games were in full swing. As usual, Mardell's team was in the lead, but it didn't matter to Kelly which team won. She was having the time of her life and she wasn't stuck in the kitchen while everyone else had fun.

With the game ended, JK started breaking out the food and drinks from the cooler. To Kelly's amazement, several of the people she had met at Mardell's party joined them, pulling over coolers filled with more food than any of them could possibly consume.

"We decided to join your party, JK," a young man by the name of Darrin said. "I remember that awesome dip that Kelly brought to the party the other night. I was hoping we'd get lucky enough that she would have some in your cooler."

Kelly smiled at the compliment and brought out her taco dip. As it had been the night of the party, it was an instant hit.

"Leave some for me," Kelly heard Mardell say. She looked up to see the volleyball team descending upon their picnic area. The amount of people clamoring for Kelly's dip made her pleased that she had thought to quadruple the recipe.

With lunch finished and everyone ready for more fun, Kelly started cleaning up. To her surprise, JK and Mardell insisted she join them in a game of beach volleyball.

“I haven’t played volleyball since high school,” she protested.

“It’s like riding a bike,” JK assured her. “Once you learn, you never forget.”

After a couple of awkward starts, Kelly found her stride and began to enjoy the game. She was certain that the fact she was doing so well was due to her weight loss. She knew it hadn’t been much but even the few pounds she’d shed made a difference. That, coupled with her increased activity over the past few weeks, and she felt like an entirely different person.

“So, how do you celebrate the Fourth of July?” JK asked as they sat covered up with the beach blanket.

“We usually go to my folks’ place and have a picnic, then we go into town at night so the kids can go to the carnival and we can watch the fireworks. It’s nothing like this.”

“Do you want to call home and tell them how different this Fourth of July is?”

“Not really. With the time change, it’s after ten out there. Everyone is at the fireworks wondering how they’re going to get to their cars and fight the traffic to go home.”

“We’ll be doing the same thing in a couple hours.”

“I know, but I don’t want thoughts of home to spoil this day for me. I’ve had such a wonderful time, I don’t want to think about my family and what they’re doing.”

* * * *

The morning after the Fourth, Kelly weighed herself at the athletic club. She had been worried that the party at the beach would have hampered her progress. She stepped on

the scale, all the while keeping her eyes closed. When she finally had the nerve to open them, she realized that she had dropped three pounds in spite of the party.

“That’s a big grin you have on your face, Kelly,” Judy said when Kelly entered her office.

“It should be. I was afraid I would gain over the holiday, but instead, I lost three pounds. That brings my total since leaving home to twenty-two pounds. I hope I can keep it up.”

“I know you will, but sooner or later, you’ll reach a plateau. That’s when your resolve will falter. I’ve been doing some research. Since we only have about three more weeks until you leave for home, I looked into some health clubs in Madison. I printed out this list so you can find one that’s close to where you live and work.”

Kelly took the printed list from Judy and checked out the addresses of the various clubs. There were two that were in her area. She decided she would look at their web sites when she got back to the apartment. A lot would depend on hours of operation, as well as the fees involved in joining and maintaining her membership. Now that she knew what to do, all she had to do was continue to do it.

After spending her morning on the various machines, she was more than ready to hit the showers and then go home. Back at the apartment, she fixed a light lunch for herself and Allison. She was just setting the table, when the phone rang. When she answered, she found Allison on the other end on the line.

“I hope you haven’t started fixing lunch,” Allison said as soon as Kelly answered.

“I was just setting the table. What’s up?”

“My dental appointment took longer than I thought it would and when I was leaving the office, I ran into an old friend from school. We’re going out to lunch together.”

Kelly glanced at the fruit salad that sat on the counter ready to be put on the table. “Not to worry. I just threw together a fruit salad. I made plenty, so we can have it for dinner. Have a great time.”

After hanging up the phone, she dished up a small amount of the salad and grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator. It didn’t take her long to finish eating and clean up the kitchen. With the mandatory tasks completed, she changed into her swimsuit and made her way to the pool.

She had just sat down with a good book, when her cell phone rang. “Hello,” she answered without checking the caller ID. She knew it had to be JK, since he was about the only one who ever called her.

“Kelly? Are you all right?”

She immediately recognized Kim’s voice.

“Of course I’m all right. Why would you ask such a question?” *And why are you calling me?* she silently added.

“Because we were over at Mom and Dad’s last night and they said they hadn’t heard from you since you were in Arizona. Mom said that you were shacking up with some guy you met at the wedding. Really, Kelly, do you think that’s right? Are you being careful? I’d hate to see you in the same position that Kate and I were in when we got married.”

Kelly’s anger simmered and threatened to boil over. “To begin with, the phone lines run both ways. Mom and Dad have my cell phone number and since you’re talking to me now, you do too. I’m tired of being the one to make all the calls. If anyone back there really cared, they’d be calling

me. Secondly, we called Mom when I got hurt in Old Tucson and she did everything but blow me off. She said that if I needed her there I would have to send her an airline ticket. I've been taking some time to cool off so I don't say something I shouldn't."

"But what about this guy? Mom says he's a beach bum out to get in your pants and take your money."

"For your information, I've known JK for quite a while. We've been in the same chat room for several years. If you bothered to listen to me when I talk to you, you would have heard me mention him. He was the best man at Chuck and Birdie's wedding. When I told him that I was planning to come to California to do some sightseeing, he invited me to stay with him and his sister. They have a three-bedroom apartment and their roommate is away for the summer. I have my own room and yes, I'm paying one third of the bills. Does that answer your questions?"

"Not quite? Are you being careful?"

"There's nothing to be careful about. JK has his room and I have mine. Even though it's none of your business, we haven't made love and probably won't. Neither of us is that careless. As for him being a beach bum, he's a highly paid computer programmer and troubleshooter for his company and he goes all over the country for them. I doubt anyone in their right mind would call him a beach bum, even though we do go down to the beach quite often. I've even made some friends down there that I'll miss when I come home."

"Speaking of coming home, when can we expect you? I mean school will be starting the end of August and..."

"And you and Kate are wondering if I'll be home in time to give you money to outfit the kids for school. Well, you don't have to worry about that. I'm mailing out the checks next week, but be prepared, because this is the last

time I'm giving either of you money to get your kids ready for school. I rather enjoy doing things for myself and I'm planning to buy a house sometime in the near future. From now on, my money will be for me and not for the family. These checks are the last ones I'm writing."

"I didn't mean...I only wanted to know when to expect you."

"I'll be home in time for school to start. In three weeks, JK and I are driving up to San Francisco. From there, he'll fly back to LA and I'll start the trip home. There's a lot I plan to see and do along the way. With staying with JK and Allison, I'll have enough money left over from my travel fund to be able to do it."

"So what are your plans?"

"I want to drive through Donners Pass. From there, I'll head north and go through Glacier National Park, then drop down to Yellowstone, Little Bighorn and end up with a stop to see Mount Rushmore and the Crazy Horse Monument. I should be back in Madison by late the second week or early the third week of August."

Kim prattled on about the kids and what they had been doing all summer. Suddenly, she wasn't half as interested in what Kelly had to say about her trip as she was about telling her what she was missing in Wisconsin. Kelly half listened and longed for the conversation to be over. Since Kim had initiated the call, Kelly knew it would be rude for her to be the one to end it.

After an entire hour on the phone, Kim decided she had to go and quell an argument between the kids fighting in her backyard. Kelly was relieved to have the call finally come to an end. Instead of picking up her book, she eased herself into the pool before she began swimming vigorously in order to rid herself of the anger Kim's call had produced.

“Have you worked the anger out of your system?” Allison asked when Kelly finally hoisted herself out of the pool.

“How did you know I was angry?”

“Just a lucky guess. That’s what JK does when he’s upset or angry. I’ve seen him swim enough laps of the pool to know the signs. What’s wrong?”

Kelly accepted the towel Allison handed her and dried off before seating herself in the same chair she had occupied when she talked to Kim. “I got a call from my sister,” she finally admitted.

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Not really. She raked me over the coals because I hadn’t called Mom and Dad since I got here. Then she told me that Mom is telling everyone that JK and I are shacking up and that he’s a beach bum.”

Kelly paused because she knew that Allison wouldn’t hear anymore of what she had to say since she was laughing so hard, that tears were running down her cheeks.

“It’s not that funny,” Kelly said once Allison composed herself.

“Oh yes it is. You see, when JK was in college, he had no idea what he wanted to do, so he hung out at the beach a lot. At the time, my dad said that he’d never be anything other than a beach bum. JK took him seriously and even went so far as to buy a surfboard, even though he rarely used it. He preferred to bodysurf. That summer, he let his hair grow and even grew a beard, just because it upset the folks so much.”

Kelly began to laugh at Allison’s description. “I can’t imagine JK with a beard and long hair. Still, it was a terrible thing for my own mother to refer to him that way.”

“It was, but they’re all afraid they’ll lose you to the sun and sand of Southern California.”

“Don’t think it hasn’t crossed my mind, but I have obligations back home. There’s no way I could pull up stakes at this late date and move out here.”

“Maybe not now, but there’s always next year.”

Kelly made no comment. She was JK’s interest for the summer and nothing more. Once she returned home, he would forget she even existed. Having quelled his curiosity by meeting her, it was possible he would even drop off the loop. There were lots of lovely young ladies like Mardell on the beach to keep him busy.

Chapter 17

“Pack a bag, we’re going to San Diego,” JK announced when he came home on Thursday afternoon the week following the Fourth of July.

“San Diego?” Kelly echoed.

“I got a great deal on a weekend package at the Hotel del Coronado. I put in a lot of extra hours this week so I could have Friday off. It’s a great city and we can even take a short trip down to Mexico.”

The thought of going to a hotel with JK for the weekend intrigued Kelly. Would he want to make love to her? Her heart told her she wanted a sexual relationship, while her head told her it would be little more than a summer fling. Making love to JK would mean she would leave with a broken heart over what she could never have in her life.

If he makes the advance, I’m going for it, she silently reasoned. If I don’t, I’ll be an old maid schoolteacher who sacrificed love when she could have had it. I certainly don’t want to die a virgin.

“What should I take?” she finally asked.

“Something cool and comfortable,” JK replied.

Kelly waited until JK went to shower before dinner to start picking out what she wanted to take with her to San

Diego. She silently blessed Allison for giving her access to her wardrobe. If she had taken her things to Goodwill when she lost enough weight to wear a smaller size, Kelly would have been forced to buy new clothes, which would have put a real crimp in her travel budget.

With her packing finished, she joined JK and Allison in the kitchen. The lamb chops Allison had prepared on the grill smelled delicious and made Kelly's mouth water. She had certainly enjoyed learning all the new recipes that were intended to be tasteful and yet, not add unwanted pounds to her figure.

Just the thought of her new figure brought a smile to her lips. With luck, she could return home at least thirty pounds lighter. Of course, the trip back would be the real test. Without JK to help her pick out healthy choices from the menus, she prayed she would make the right decisions.

Early the next morning, Kelly and JK left for San Diego and a weekend of sightseeing, fun and maybe even adventure. The drive down the coast was more breathtaking than Kelly had ever imagined.

As soon as they pulled up to the historic hotel, Kelly recognized it from one of her favorite movies, *Some Like It Hot*. Just the thought of being in the hotel where the classic film had been shot sent shivers up her spine.

"I can't believe I'm actually at the hotel where they filmed *Some Like It Hot*. It's like a dream come true."

JK chuckled as though amused at her enthusiasm. "If it's history you're interested in, this place is full of it. It's been listed as one of the top ten resorts in the world, the top wedding spot in the US and it even has its own ghost."

"Ghost?" Kelly echoed. "I never heard of a ghost at this hotel."

“Well, then you’re in for a surprise. It’s said that Kate Morgan checked in on November 28, 1892 and never checked out. If you’re lucky, you might get to see her.”

“Sure, like I believe in ghosts. What other history do you know about this place?”

“Let’s see, it was built in 1888 and it’s said that Prince Edward met Wallis Spencer Simpson here and this is where they fell in love.”

“Isn’t that like the story you told me about the *Queen Mary* when we went to Long Beach?”

“In a way, but by the time they sailed on the *Queen*, they had already met. She was from Coronado and a wealthy widow. He fell so helplessly in love with her, that he gave up his throne for her. If we’re lucky, that could happen to us. They say this is a magical place.”

“Although you’re a prince in my eyes, I doubt that you’d give up your life for me and there’s not a fairy godmother in the world who could make me into a wealthy widow. I’m comfortable, but I’ll never be wealthy.”

“Ah, then it’s the prince and the pauper. We make quite a pair.”

JK let Kelly off at the front door before parking the car. Once he returned with their luggage, they entered the lobby. The opulence of the hotel was completely overwhelming. She had never been in such a luxurious resort in her life.

“This must be costing you a fortune. How much is my half?”

“For this weekend, there is no splitting the bill. This is my treat. I love coming here, but I don’t enjoy it alone. There is so much I want to show you, that I don’t know if three days will give us enough time.”

Kelly knew better than to protest. JK had his mind set on showing her a good time and she certainly didn't intend to throw cold water on his plans. She was surprised to learn that the package he had booked included Sunday brunch at the Sheerwater, tickets to the zoo and Sea World and a trip to the spa.

"How are we going to have time to do all this?" she asked once they were shown to their room.

"Let's see, today we'll do the spa and then go to the zoo. Tomorrow, I plan to drive down to Tijuana so we can have lunch at the Casa Machado and do some shopping. We'll grab something to eat on the way back. Then on Sunday, we can enjoy the brunch and go to Sea World before we head back home."

"It sounds like you have everything planned perfectly."

When the bellman left, Kelly looked around the room. There were two queen-sized beds, a lovely sitting area with a built-in bar and a balcony that looked out onto the ocean. She had heard the bellman call this a Victorian Junior Suite. It certainly lived up to its name.

Once they were alone, JK opened the French doors leading to the balcony, so Kelly could experience the view of the ocean.

"This is perfect," she declared. "Everything about this place is perfect, especially my companion."

"To be truthful, I wasn't certain about what to do about the bed. I could have had a suite with one king, but I decided that two queens would be better."

Kelly felt her heart catch and leap into her throat. She hadn't given sleeping arrangements much thought. As much as she wanted to give herself to JK, she realized he was the one holding back.

"Did you think I wouldn't want to sleep with you?"

“Look, Kelly, I want to sleep with you more than anything in the world, but I was afraid that you might not want to...”

“To what?”

“To sleep with me. Unless I can convince you to move to Los Angeles, there will be almost two thousand miles separating us. Once you get home with your new look, I won’t stand a chance.”

Tears filled Kelly’s eyes. “I want to make love to you and this might be our only chance. I know I’ll be but a memory to you when I go home. I want that memory to be a pleasant one.”

“Let’s play it by ear. Lovemaking is nothing that should be forced. If it happens, so be it. For now, let’s just enjoy the day.”

Kelly agreed. She knew if she were to make love on demand, it wouldn’t be special. She would just let it happen naturally. If it didn’t happen this weekend, there was always the trip they would be making up the coast to San Francisco. JK had already told her that he planned to go that far with her so they could see Carmel together and explore San Francisco before she returned to Wisconsin.

* * * *

JK enjoyed watching Kelly as she took in the sights that San Diego had to offer. She was like an excited child at the zoo. Everything that she saw brought squeals of delight from her lips. They drove past the ships anchored in the marina, as well as the harbor and saw the naval and marine bases.

When they at last arrived back at the hotel, they took turns in the shower before dressing for dinner at the Sheerwater. Just hearing the water running as Kelly showered made him wish they were sharing the experience.

When she returned to the room, she was wrapped in one of the luxurious robes furnished by the hotel. He took his suit into the bathroom so he could dress there after his shower. There was no need in embarrassing Kelly by dressing in the room in front of her.

By the time he returned, she was wearing a long skirt of burgundy satin with a white lace overlay and a white lace blouse to match. He remembered Allison buying the outfit for a special occasion and lamenting about the fact that she had lost so much weight, it no longer fit her. At the time, he had tried to convince her to give the clothes that she had purchased to charity, but she had declined. Now he was glad she hadn't listened to him. The clothes fit Kelly perfectly and he was proud to be her escort for the evening.

"You look fantastic," he said, as he crossed the room to take her in his arms.

"Thank you, kind sir. You don't look so bad yourself. I think we both clean up rather well."

"Are you ready to go to dinner, my Lady?" he asked once he had kissed her tenderly.

"Very ready. I hope I look all right to be going to this restaurant. I was reading about it in the literature I found on the nightstand. It looks fancier than anywhere I've ever been before."

"Nothing is too fancy for you."

By the time they reached the restaurant, they were both laughing at how easily they had adapted to the beautiful Victorian setting they found themselves in.

"We have reservations for this evening," he said to the maitre'd. "They're under the name of Ransom."

"Of course, Mr. Ransom, right this way."

They were led to a table on the balcony with a fantastic view of the ocean. When they were given menus, JK waved them away.

“Let me order for you. I think you’ll like my selections.”

Kelly’s smile was enough to reassure JK that he was right. When the waiter arrived, he ordered the crispy skin salmon, the grilled asparagus and glasses of white wine.

JK watched as Kelly tentatively tasted the wine. It was a particular favorite of his, but he didn’t know about her tastes. He had never seen her drink wine, other than the champagne that had been used as a toast at the wedding.

“This is delicious,” she declared. “I’ve never been much of a wine drinker, but I think I could acquire a taste for it rather quickly.”

“That’s good,” JK replied. “I’d hoped it would be something you enjoyed since when we get up to San Francisco, I thought we could do some wine tasting.”

During the meal, Kelly’s reaction about everything from the food to the atmosphere made JK glad he had chosen San Diego and the Hotel del Coronado for this weekend getaway. All too soon, the summer would be over and not only miles, but also lives that needed to go on would separate the two of them.

* * * *

Kelly awoke, aware that JK was already up and in the shower. Last night had been wonderful and terrible all at the same time. The dinner they had shared was wonderful and the evening of dancing to the band in one of the lounges delightful. The terrible part had come when they returned to the room. She had never been alone with a man in a hotel room before and she cursed herself for not knowing the

right words to say and the proper moves to make that could easily lead to lovemaking.

By the time JK came out of the bathroom, Kelly had her toiletries and clothes for the day ready. She couldn't help but wonder just how awkward it would be to face each other after the way she had acted, or better yet, not acted the night before.

"I hope I didn't wake you," JK said, acknowledging the fact that she was up and waiting to use the bathroom.

"I've been awake for quite a while. I just want to say that about last night..."

"You don't have to say it, I certainly made a mess of things."

"You? I was the one who didn't know the proper things to say or do."

JK laughed out loud. "We make quite a pair. I was afraid I had let you down, while you were thinking the same thing about yourself. Let's call a truce. If things lead to lovemaking, so be it, if not, then it wasn't meant to be."

Kelly let out a sigh of relief. Without pressure, lovemaking would be spontaneous rather than forced. She wouldn't have to be so nervous about her first time.

"Deal," she said as she allowed him to take her in his arms. "I have a terrible confession to make. I'm a thirty-three year old virgin. I've never been with a man and I'm nervous as hell."

"I can understand. Same here. I'm still a virgin as well. Do you know how long I've fantasized about making love to you? I think it all started with the first words you typed in the chat."

Kelly smiled. "I'm guilty of the same thing, but I just don't know how to go about it. Oh I know how it's done, but I'm afraid of being awkward. Guess we'll have to play it

by ear. When it's right, we'll both know it. It's funny, right after the Fourth of July, my sister accused me of sleeping with you and said that Mom called you a beach bum. I got really upset and assured her that I would never do anything like that, even though I knew I wanted to."

"She called me a beach bum?"

Kelly couldn't give JK an answer, since the two of them were laughing so hard, tears were running down their cheeks. She knew there was no answer necessary when he kissed her tenderly, taking away all her fears and inhibitions.

* * * *

Tijuana was everything Kelly had anticipated and more. They shopped in stores with walls as well as those without. At the ones without walls, JK told her it was okay to haggle over the price of the merchandise.

At noon, they stopped at the Casa Machado and enjoyed true Mexican cuisine. Kelly had to admit, she had expected the food to be much spicier than the dishes that were served.

"That was delicious," she said once they left the restaurant and started walking in a different direction than they had gone in the morning.

"I always like to eat there when I come to Tijuana. Now, we're entering an area where we have to be very careful. In this area, you're my wife."

"I'm your what?"

"My wife."

"Why?"

"Because if you aren't my wife, they would expect me to sell you. This is the red light district. I've heard horror stories about guys bringing their girlfriends down here to

get rid of them. Like it or not, human trafficking does happen. I like to be safe rather than sorry.”

A shiver of dread ran up Kelly’s spine. She had heard stories about human trafficking and thought it only happened on the back streets of Asian countries where women were thought to be little more than property. She certainly didn’t think it happened in North America. Mexico was as civilized as the United States. Surely such practices were not going on here.

They had walked only a short distance, when a well-dressed man approached JK. Although Kelly spoke little Spanish, she understood the meaning of the conversation. She was relieved when JK told the man that Kelly was his wife and was absolutely not for sale.

By the time they left the city, they had been approached several more times. Even though it made her uneasy, she realized she was flattered that these men looked at her as a beautiful woman. She was also glad that JK had not sold her. It would make for quite a story to be related to her friends when she returned to Madison.

When her many purchases were put into the trunk, they started for the border. “I’m so very pleased you didn’t sell me to those guys,” she teased, when JK started the car.

“It was tempting, they were offering me a good price, but then I would have had to carry all these packages for you. What in the world are you going to do with all this stuff?”

“I bought enough trinkets for unique Christmas presents for my students. I usually have about thirty kids in my class, so I bought thirty gifts for the girls and thirty for the boys, since I never know what the mix will be. What I don’t use for my students will be given to some of the charities in town that give gifts to underprivileged kids. At

the cost of these things, I spent less than I usually do on presents for my students.”

After crossing the border, JK found a small restaurant along the highway where they stopped for dinner. It was the perfect end to a wonderful day.

Back at their hotel, they changed out of their sightseeing clothes and into ones more appropriate for dancing.

The lounge was crowded, but few people were out on the dance floor. The lack of other dancers made Kelly a bit apprehensive, but once she and JK were on the floor, his arms gave her all the reassurance she needed.

It was well past midnight when they finally returned to their room. While Kelly used the bathroom, JK prepared for bed. The night before, she had worn a cotton nightdress but tonight, she opted for the sheer one that Allison had insisted she pack. Just the memory of being in JK’s arms made her want more.

He lay on the bed wearing only his pajama bottoms. It wasn’t the first time she had seen him bare chested, but it was certainly enough to make her want him.

He looked up from the pamphlet he had been reading about Sea World and let out a low wolf whistle. “You look beautiful.”

She knew she was blushing, but she couldn’t help it. “I don’t think that beautiful is the right word. I feel a bit uncomfortable in a sheer pink nightie, but Allison assured me it was perfect for this trip.”

“I don’t know if it’s perfect for the trip, but it is for me. I think you look lovely. Are you certain this is what you want?”

Kelly nodded shyly. “I’ve wanted it since the first time I saw you in Arizona. I don’t know all the proper moves or

the right words, but I know I want you to make love to me. I may never have another chance at being physically loved. Once I go back to Madison, I become Ms. Masters, schoolteacher. This summer is my fairytale come true. Please be my Prince Charming, even if it is only for a few more days.”

JK took her in his arms. With the adeptness of a practiced lover, he fondled her breasts until she thought she could stand no more. She slipped her hands down his back until her thumbs hooked into the elastic of the waistband of his pajamas. The feel of the curve of his hip brought her to the realization that this was exactly what she wanted.

His bed was turned down and inviting. It took only a moment for the two of them to crawl under the covers and to explore each other’s bodies with their hands. The muscles of his stomach rippled beneath her touch. He started his explorations by touching her bare breasts and then moving his hand lower until he caressed her belly and finally moved lower until they were entangled in the hair at the juncture of her thighs. When he slipped his fingers into the hidden cleft between her legs, she thought nothing could compare to the feeling he was awakening within her.

To her surprise, when they finally made love, it was beyond her wildest expectations. The initial pain was replaced by intense pleasure. When they finished, she was glad he had taken the precautions necessary to prevent pregnancy. It wouldn’t do for her to return from her vacation with a child that had been conceived in love but would be raised without its father. If she ever got home and learned that she carried a child, she didn’t know if she would tell JK about it. It wouldn’t do for him to think he had to marry her, just because she was pregnant. That wasn’t the way she wanted her life to be.

* * * *

Early the next morning, JK could stay in bed no longer. He had taken from Kelly what she had so jealously guarded all her life. As much as they had enjoyed making love throughout the night, would she regret their decision by the light of day?

He'd hardly slept thinking about what they had done and what it might do to their relationship.

After getting out of bed, he pulled on his pajama bottoms and went out to the balcony. The morning air was already fresh, giving the promise of another glorious day ahead of them. In the harbor, he saw ships coming and going. It was surprising to see so many people on the water so early in the morning.

He continued to stare out at the distant horizon. He would never tire of the beauty of the expanse of the Pacific Ocean. He'd grown up on it and wondered if he dared ask Kelly to come to California and make this her permanent home. As soon as the thought crossed his mind, he dismissed it. She was too dedicated to her family and the kids she taught to pull up stakes and move all the way across the country.

"Good morning, Prince Charming," Kelly said from behind him.

He turned to see her standing on the balcony, a cup of coffee in her hand. It was strange that he hadn't heard her make it, or even smelled the rich aroma from the pot in their room.

"Good morning, Cinderella," he replied, getting to his feet in order to pull the second chair away from the table so she could sit down.

"Last night was ideal," she said once they were both enjoying their coffee. "I'm so glad it happened naturally and

wasn't forced. It made things so much better. I'll never forget what we shared."

"Do I hear a note of sorrow in your voice?"

"A bit, I suppose. Once we return home, there will be all the final plans for Allison's wedding, and then two weeks from yesterday, the wedding itself. That means the following weekend, I'll be leaving for Wisconsin."

JK knew the timeline all too well. "I was thinking about that. I don't want to see you go, but I realize it's inevitable. Let's make it an entire week. I have vacation time coming. Why don't we leave on Monday after all the wedding stuff is completed? That way, we can drive up the coast leisurely and even get up to Napa Valley for some wine tasting. I don't want to miss a minute with you."

Kelly's smile as she considered his proposal gave him the answer he knew she would verbalize as soon as she gave it careful thought. "I think that's a wonderful idea. It's a shame that you have to waste your vacation time on me."

"I don't think of it as a waste. I can hardly wait to start planning where we'll stay and what we'll see."

Chapter 18

On Monday morning, Kelly worked out at the athletic club. She knew the weekend had taken a toll on her progress, but a vigorous workout, along with the hours she planned to spend rollerblading and swimming should compensate for it.

From the club, she went to a little coffee shop she had found that was close by. She enjoyed stopping for a cup of the strong brew after her workout. To her surprise, she ran into Mardell.

“I was going to call you guys tonight. I know next week is going to be busy with the wedding, but I wanted to give you a going away party. I was thinking about doing it Sunday afternoon at the beach. In case of rain, we can always move it inside to my place.”

The mention of rain made both girls laugh. There had been no rain since Kelly arrived.

“That would be great,” Kelly replied. “It isn’t necessary, but it will give me a chance to say good-bye to all the wonderful people I’ve met this summer. I know that next week is going to be busy and then JK and I are leaving for San Francisco on the following Monday.”

“So early? I didn’t think you were planning to leave until the Sunday a week after the wedding.”

“I’m not. JK is taking vacation time and we’re going to leisurely drive up the coast, and do Napa Valley. On the way back, I’ll drop him off at the San Francisco Airport so he can fly back to LA.”

“I just had a terrific idea. I’m going up to San Francisco on the Wednesday after the wedding. My dad just got back from his yearly trip to Wisconsin. That means I haven’t seen him in the past six weeks. Another reason for the trip is that my brother is getting ready to go on a business trip for his company, so we’re planning to celebrate our birthdays that weekend. He lives in San Francisco and my folks live in Cupertino. I know my folks would love to have you stay with them. They have a spare room and I’ll be staying with Tyson. That way JK and I can drive back together.”

“Oh, I couldn’t—we couldn’t impose.”

“Who’s imposing? Let me call my mom and see what she thinks.”

Kelly knew better than to try and argue with Mardell. Instead, she watched as her friend pulled a cell phone from her purse and placed the call.

Even though she tried not to listen, she couldn’t help but overhear Mardell’s end of the conversation.

“She wants to talk to you,” Mardell insisted as she held out the phone to Kelly.

“Hi, Kelly,” Mardell’s mother greeted her. “I’m so thrilled that you and JK want to stay with us. We haven’t seen him since Mardell was inducted into the Hall of Fame.”

“Ah...I don’t really know. We’re planning to drive up the coast and spend some time in Carmel. We’re leaving the Monday after the wedding.”

“Good, then we’ll get the chance to meet you. Delmar and I are flying down for the wedding and staying with

Mardell. We'll be driving back with her. She promised her dad that he could drive her vehicle. If you plan on getting here before Thursday, we'll give JK a key."

"But-but we don't want to be any bother, Mrs...."

"None of that, it's Delmar and Ellen. I don't like that Mr. and Mrs. business. I'm so excited to have you coming up for a visit. The spare room will be ready for you. I was hoping my darling daughter would want to stay with us, but she insists that she wants to spend some time in San Francisco with her brother before they come down here on Saturday for the birthday party. On Saturday night, you and Mardell can have the spare room and Tyson and JK can share the pullout in the living room. It will be great to have the house full of young people. Things have been pretty quiet around here since the kids were home and they brought over their friends. We'll see you at the wedding, of course, but give JK our best."

Kelly stared at the phone, completely dumbfounded. Ten minutes ago, she and JK were going to Northern California on their own and would probably pay way too much for hotel rooms. Now they were staying with Mardell's parents. How could she ever explain this to JK?

"Let's call JK and tell him the news," Mardell suggested.

Before Kelly could say anything, Mardell had used her speed dial and was waiting for JK to answer.

"Hey, JK, it's Mardell. I just had the greatest idea. Since you and Kelly are going to go to the San Fran area, I thought it would be great if you stayed with my folks and saved the hotel bills."

There was a pause while JK answered Mardell.

"Sure she knows. Do you want to talk to her?"

Mardell held out the phone to Kelly.

“Are you okay with this?” JK asked as soon as Kelly acknowledged that she was on the line.

“I’m still a bit shell-shocked.”

“Well, don’t be. I halfway expected Mardell to suggest something like this. You’ll love Ellen and Delmar. They’re great. With their ties to Wisconsin, they’ll love you. As for privacy, I happen to know they’re coming down for the wedding and driving back with Mardell. We’ll have Monday through Thursday to do our sightseeing and have some time together. That will give us Friday through Sunday to enjoy their pool and for you to rest up for your trip back to Wisconsin. I think this is great.”

They talked for a few more minutes and as they did, Kelly became more and more comfortable with the arrangements that had been made for her last week in California.

“So, what did he say?”

“He thinks it’s great. He’s certain I’ll fall in love with your parents. I hope they can say the same about me.”

“Of course they can, what’s not to love? Well, I’ve got to fly. I have a showing at noon.”

Kelly finished her lukewarm coffee before she went back out to the car. Mardell’s words of ‘what’s not to love’ ran through her mind. She knew that was one thing she didn’t dare ask her family. They could certainly give Mardell any number of answers to her question.

* * * *

JK thought about the phone call from Mardell and Kelly all day. It was no wonder Kelly said she was shell-shocked. She certainly wasn’t used to the way things were done on the spur of the moment within his circle of friends.

Before they had ended the conversation, Kelly had told him of the impromptu party planned for Sunday on the

beach. It would take both their minds off the wedding preparations, but it would also be a bitter reminder of the fact that Kelly would be leaving two weeks later for Wisconsin. The summer he had dreamed about and planned so perfectly was coming to an end and he didn't want to lose her.

"What are your plans for next week, JK?"

He looked up to see his boss standing next to his desk. "I'll be getting ready for my sister's wedding and then I'm taking a week off. Why do you ask?"

"I was hoping I could persuade you to go to a couple of places in the Midwest on a troubleshooting trip. I'll get you the information so you can do what you can from here. When you get back, I'm afraid you'll have to go out on the road for a while."

"Thanks for the reprieve. My friend from Wisconsin will have left for home by then and I'll be ready to get away for a while."

"Good. I'll make some calls and get everything set up for the week after your vacation."

After his boss left, JK contemplated the trip. He hadn't asked where he would be going. It really didn't matter, since it could be anywhere in the country. He'd find out where he was going when he got back from vacation and he certainly wouldn't be mentioning it to Kelly. He knew it would make her feel as though she was keeping him from doing his job.

Five o'clock finally came, even though JK thought the day would never end. After the weekend he had just spent with Kelly, he didn't want to miss any of the time they had left together.

At home, he found Kelly dressed and ready to go to Medieval Times with him. The restaurant put on quite a

show of jousting and served an excellent meal. With their reservations set for seven in Buena Park, they'd have just enough time to get there. He tossed his suit jacket and tie on the chair and opened the neck of his shirt, rather than take the time to change his clothes. Since he had anticipated the trip, he had dressed a little more casually than usual this morning. Rather than putting on a dress shirt, he had opted for a polo shirt that would adapt well to his tie.

On the drive to the restaurant, Kelly pumped him for information about Delmar and Ellen.

"You have to experience being with them to fully appreciate them. Ellen is an only child and craves her privacy, so when Delmar goes back to Wisconsin in the summer, she's in her glory. She's rather quiet while Delmar is outgoing, like Mardell. I think of them as the original odd couple but considering they've been married for almost forty years, whatever they have works. They both like to travel and Delmar likes to gamble. I don't think the casinos are Ellen's bag, but she enjoys the hotels where they stay."

From the corner of his eye, JK could see Kelly nod. It was evident that she had gotten the same impression from her phone conversation with Ellen earlier in the day.

The castle that represented Medieval Times brought a broad smile to Kelly's lips. "They have one of these in Chicago, but I've never been. I guess I'm nothing more than a homebody. Something tells me that once I get back home, there are going to be some great changes in my life and I owe it all to you."

"I'm glad to be of help, my Lady. Now you're in for a real treat. The food here is delicious, but you don't get any utensils to use. Everything is eaten with the fingers."

"Everything?" Kelly echoed his word in the form of a question.

“You bet. You drink soup from a cup, eat corn on the cob, along with roasted potato wedges, barbeque spareribs and chicken for the main course, have wine, soda or coffee and an apple turnover for dessert. It’s a real experience, but the food is nothing compared to the joust. I love watching the way the knights maneuver their horses. I think I must have lived back then and I’m remembering all the excitement.”

“I’ve heard it’s spectacular. I have to admit, I did go online this afternoon and looked the place up. When the show is finished, I have to stop at the gift shop and pick up postcards for my class. This is one place that will be very interesting to them and I know any picture I might take could never do it justice.”

Although the joust was JK’s favorite part of the evening, he enjoyed watching Kelly even more. She was so excited about the entire thing, that it pleased him to have brought her to this new experience.

With the performance ended, they made their way to the gift shop. While Kelly shopped for postcards, JK made his way to the jewelry counter. From the selection, he found the perfect gift to give Kelly as a remembrance of their summer together. It was a beautiful silver filigree heart suspended from a delicate chain. He was happy to see that she was so engrossed in the selection of postcards, she didn’t realize he had left her to make the purchase.

On the ride home, she couldn’t stop singing the praises of the horsemanship, as well as the joust. He knew he had left this as one of the last things that they did together in Southern California for a reason. It would certainly make a lasting impression on her and make her all the more eager to return to be with him.

* * * *

Sunday morning dawned bright and clear. Kelly knew it would be a perfect day for a beach party, even though she knew it was going to be hard to say good-bye to her new friends.

“Are you certain I can’t make a taco dip?” Kelly lamented as they were getting ready to leave. “Everyone loves it and...”

“And nothing, Kelly. Mardell said that everything was under control. Today is your day. We’re pampering you. No cooking, no cleaning up, no nothing but enjoyment. Now grab your skates, and we’re out of here big time.”

Kelly smiled at JK’s take-charge attitude. She had to admit, it was refreshing not to have to make a ton of food for a gathering.

At the beach, the Strand was filled with skateboarders, bikers, runners and skaters. It was the one memory that would carry Kelly through the long winter until she could get down to one of the lakes and enjoy the bike paths as well as the beach. By next summer, she hoped to be slender enough to not be embarrassed to show her face at the local parks where she could be easily recognized as Ms. Masters, the fifth grade teacher.

One by one, her new friends arrived. There were hugs and kisses, tearful good-byes as well as comments such as, “You’ll be coming back next summer,” and “We’ll all get together again.” Kelly knew it wouldn’t happen. She wouldn’t be coming back to California, because by next summer, there would be new demands upon both her money and her time. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity and one that she would remember for the rest of her life.

“Thank you so much for today,” Kelly said once the only ones left on the beach were Mardell, JK and herself. “I have such wonderful memories.”

“You’ll be back, you can bet on it. Underneath that ‘I’m a Wisconsin girl’ exterior is a California girl just waiting to get out. I may have been born in the Bay Area, but I’ve become a Southern California girl. I love the lifestyle and I have a feeling you do too. You’ll be back to visit, if nothing else. I know it’s hard to leave your family and your job but that’s what vacations are for.”

Kelly hugged Mardell. She knew that coming back here would be something that she might do someday but that day was a long way down the road.

Chapter 19

Allison's wedding seemed to take an entire week of preparation. With all the necessary preparations, Kelly felt like she had taken up almost permanent residence in JK's parents' kitchen. She baked and designed the wedding cake, taking that responsibility and expense from Allison's to do list.

Before starting on the cake baking, Kelly had found a wonderful store where she could buy all the supplies she needed for her decorations. She had even rented a fountain so that the center of the cake would be absolutely beautiful.

From that store, she had visited a florist and ordered the flowers that would be delivered on Saturday morning so she could put them on the cake. It had cost her extra to have each of the blooms encased in their own vial of water so they would remain fresh throughout the reception.

"Why can't I see what you're doing?" Allison questioned after the rehearsal on Friday night.

"You can't see, because this is my wedding present to you. I want it to be the very best wedding cake anyone here has ever seen. This is my specialty and I think it's a perfect addition to your reception."

"But, Kelly, you shouldn't have gone to so much work."

“Work swork, this is something I enjoy. Besides, what you saved on the cake, you can use on your honeymoon.”

“Speaking of the honeymoon, big brother,” Allison said. Her voice had more of a teasing tone than the seriousness it carried only moments earlier. “Have you heard from Dan? What are the two of you doing about a roommate?”

“Dan called last night and told me he met this fantastic teacher on the trip he took this summer. She just accepted a job in Long Beach and was going to have to search for a place to live. I think this one will be more than a roommate. I may have to look for someone else to take that other bedroom, because the way it sounds, she and Dan will be in his room most of the time.”

“Is that an announcement?” Allison asked.

“I think he meant it to be. It wouldn’t surprise me if I were the one who had to look for new digs. I think the two of them will be getting married soon.”

Kelly listened to the conversation. It seemed like everyone who lived in the apartment was getting married, everyone that is, but herself and JK. She wished she could say that they were a couple but a long distance relationship was completely out of the question. He had his life in Culver City and she had hers in Madison. With over two thousand miles separating them, it would be impossible to have any kind of romance.

* * * *

On Saturday morning, JK dropped Kelly off at his parents’ house and went to meet with the groomsmen and the bridegroom. Kelly knew she had her work cut out for her. Even though she had frosted the cake yesterday, she still needed to get it decorated. At least they wouldn’t have

to transport the cake to a hall since the reception was being held in JK's parents' backyard.

While his parents worked at decorating the pool area, Kelly mixed decorating icing. She had just put the last of the borders on the cakes and assembled the stands that would hold them when the florist arrived. She was pleased to think that he had come to the house before going to the church. It would give her time to complete her masterpiece.

JK's dad helped her take the individual cakes out to the patio and assemble them on the table set aside for it. Once the pedestals were in place, she added the fountain before beginning to place the flowers on the frosting that had set. When everything was in place, she added the bows that she had made the day before to cover the vial-encased stems. Other bows were added to the front of each layer to give the impression that they were placed all around, rather than to cover anything she didn't want the guests to see.

She finished the last of her decorating at exactly noon, giving her enough time to dress for the wedding. After her shower in the guest bathroom, Kelly dressed in the gown she had purchased at the same time she had visited the florist and the craft store. She knew she'd paid way too much for it, but she wanted to look especially nice for JK. If nothing else, he would remember that she had been someone he wanted on his arm at the reception.

When she stepped into the living room, Rand let out a low wolf whistle. "If that dress doesn't get my son's juices flowing, nothing will. I hope that boy is treating you right."

"He's treating me very well," Kelly replied. She hoped that the blush she could feel creeping into her cheeks was well hidden with her make-up.

She was surprised when they went out to get into the car, as there was a stretch limo parked in the driveway.

“I decided if I was chauffeuring two of the most beautiful women at the wedding, it should be done in style,” Rand said, as he explained why the limo had appeared in time to take them to the wedding. “I have a friend who runs a limo service and he said he would provide the limos for the wedding as a gift to the bride and groom. I think it’s more of a gift to me, since I don’t have to pay for them. He said he’d send his most unique limo for us.”

Kelly couldn’t help laughing at the white PT Cruiser limo that was waiting for them. Until Rand mentioned it, she had not taken the time to look at the chariot that would be taking them to the church and back to the house.

“I’ve never seen anything like this, although I did hear of a company in Janesville that makes them.”

“That’s where the boss ordered it from, pretty lady,” the driver of the limo said, as he held open the door for them. “When he saw it advertised, he knew he wanted it in his fleet. I’d love to stand here and talk about the vehicle, but I have to get you folks to a very special wedding on time.”

Kelly felt like a fairy princess. Her sisters had never had limos at their weddings since they had been done on a shoestring, which belonged to her. If they would have insisted, she knew she would have written the check. Just riding in the back of this special vehicle made her realize that this was what she wanted when or if she ever decided to get married. It would make her wedding completely unique and different from those of her sisters.

The church was elegantly decorated. Roses like the ones Kelly had put on the cake bloomed in abundance alongside bird of paradise and exotic orchids. She had to

admit, it was one of the most beautiful weddings she had ever attended.

Since Rand and Carolyn would be the last two people seated, Kelly took the arm of one of the ushers. Instead of taking her to a seat at the back of the church, he took her up the long aisle to the pew behind the parents. She knew this pew was reserved for family. JK's brother-in-law and sister-in-law and nieces and nephews should be the ones sitting here. Leaving room for others who would be seated there, she entered the pew and went to the far end. Hopefully, no one would notice her and ask why she thought she had the right to be seated in that area.

Rather than an organ playing while the guests arrived, a string quartet played beautiful music that made the whole scene seem surreal. As much as she wanted to turn around and look at the guests to see what everyone was wearing, she sat facing forward. Long ago, she had been chastised by her mother for gawking during a family wedding they attended. At this wedding, she wanted people to tell JK that he was lucky to be with such a well-mannered girl.

Kelly had been almost unaware when JK's family members filled the pew beside her. It wasn't until Carolyn was ushered into the church that she realized the wedding was about to begin.

The string quartet put down their instruments and the sound of the organ filled the sanctuary. The groom entered from behind the altar area, along with his best man and groomsmen. As he had in Arizona, JK looked dashing in his tux with its cummerbund of deep rose. When they were in place, the organist began to play *Ode To Joy*. The very sound of it filled the room and echoed off the walls.

Everyone turned to watch as the bridesmaids came down the aisle. Rather than the garish dresses her sisters

always chose for their bridesmaids, these dresses were ones that could be worn again. They were very sleek in their appearance with a floral patterned skirt and deep rose bodice. The hemlines were handkerchief style so that they could be worn again with no alterations.

As soon as the last bridesmaid walked down the aisle, the music changed and the congregation got to their feet. Rand looked like an older JK as he escorted Allison down the aisle. The train on her dress trailed behind her like a cloud of silk and lace. Kelly watched as Rand placed his daughter's hand into that of her waiting bridegroom.

From there on, everything was a blur. In Kelly's mind, it wasn't Allison and Alan standing at the altar, it was herself and JK. The vows the happy couple spoke were ones of love with promises of a happily ever after mingled in.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," the minister said, dissolving Kelly's vision of what could never be. "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder."

Alan took Allison in his arms and kissed her with a hunger that said he had waited for this moment for a lifetime. The processional began to play and the bride and groom led the wedding party to the back of the church to participate in the reception line.

Kelly waited for JK's in-laws to leave ahead of her. When at last she exited the pew, she realized that she would be walking alone. She had no family here and the only man she wanted at her side was in the wedding party, greeting guests. She scanned the church for a way to avoid the reception line, but found she had nowhere to turn other than going through the process of greeting people she didn't know.

By the time she got to JK, she had already spoken to three bridesmaids and two groomsmen. JK held her hand

longer than necessary and kissed her cheek. “You look a lot different from when I dropped you off this morning. Here are the keys to my car. I’ll be in one of the limos after the pictures are over. I’ll see you back at Mom and Dad’s place.”

Kelly nodded and accepted the keys JK held out to her. It was the least she could do for him. He’d brought her home like a stray kitten, given her a place to stay, showed her a wonderful time and given her a summer she wasn’t likely to soon forget. In a way, she wished they hadn’t been so careful. She wanted his baby, some link to him, but how could she raise a child alone? There were too many obligations with her family to think about a baby. She’d just continue to be careful and not run the chance of ending up like her sisters.

From the reception line, she went out into the parking lot in search of JK’s car. Since Rand and Carolyn would be staying for pictures, she knew she should go back to the house and do what she did best, oversee the placement of the food on the buffet tables and put the finishing touches on the decorations for the reception. It would be just like being at home, only here it wasn’t expected, it was appreciated.

The caterers were already at the house when Kelly arrived. “What can I do to help?” she asked when she entered the kitchen.

The man she asked looked at her as though she had just asked if she could blow up MGM studios.

“There is no need for you to help. You are one of the guests, but if you insist, there are plates and napkins in that box. You could put them at the end of the buffet table.”

Kelly realized that she was intruding on this man’s space. She hadn’t considered that, even though she always

appreciated help in setting up the buffet, this man was being paid to do the job and he certainly didn't need her jumping in and confusing his routine.

Without any more comment, she put out the plates and napkins as she'd been directed and then fussed with the decorations she had helped put up earlier.

"This cake is beautiful," the man she had talked with earlier said. "Do you know which bakery they used?"

"I made and decorated the cake as my wedding present to the happy couple."

"You did? I didn't think anyone could do such beautiful work without working in a bakery. Would you consider doing this for my company, on a full-time basis?"

"Thank you for the compliment, but I will be leaving on Monday for San Francisco and then the following Monday, I'll be going home to Wisconsin. I do some catering there, but on a much smaller basis than what you do. I go into people's kitchens and prepare a meal, then serve their guests and cleanup. They buy the food and pay me to do the rest."

"How much do you get for a cake like this one?"

Kelly thought for a moment before answering. "I've never charged for a cake, but I guess if I did, it would be three times the cost of the ingredients."

The man shook his head in disbelief. "If you were working for me, I would charge at least five hundred dollars for a cake like that one. I would pay for the ingredients and keep a little for myself, but you could easily make three hundred dollars for your efforts. If you ever decide to move out here, the offer stands firm. I would enjoy having you on my team."

"I'm very flattered, but I'm afraid I have a teaching contract waiting for me back home. Even if I decided I

wanted to move out here, I would have to fulfill my obligations first.”

“Just remember, my offer stands,” he said. Before he went back to work, he pulled a business card from the pocket of his smock and handed it to Kelly.

She stared at the printing on the card, all the time imagining what it would be like to make three hundred dollars for a wedding cake. It certainly was more than she had ever made, even for her catering, back home.

As she daydreamed about what could be, she checked the cake to see if she needed to make any final repairs. Looking at the table where the cake sat, she realized that she hadn't brought out the packages of groom's cakes. Keeping with the tradition of her family, she had made several pans of fruitcake and cut them into small pieces that she wrapped in netting and tied with ribbon that matched the bridesmaid's dresses. To each small package, she added a note that read, 'Put this under your pillow and dream of the love of your life.'

“Those are unique,” the man she now knew as Andre said, when he again joined her. “Can you explain the significance of them?”

“In my family, it's a tradition. Instead of a chocolate groom's cake, we make a fruitcake and cut it in small pieces. It's said that if you put the piece under your pillow, you will dream of the love of your life.”

“Then you don't have any chocolate cake?”

“I make the bottom layer of the wedding cake out of chocolate. That way, everyone gets a little of both the white and chocolate cakes with each serving. I know many people would like a taste of each, but don't feel they want two pieces of cake.”

“That is a very unique concept. How much would you charge me to use your idea for future weddings that I cater? It would certainly make my business stand out from the rest.”

“I can’t charge you for an idea, Andre. Consider it a gift.”

“Gift or no, I will compensate you for such a wonderful addition to my menu. It will take me a while to decide just what you deserve, but mark my words, I will be in touch with you after you return to Wisconsin. I am certain that Mr. and Mrs. Ransom will be able to provide me with your address.”

A commotion from inside the house told Kelly that the guests had started to arrive. With no pockets, she slipped the card Andre had given her into her bra. The thought of his offer made her smile. It was wonderful to be appreciated, even if she never heard from the man again.

The party was in full swing by the time the wedding party finally arrived. JK sought her out as soon as they arrived, leaving the bridesmaid that he had been escorting at the wedding to fend for herself.

“The cake looks fantastic, but not as great as the woman who made and decorated it,” he whispered in her ear. “Tonight, we’ll have the apartment all to ourselves and...”

“And we’ll both be too exhausted to appreciate it,” she whispered back. “Did Mardell’s parents get here?”

“I saw them go through the reception line, but I didn’t get a chance to talk to them, other than to exchange pleasantries. You know how those things are.”

Kelly couldn’t help the lump that formed in her throat. She didn’t know what reception lines were like. She had never stood in one for either of her sisters, or for any of her

friends. Even with being in Birdie's wedding, she hadn't had to participate in any such thing, as Birdie and Chuck had greeted their guests as they ushered them out of the pews.

By the time the evening ended, Kelly's prediction of their exhaustion was all too true. With all the guests gone, Kelly had promised to come back to the house in the morning and do the cleanup before she and JK returned to the apartment. With all her heart, she wished she could call it their apartment, but in two days, she would be on the next leg of her journey and within three weeks, she would be home. This summer would be but a pleasant memory.

Chapter 20

Kelly sat on the bed. She pulled her knees up under her chin and wrapped her arms around them. The view outside her window was the activity of Fisherman's Wharf. The sound of water running in the bathroom reminded her that this would be the last night she and JK would be alone.

On Monday, they had driven up the coast and had spent the night at a bed and breakfast in Big Sur. The wildness of the crashing waves against the rocky shoreline had been awesome. Even the memory of it left her breathless.

From there, they had driven up to Yosemite, where they stayed in one of the rustic lodges. As it had been at Big Sur, the scenery had been spectacular. While JK took dozens of pictures, Kelly bought postcards depicting scenes she could have never captured with a camera.

After a wine tasting tour through the Napa Valley, they had finally arrived at the luxury hotel that faced Fisherman's Wharf. As soon as JK finished in the bathroom, they had planned to explore China Town. Tomorrow, they would do all of the touristy things before going to Cupertino to spend a few days with Delmar and Ellen.

"Are those tears?" JK asked when he entered the room.

Kelly wiped the tears from her eyes and looked up at JK. “It’s all going so quickly. On Sunday, you and Mardell will be going back to Los Angeles and on Monday, I’ll head back east. I know I have a lot of sightseeing to do, but it won’t be as much fun doing it alone.”

“Then call the school district, break your contract and come back to Los Angeles with me. Dan and I need a roommate and...”

“And you told me that Dan has already found a roommate. You know I can’t break my contract and believe it or not, I actually miss my family.”

JK sat down on the bed next to Kelly and pulled her into his arms. “I don’t want you to have to go back there, but I know what you’re saying. Family is important. It’s my hope that they appreciate you more after this summer.”

Kelly could only nod her answer. To speak would bring on a fresh onslaught of tears. Within her mind, questions ran rampant. *What if no one notices a difference in me? What if they still expect me to give away my money? Without JK by my side, can I stay strong and say no?*

“A penny for your thoughts,” JK said, when he leaned back to look into her eyes.

“I was just thinking about what could happen when I get home. I don’t know if I can stand firm in my decisions. I was very harsh with my sister the last time I talked to her. What if the family I’m suddenly missing only wants my checkbook and not Kelly the person?”

JK pulled Kelly into a warm embrace. “If they do, your contract is only for this year. We can survive that long without each other. If we’re meant to be together, we can find a way to work everything out.”

After wiping away her tears with his thumb, JK kissed her tenderly. Any doubts she had dissolved when he was at

her side. Somehow, she would have to keep them from returning.

* * * *

JK wished he could persuade Kelly to put Wisconsin behind her and move to California, but he knew that was an impossibility. The evening in China Town had seemed to relax her, but he could tell she was concerned about facing her family.

He certainly couldn't blame her. From the things she had told him, they certainly didn't appreciate her as a person. He wondered how anyone could treat a family member in such a way. His parents, as well as brothers and sisters, had never looked down on him because of his weight. Considering he and Allison were the only heavy members of the family, he could see where it may have happened, but it never did.

With their final night on the road over, they did all the things tourists do in San Francisco. The only thing Kelly seemed to shy away from was the cruise to Alcatraz. He couldn't blame her. He remembered going there when he was a kid and experiencing nightmares for the next six weeks.

It was close to three when they headed toward Cupertino. As they drove through the Bay Area, JK wished he had insisted that they stay in San Francisco until Sunday. As much as he liked Delmar and Ellen, he knew time alone would be at a premium.

After following Mardell's directions, JK pulled up in front of Delmar and Ellen's modest house. They had hardly gotten out of the car when Ellen came out to meet them.

"Have you two had a good trip?" she asked as she helped JK with the luggage.

“It’s been a wonderful week,” Kelly replied. “Where’s Delmar?”

“He has a standing Thursday afternoon golf date. He’ll be home in about an hour, just in time for supper.”

Even though JK protested, Ellen insisted on helping him carry in their bags. Once in the house, Ellen took them to the spare bedroom. This was what JK had been dreading. Mardell had told him that the room had twin beds. Just the thought of sleeping in the same room as Kelly but in a different bed was upsetting. He wanted her in his bed for as long as possible before she started the long drive back east.

“I rearranged this room for you,” Ellen said, breaking into JK’s thoughts. “I may be of the older generation, but I’m not so blind that I can’t see the two of you are sleeping together.”

JK looked at the twin beds that had been pulled together to make a king. He couldn’t help but smile. Mardell had often told him how cool her folks were and now he was seeing it firsthand.

* * * *

Kelly dried the last of the dishes. From the living room, she could hear Delmar and JK discussing baseball. Even though she had grown up in a house where sports were talked about endlessly, she had no desire to watch a game, or even to get into a discussion about which team was the best.

With the work in the kitchen completed, Ellen walked to the doorway of the living room. “It’s such a nice night, let’s all go outside by the pool.”

“You girls go ahead,” Delmar replied. “We’ll be out as soon as this game is over.”

Ellen rolled her eyes as she and Kelly made their way to the pool. “Men,” she said when they were out of earshot.

“I swear all they think about is sports. Of course, it gives us time to talk.”

Kelly sat down in a deck chair and turned her attention to her hostess.

“Mardell tells me you’re from Wisconsin and I guess you know that’s where Delmar and I grew up. Have you thought about moving out here?”

Ellen’s question took Kelly by surprise. “I’ve thought about it, but my family is in Wisconsin and so is the contract I signed with the school district. No matter what I really want, I can’t make any moves or decisions until the end of this next school year.”

“But what about JK? It’s not hard to see that you love him.”

“That’s why I’m so torn. I do love him, but we both have to admit, this was little more than a great summer. My life is in Wisconsin and his is in Los Angeles. I don’t know if either of us will be able to leave our lives behind.”

“I’ve known JK and Allison ever since Mardell first went to Los Angeles to school. They’re great kids, but JK has always worried me. I was so proud of him when he lost weight. I thought the wedding we would be going to would be for him. Every time I asked Mardell about him, all she would say was that he was obsessed with someone he met online. To be truthful, I was worried about it, but now I can see why he waited for you.”

“Okay, you girls can quit talking about us,” Delmar announced before Kelly could comment on what Ellen just said.

“Who won the game?” Kelly asked, trying to sound interested.

“San Francisco, of course,” JK answered. “I should have known better than to bet with Delmar. He’s the original gambler.”

“That’s right and I’m ten dollars richer. Do you gamble, Kelly? I mean Madison isn’t that far from Ho-Chunk.”

The mention of the Casino at Wisconsin Dells brought to mind the one time she had accompanied her friends when they went there. She had taken a hundred dollars and lost all but half of it. When her parents had learned about her trip to the casino, they had dwelled on it for almost a year. It hadn’t mattered that she had enjoyed herself. The money she had lost could have been spent to help her siblings and their families.

“Are you all right, Kelly?”

She looked up to see JK kneeling in front of her. “I was just thinking about my one and only trip to Ho-Chunk. I had so much fun, that I couldn’t help telling my folks about it. Instead of being pleased that I’d had a good time, they were upset about the money I lost, since I knew how much help my brothers and sisters always needed.”

“Mardell said something about how your family treats you, but I didn’t believe her,” Ellen said, reaching across the expanse between their chairs to touch Kelly’s hand.

“Would you like to go to Lake Tahoe and Reno on your way home?” Delmar asked.

Kelly’s dark thoughts turned to anticipation. “I’d love it.”

“Good. We were planning to go to Reno with our friends next weekend. Instead of driving over alone, we’ll go with you and meet our friends after you leave. We can come back with them and you can have a couple days of fun before you start driving back to Wisconsin.”

Kelly thought for just a moment before saying anything. “It would be fun, but I wouldn’t want to put you out.”

“Nonsense,” Ellen said, as she patted Kelly’s hand. “Delmar’s been gone for six weeks and we both enjoy taking our friends to Lake Tahoe, as well as Reno. Of course, we can do some great sightseeing along the way. I always enjoy going to Virginia City and spending the night in Carson City when we drive from Lake Tahoe to Reno. I think you will, too. Besides, it will be good to get away for a few days. With the exception of a couple day trips this summer, I’ve been a real homebody.”

Delmar and Ellen’s generosity was almost overwhelming to Kelly. By the time they went to bed, she couldn’t stop talking about the upcoming trip to Nevada.

“I wish I could go with you. I don’t want to go home without you,” JK commented once they were in bed.

Kelly found she couldn’t say anything without crying. The thought of JK returning to the apartment without her was more than she wanted to consider. “Let’s make a pact,” she finally managed to say. “I won’t talk about my plans for the trip home and you won’t talk about going back to Los Angeles.”

He took her in his arms. Not only did he kiss her lips, but he also kissed away the tears that were rolling down her cheeks. “From this moment forward, we talk about what’s happening now. There is so much I want to show you tomorrow.”

* * * *

Everything in San Jose excited Kelly, but her favorite spot was the Winchester Mystery House. She had seen several television shows about the property, but none of them had done it justice. The fact that Mrs. Winchester had

kept building day and night until she died to keep away the ghosts of the people killed by her husband's rifles was fascinating.

On the tour, she had walked up the low riser stairs that led to nowhere, gasped in awe at the magnificence of the ballroom and opened doors that concealed a wall, rather than a room. At every corner, she hoped to encounter a ghost. Even though none seemed to be in residence, she thoroughly enjoyed the tour.

As she did at every major attraction they had visited, she bought stacks of postcards and way too many books about the property when they visited the gift shop.

From there, they drove down the coast to Santa Cruz. JK assured her if she liked Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, she would love this one even more. It wasn't nearly as commercialized as San Francisco had been. It surprised her to see many local artists displaying their work for the tourists.

One painting caught her eye. It would be a perfect reminder of this trip as it depicted the rugged coastline of Big Sur. She knew it would look lovely in her living room behind her couch, but the price tag kept her from snatching it up. It was one thing to spend money for Christmas presents for friends, family and students, and quite another thing to drop over two hundred dollars on a painting for herself.

"That is a beautiful painting," JK commented when she returned to it for the third time. "Let me buy it for you."

"Oh, I couldn't, it's way too expensive."

"Money doesn't mean a whole lot to me, but if buying this picture will keep me in your mind, then it's worth any price I have to pay."

The artist smiled as she ran his American Express card across her imprint machine. Even though Kelly felt guilty about taking such an expensive present, she knew that to decline JK's offer would hurt his feelings. Besides, just looking at the picture reminded her of the view they had enjoyed just beyond the window of their room at the bed and breakfast.

"How about some lunch?" JK suggested when they returned from taking the painting to Kelly's car.

"That sounds great. Do you think they have that lovely crab and shrimp like we had in San Francisco?"

JK winked wickedly. "Why do you think I brought you here? I remember how much you loved the fresh seafood we had in San Francisco. I know it's something you can't get back home. Hopefully, it will entice you to return to California as soon as you can."

Before going to the storefront that housed the seafood restaurant, JK took her in his arms and kissed her. She knew he wanted to tell the world that she belonged to him heart and soul. She only wished there was a way that they could be together, but like she'd told Ellen earlier, it was impossible. There was no way that either of them could easily give up their lives for the other.

While JK went to buy the cups of shrimp and crab, Kelly found a secluded table. While she waited, she looked down through the spaces between the boards that made up the wharf and noticed the seals lying on the support beams below her. As though they knew she was watching, they proceeded to put on quite a show for her, barking loudly when they thought she wasn't giving them enough of her attention.

"Why didn't you tell me the seals were down there?" she asked when JK returned.

“I thought it would be more fun for you to find them for yourself. They put on quite a show for the tourists. I love coming here and watching them. I just don’t get up to San Francisco as often as I’d like.”

“I know what you mean. In January, I usually go over to Cassville to watch the bald eagles soaring over the bluffs of the Mississippi and in February or March, I go to the Wisconsin River to see them again. They are so magnificent but not usually seen in Wisconsin. I love watching them.”

“I’d like to watch them as well. Maybe I can make a trip to Wisconsin for the Cassville thing in January. I’ll have vacation time coming.”

Kelly looked at him, surprised by his comment. “You’d brave Wisconsin in the winter just to see bald eagles?”

“Not just to see the eagles. It’s an excuse to see you. Do you have a spare bedroom, or is your bed big enough for two?”

“Yes to both questions. I do have a spare bedroom and one of the first real purchases I made was a king-size bed. I know it was foolish for a single gal, but I’d slept in a twin all my life and I wanted room to spread out, especially since my apartment has enough space in the bedroom to accommodate something that large. I got lucky when I found my place. It’s close to the school where I teach and it’s in an old building, so it has much larger rooms than the new places they’re building. I have the downstairs apartment. When I get home, I’m going to approach the owners again about buying the building. They were making noises about it last year. He’s retirement age and they’d like to move to Florida. I think it would be the perfect investment for me. Once I get some equity in the place, I can look for a house for myself and rent out both apartments. It would make a nice income for me.”

“It sounds like you have things all planned out. What if you were to move to California?”

The question echoed in Kelly’s mind. All the talk of giving up everything and moving to California was just that, talk. She knew where she belonged and it wasn’t with beautiful people like JK and Mardell. Her place was in a classroom teaching eager young minds. As much as she loved JK, she knew she couldn’t give up on her career, at least not for a year. If, by the time she was ready to sign a new contract, she changed her mind, she could easily purchase the property and become an absentee landlord.

“I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it. I have a year to decide what to do with my life. I’m hoping to buy the place, even if I move out here. It’s a good investment and the rent from the upper could defray a lot of the cost of the house payment. Besides, if I do move, I’ll have the rent from the lower and that would more than pay what I would owe each month.”

“That’s one of the things I love about you. You have a head for business. I think buying the house is a good move. My folks keep telling me that I should be investing in property, but buying anything in California is out of the question. Mardell says she can get me a good deal, but I doubt if it’s anything I could ever afford on my budget. I make a good living, but I’d need at least a hundred thousand down and I just don’t have that much saved. I like to travel and entertain friends far too much to put away that kind of money.”

“Then you’re living in the wrong part of the country. The house I’m looking at is only two hundred thousand. Since I’ve lived there for so long, the people I’m hoping to purchase it from would like to sell it to me on a land contract. I can pay them directly for the first ten years and

then borrow enough money from the bank to pay it off. They're young retirees. He took early retirement from his company when he was fifty-eight and she never worked. They inherited the house from her parents, so they don't owe anything on it. They're asking for twenty thousand down and the monthly payment would be less than the combined rent from both apartments. It's not a bad deal, since there's a waiting list of people who want to rent in the building. It's just a matter of when they'll be ready to sell and move to Florida. Hopefully, it won't take long."

Kelly wondered why she had voiced her desires to JK. She'd told no one of the long talks she'd had with her landlord about the property. Until now, it had been a pipe dream, but suddenly, she was giving it more thought. *Am I using this as an excuse not to move to California? Am I so afraid of change that I would give up someone like JK?* She shook her head to rid her mind of the annoying questions that were popping in uninvited. The house wasn't an excuse or something she was hiding behind. It was something she wanted. If the year separation from JK didn't make them closer, she would have the house as an investment. If it did, she would have a steady income, even though it wasn't much, to tide her over until she could get certified and find a teaching position in California.

"Would you like some ice cream?"

JK's question silenced the voice that sounded in her head. "What did you say?" Kelly asked.

"I asked if you'd like some ice cream. I figured I had to say something to get you back. You were a million miles away."

"I guess I was, but are you sure about the ice cream?"

JK patted her hand reassuringly. "You're dieting, Kelly, not depriving yourself. There's nothing that is bad

for you. It's overindulging that gets us in trouble. So what will it be, ice cream or fudge?"

"You choose, I love both and it shows."

The patting of her hand became a squeeze as JK looked into her eyes. She wondered if it was her imagination or if she really did see sadness mingled with unvented anger.

"Don't ever talk that way again. The only thing it does is to undermine your progress. Trust me, learning not to put myself down was the best kick-start I got to my losing efforts."

"Really? I can't believe that you were ever down on yourself."

"I work hard every day to be upbeat. All through high school and college, I was always 'The Fat Kid' and 'The Computer Geek.' I was the guy who was everyone's friend but who never dated. I soon learned that to get along, I had to become the butt of my own jokes. It was Mardell who first got on me about being so negative. When I finally started losing, it helped to be more positive about myself."

Kelly looked at JK in awe. He had described her life in high school and college to a tee. The difference was that she didn't have a Mardell to bring her to her senses.

Chapter 21

Kelly awoke secure in JK's embrace. She knew that it was late by the sun streaming in the window, but to her surprise, the house was quiet.

"Good morning, Sleeping Beauty," JK said as soon as he realized that she was awake.

"Good morning. I wonder what time it is?"

"Do you really care? This is the last morning we'll be waking up together until I come to Wisconsin to see those eagles of yours. I plan on staying in bed as long as possible."

"But what about Delmar and Ellen?"

"Delmar is at the coffee shop and Ellen is shopping."

"How do you know that?"

"Delmar told me last night. They go out to breakfast early on Saturday morning and he stays at the coffee shop while Ellen goes shopping. She picks him up when she's done. They won't be back until about noon. I think Ellen goes to a yoga class as well."

Kelly snuggled closer to JK. She was prepared to feel guilty about not being up and helping Ellen prepare for this evening's party, but since her hostess wasn't home, there was no need to get up before it was absolutely necessary.

"Do you think we'll ever be together?" she asked.

“Of course we will. Let’s just see how things go once you get back home. Moving to California might be easier than you think. We have a year to decide. In the meantime, I have unlimited anytime minutes on my cell phone and when we aren’t talking on the phone, we can be in touch by computer. January will be here before you know it, and when it arrives, we’ll both have had several months to get this situation worked out.”

JK made sense and his tender kisses drove all thoughts of being alone from Kelly’s mind. He was the only man who had ever loved her and made love to her. She would cherish his attentions, even though she should feel evil for doing the one thing that had gotten her sisters into enough trouble that they were forced to get married. Instead, she enjoyed every precious moment she and JK had left to them.

* * * *

“Anybody home?” Mardell’s voice woke Kelly from a sound sleep.

Kelly couldn’t believe that she had dozed off again after she and JK made love, but it was true. She was still in her nightclothes and if Mardell and her brother had arrived, it could only mean it was well past noon. Her great plans of helping Ellen prepare for the party were long forgotten, thanks to JK’s attentions.

“Kelly’s still sleeping, but I’m about as awake as I’m going to get,” JK replied to Mardell’s question. “I guess your folks are still out. Delmar said something about Ellen going to yoga class before she went shopping.”

Kelly quit listening to the conversation. Instead, she got out of bed and grabbed her robe as quickly as possible. If she was lucky, JK would keep Mardell and Tyson in the living room or the kitchen long enough for her to slip into

the bathroom for a quick shower before anyone saw what she looked like in the morning.

Her luck held, as she was able to get to the bathroom unnoticed. One look in the mirror told her that she looked not only disheveled, but also well loved. The glow from their lovemaking was evident. She had to admit, she had never looked happier.

After showering, she quickly dressed, did her hair and put on her make-up. At least no one would see her at her worst. Of course, JK didn't mind the way she looked in the morning, but he had become used to her over the summer.

By the time she joined the others in the living room, Delmar and Ellen had returned and the house was a hubbub of activity.

"You look well rested," Ellen commented when Kelly sat down on the couch next to JK. "We were hoping the two of you would take the opportunity to sleep in while we were out. It's been a busy week and I knew that you were tired."

"Well, I certainly didn't think I'd sleep this late. I should have had some of the work in the kitchen started before you got back from shopping."

"That's the most silly thing I've ever heard," Delmar said, joining the conversation. "You're a guest. Ellen never expected you to help out."

"Maybe Ellen didn't expect it, but I do. I've never been one to sit back and let others do the work."

"Well, maybe it's time you started," Tyson commented. "From what Mardell tells me, your family doesn't appreciate you. I hope when you go home, they see what they've been missing all summer and you let them do for you for a change."

Kelly smiled. “That’s easier said than done. I know what my family expects from me and it isn’t sitting back and letting others do the work. I understand that you all mean well, but my family isn’t like yours. I’m not the favored daughter and I learned to accept it a long time ago. I’m next to the oldest and I have a lot of responsibility. It wouldn’t do for me to forget it.”

Everyone looked at her as though they didn’t understand her meaning, or even want to. Until they walked in her shoes, they would have no idea what life in the Masters’ family was like.

“Let’s change the subject,” Mardell suggested. “On the way into town, Tyson and I stopped for something cold to drink. While we were waiting for our smoothies, we ran into some kids we went to school with. We’re all going out tonight, so we decided that since we’d be getting home late, we’d sleep on the pullout in the living room. That way, we won’t disturb anyone and JK and Kelly can have another night together.”

Kelly looked at Mardell in surprised appreciation for the offer. If she knew Mardell, there were no friends they were going out with. This was something she had made up so Kelly could be alone with JK for their final night. This morning’s lovemaking had left her hungry for more of his attentions.

* * * *

Since Delmar and Ellen went with Mardell and Tyson to the San Francisco airport, JK and Kelly had the house to themselves. Although they slept late, they were up by ten and ready to go out to brunch with Delmar, Ellen and Mardell when they returned to Cupertino.

“It was for the best that we didn’t go to San Francisco with everyone else,” Kelly said, as she helped JK pack for his return trip to Los Angeles.

“I know it was,” he agreed. “I thought they needed some family time, just like we need time alone.”

Kelly’s eyes filled with tears and he wiped them away before kissing her. “Look, honey, January will be here before we know it. As soon as I can get the time off, I’ll be making reservations to fly from Los Angeles to Madison. When I do, I’ll let you know, so you can meet me at the airport. In the meantime, why don’t you make reservations for Thanksgiving? Those flights will fill up fast. Even if it’s just from Friday to Sunday, at least we can be together. Better yet, make reservations on one of those gambling junkets to Las Vegas for that weekend. I’ll make hotel reservations and be there when you arrive.”

Kelly nodded. “That would work. I’d be able to put in an appearance at the folks’ place for Thanksgiving and you could spend the holiday with your family.”

They had just closed JK’s suitcase, when they heard Mardell pull into the driveway.

“Who’s hungry?” Delmar asked when he came into the kitchen.

“We are,” Kelly replied.

JK knew she was only saying what Delmar wanted to hear. Rather than say anything to the contrary, JK picked up his suitcase and headed toward the car.

Once they finished brunch, they left Delmar, Ellen and Kelly off at the house and JK left with Mardell for the four hundred mile drive back to Los Angeles.

“It was hard leaving her, wasn’t it?” Mardell asked, once they left the congestion of the city and pulled onto the highway.

“It was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do, but it’s for the best. We both have to figure out if we really want to be together and we can’t do that if we don’t separate. We’re going to get together in Las Vegas for Thanksgiving and I’m going to Wisconsin in January for some eagle festival.”

“Is that enough? Do you think that being apart is the answer to this problem?”

JK shook his head. “Of course I don’t, but what else can I do? She has obligations and I have my job. One of us has to bend and I don’t know which one it will be.”

“Well, I think I do. Didn’t you tell me that you could do your job anywhere in the country and that your company has a branch in Madison?”

JK nodded. He’d been thinking the same thing ever since his boss suggested the troubleshooting project in the Midwest. The biggest problem was that he didn’t know what his boss would say when he asked for a permanent transfer out of the Los Angeles office. That was something he wouldn’t know until he got back to work on Monday morning.

* * * *

Kelly watched until Mardell turned the corner and drove out of sight. *It was a wonderful summer. There’s no one in the world who can take that away from me now. I’ll have the memory of our lovemaking and all the things we did together to last me for the rest of my life.*

She knew that standing in the front yard was fruitless. JK wouldn’t be coming back. It wouldn’t take them long to make it to the freeway for the four hundred mile drive back to Los Angeles. She just wished she had had the guts to tell the school district she was breaking her contract and staying in California.

“Are you all right?” Ellen asked when Kelly came into the house.

“I will be. It was hard watching him leave, but I’ll survive. Tomorrow’s another day.”

“It certainly is,” Delmar said. “Ellen and I were talking about it and we want to get an early start. I was thinking that you girls might want to pack the car tonight.”

“And I was thinking that you should be helping us,” Ellen replied as she winked broadly at Kelly.

“Ah, Ellen, you know you girls are much better at that than I am. Of course, I guess the two of you helpless little things could use my muscle in carrying out those bags.”

Before Ellen or Kelly could comment, Kelly’s cell phone rang. She excused herself and went out to the pool area so she could have some privacy. Even without checking the caller ID, she knew it was JK telling her how much he missed her already.

“Hi, honey,” she answered, “I miss you already.”

“I don’t think I’m who you think I am,” the caller said, without saying hello.

Kelly immediately recognized the voice of her childhood friend, Sue Natter. Of course, she was Sue O’Mally now that she had married and moved to Minneapolis. “Sue, I’m sorry. I thought...oh, never mind. It’s great to hear from you. What’s up?”

“I should be asking you the same thing. I called your place and was told that your phone was temporarily disconnected, so I called your mom. She said that you had taken the summer to go out west and you weren’t expected back until the end of August. She gave me your cell phone number, so I thought I’d give it a shot. Where are you?”

“Right now, I’m in Cupertino, California, but tomorrow morning, we leave for Sacramento, Donners Pass and Lake Tahoe.”

“We?” Sue questioned suspiciously. “Does that mean you met someone special?”

“I did meet a special guy, but he left to go back to Los Angeles a little while ago. The *we* refers to some friends that I met who have offered to show me the sights, at least until we get to Reno. There they’ll meet up with friends and I’ll head back home. I have a lot of sightseeing I want to do before I get back to Wisconsin.”

“Could that sightseeing include a stop in Minneapolis?”

“Of course it could. What’s going on?”

“Donald proposed and we’re getting married two weeks from yesterday. I can’t think of anyone I’d rather have stand up with me than you.”

“What about your sister? She was in your first wedding.”

“She’s up in Alaska with her husband. He’s stationed there with the air force. They can’t afford the trip. As for Mom and Dad, she had to put him in hospice last week. She doesn’t want to make the trip up here for our hurry-up wedding.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your dad. Is it cancer?”

“Yes, and they didn’t catch it quickly enough.”

“So why such a hurry-up wedding?”

“Donald is being transferred to Seattle with his company. He has to be there right away. He didn’t want to leave Mindy and me behind. She misses her daddy so much and Donald loves her with all his heart. He wants to get her in school and become a real daddy to her. You know how hard it’s been on Mindy and me since Karl was killed three years ago. This way, she’ll have a normal life.”

“But do you love him?”

“Oh, Kelly, I can’t begin to tell you how much I love him. We’ve been dating for the past year and a half and had decided to get married next summer. The transfer just hurried things up. We were going to get engaged at Christmas and have six months to plan for our wedding, but you know how plans can change.”

Boy, do I know how plans can change. At the beginning of the summer if anyone would have told me that I would meet JK and lose both my virginity and my heart to him, I would have called him a liar.

“Yes, Sue, I do know how plans can change. What kind of a dress do you want me to look for? I’ll have plenty of time to look in all the different stores along the way back home.”

“Get whatever you feel comfortable in. We’re being married in the park and I have a light blue dress with a lace overlay. Mindy is wearing pink and she’s giving me away. She’s so excited about being part of the wedding. It will be really strange being given away by my nine year old daughter, but it will make everything so very special.”

“This is one wedding I wouldn’t miss for the world. What about a wedding present?”

“We’re asking that people not bring gifts. We each have a house full of furnishings that we have to consolidate into one before the movers come. Our honeymoon will be the trip out to Washington. Donald has arranged for us to have two bedroom suites at every stop along the way. As soon as he finds us a place to live, we’ll be transferring Mindy’s school records and advising the district in Seattle that we might be a little late in arriving. We’re all looking forward to some sightseeing along the way. Donald is out

there right now looking into housing for us. I'm so excited, I can't stand it."

"Somehow, I can tell that."

"So, when will you be arriving?"

"Let's see, tomorrow we're going to leave early in the morning and spend the night in Lake Tahoe. Tuesday, we'll do some sightseeing and spend the night in Carson City and Wednesday, we'll be going to Reno. On Thursday morning, I'll be heading east. I hope to make it to Glacier by Saturday and Yellowstone sometime on Sunday. I'm planning to get to the Black Hills on Tuesday, so that will put me in Minneapolis by Thursday. I know it's cutting things short, but at least we'll have a couple days to get caught up on everything. I can hardly wait to tell you all about JK and the things we did this summer."

"You didn't get married, did you?"

"Hardly, but the explanations can wait until I see you. I'll be arriving sometime on Thursday afternoon. Do you have a couch where I can crash, or should I arrange for a hotel room?"

"I already have rooms rented for both of us. The movers are coming on Tuesday to pack everything up and send it out to Seattle, so we're all staying at the Sheraton. Donald is so old-fashioned, he booked three rooms, one for Mindy and me, one for you and one for himself. Even though we have fooled around, he doesn't want to stay with us until after the wedding. He says by doing that, we would send mixed signals to Mindy about what's proper as far as sex is concerned."

"He sounds like a peach. I'll see you a week from Thursday at the Sheraton."

Kelly broke the connection and sat down in one of the deck chairs. Her mind spun with Sue's announcement.

“Good news?” Ellen asked, when she brought out a tray of glasses and a pitcher of iced tea. “Does JK miss you already?”

“I thought it was JK as well, but it turns out it was a friend of mine from high school. She lives in Minneapolis and has been widowed for the past three years. She’s getting married in two weeks and wants me to stand up with her at her wedding.”

“Isn’t that kind of sudden?” Delmar asked.

“It really is, but only because her fiancé is being transferred to Seattle. He wants her and her daughter to go with him. It’s almost like a fairy tale.”

“Sort of like you and JK,” Ellen said, as she handed Kelly a glass of tea.

Kelly nodded. This had certainly been one exciting summer. She had left Madison with no intention of falling in love, in order to be an attendant in Birdie’s wedding. At the time, she had known it would be her one and only chance to be a bridesmaid and now she was preparing to be in another wedding before she returned home.

Would fate step in again and make it possible for her and JK to be together? She doubted it. Neither of them was ready to give up their lives for the other. In a few months, he would be a wonderful memory to bring out on special occasions.

Chapter 22

After Sue's phone call, Kelly had insisted on going shopping. It didn't take her long to find a craft store where she could get crochet cotton, a pattern and a crochet hook. She knew that Sue had said no gifts, but she couldn't come empty-handed. One of her doilies would make a nice gift, along with a gift card to the chain restaurant she had researched online. There were several locations listed in the Seattle area and Ellen assured her that the food at these particular restaurants was great.

As promised, they left early on Monday morning. With Ellen driving Kelly's car, Kelly was able to work on the doily as they drove through the California countryside. Once out of the congested Bay area, the scenery changed and Kelly enjoyed the drive to Sacramento.

Old Sacramento was filled with restaurants, exciting shops and museums. They had lunch there before heading on to Donners Pass. This was the place she had looked forward to seeing. The small visitors' center was filled with wonderful information about the ill-fated party of people who were trapped there on their way to California and a new life. Just the thought of the cannibalism that occurred out of necessity saddened Kelly.

Just beyond the parking lot was the monument to the brave souls who had survived, as well as those who had lost their lives during that terrible winter. Kelly looked at it in awe. The thought of anything so terrible brought tears to her eyes.

After a stop of about an hour, they were again on the road and heading toward Lake Tahoe. The beauty of the lake on the California side soon gave way to the strip of hotels where gambling drew in the tourists on the Nevada side.

Delmar had said that they were frequent guests at the hotel where they would be staying, but Kelly never expected the celebrity treatment they received. The room they stayed in was spacious with two queen-sized beds. Delmar had explained that they didn't mind sharing with Kelly if she was all right with it.

After they were settled, Delmar took Kelly to the casino. "What about Ellen?" Kelly asked when they were on the elevator.

"This is her chance to catch up on her reading. She'll meet us in the restaurant at seven for dinner. Before that, she'll spend a little time at the penny slots. I'm the big gambler in the family. I head right for the nickel slots."

Kelly smiled. "Nickel slots sound great to me. Although I enjoy gambling, I don't want to lose too much money. It's too hard to come by, if you know what I mean."

After about two hours of playing the slots, Kelly was thrilled to have won several jackpots. When she turned in her winnings, she found that her twenty-dollar investment had turned into two hundred dollars.

By the time they met Ellen, they learned that she had also been a winner. On the penny slots, her fifty cents had

turned into five dollars. It seemed that Delmar was the only loser in the group. Although Kelly felt bad that Delmar hadn't won, she realized that in the other places they stopped in Nevada, fortunes could easily turn the other way.

Early the next morning, they left for Virginia City. The replica of days gone by, perched on the side of a mountainside, fascinated Kelly. She loved the church, the saloons and especially the view from Boot Hill. It was like a scene from a western movie.

As they drove toward Carson City, Delmar suggested a stop at the Ponderosa, but Kelly decided against it. As much as she would have loved to see the replica of one of her favorite TV shows, she felt the pinch of time restraints. There was so much more to see before she struck out on her own and headed toward Minneapolis and Sue's wedding.

By the time they spent nights in both Carson City and Reno, Kelly had had her fill of gambling. She could easily understand why Ellen had come loaded down with books to read.

* * * *

The outskirts of Minneapolis were only miles away and Kelly knew that her wonderful summer was coming to a close quicker than she had hoped it would. Her last night on the road had been spent in Mitchell, South Dakota not far from the Corn Palace. Since then, she had driven across Minnesota, in awe of the crops that grew in abundance and the beauty of this land of ten thousand lakes.

The congestion of the city was a disappointment. Although she had spent her summer in the traffic and congestion of Los Angeles, she hated to leave the farmland behind.

The Sheraton was as luxurious as the name had implied. As soon as she checked in, she called up to Sue's room.

"You're right beside me," Sue said when she answered. "When you get settled, knock on my door and we can go shopping."

"Shopping?" Kelly asked.

"I want to pick out the perfect accessories to go with your dress."

"Dress?" Kelly questioned. "Oh my gosh, in the excitement of all the sightseeing, I never got to a dress shop. I'll be at your door in ten minutes, tops. What about Mindy?"

"She's spending the day with her friends, since we're leaving for Washington right after the wedding. They're having a going away slumber party for her. They started at ten this morning and I don't have to pick her up until tomorrow morning at ten. It gives us plenty of time to talk."

"Do I get to meet Donald today?"

"Not until tomorrow. He's flying in tomorrow morning from Seattle. He started work out there on Monday. He says he's found us the cutest house and asked the realtor to hold it until I can get out there to see it. They said it wouldn't be a problem."

Kelly knew the rest of her questions could wait until she saw Sue in person. Since she had brought in only a small traveling bag, she hurried toward the elevator that would lead her to the room next to Sue.

As soon as she got off the elevator, she saw Sue standing in the hall waiting for her. It had been at least three years since they had been together, but Kelly knew she had

never seen her friend look as radiant as she did at this very moment.

“My god, Kelly, what have you done?” Sue asked as soon as they were in the room.

“I met a guy who has lost a lot of weight. I spent the summer exercising and eating right for a change. It’s been wonderful watching the weight disappear.”

“How much have you lost?”

“The last time I weighed myself was at the athletic club in Los Angeles and then it was about forty pounds. I have a long way to go, but I feel good about myself for the first time in my life. I even found an athletic club close to where I live and work. I’ll be able to keep up my routine and get down to my ideal weight.”

“What did your folks say?”

“They don’t know. We had a falling out at the beginning of the summer and the last time I talked to Kim, I was far from cordial. If things don’t improve between us, it will make moving to California when my contract is up much easier.”

“Moving? As in going to be with this guy? You’d move two thousand miles away from your family for a guy?”

Kelly couldn’t help the smile that crossed her lips. “I think I’ve been in love with JK, or at least the idea of being with him, since the first time I signed on to the Big Beautiful People chat line. He was rather mysterious, since he never sent a picture. Now I know why. When he first started posting, he was very heavy, but then he had a scare and landed in the emergency room. When the doctor said diet or die, he took the warning seriously. When you see the pictures I have to download off my camera, you’ll understand. The best part is he loves me, not because I’m losing weight, but because of who I am. We had a

wonderful summer and leaving him was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I'm planning to go out there for Thanksgiving and he's coming to Madison for the eagle festival in January. By the end of this coming school year, we'll know if we were meant to be together and if we are, I won't sign a contract for next year."

"I can see that you're happier than I've ever known you to be. We can talk more while we shop."

Kelly put her case on the luggage rack and went into the bathroom to run a comb through her hair and splash water on her face. The last thing she wanted to do was to get back in the car and go shopping, but she did need a dress for the wedding and Sue had her heart set on the two of them going to get it together.

"I know you're probably tired of driving, how do you feel about walking? The shop I have in mind is about two blocks away."

Sue's question put Kelly's mind at ease. She did need to get out and walk and a shop close to the hotel sounded like the perfect solution.

"So what kind of exercising did you do in California?" Sue asked, as they left the hotel.

"At the athletic club, I did the stair steppers, rode a stationary bike and did weights. I also did water aerobics. When I went down to the beach, I did a lot of walking and rollerblading. At the apartment complex, I swam every day. I think that's what I'll miss the most this winter in Madison. I won't be able to do as much due to the weather."

"You on rollerblades? Now that's something I would have liked to see. Could you rent them?"

“At first I did, then I bought my own gear. I was really surprised by how much I enjoyed it. I even tried body surfing in the ocean.”

The mention of the ocean and all the things she had done with JK made the tears threaten to start falling. She missed him, even though they did talk on the phone every day. How she would be able to wait until November to have him hold her in his arms was something she didn't want to think about. It would be three months and in that time, she knew he would probably find another girl to fill his days and nights.

Before she could dwell on it further, they reached the shop that Sue had told her about. They were only inside for a moment when the perfect dress almost slapped Kelly in the face. She was glad she hadn't bought something while she'd been on the road. If she had, she wouldn't have even come to this shop.

The material was a cotton blend. The lavender print was the perfect accent to the style, which was a drawstring empire waistline. It was something she could wear, even though she was losing weight. The cap sleeves were perfect, because even when she lost more weight in her arms, they would still look good.

“What do you think of this one?” Sue inquired. “I think it would be perfect for you and it is the same style as the ones Mindy and I are wearing.”

Kelly started to laugh. “I was going to suggest that one the minute I saw it. I guess we still think the same after all these years.”

* * * *

The park that Sue and Donald had chosen was the perfect place for a wedding. They had found a clearing in the woods and right beside it was a small stream. The music

was provided by a string quartet and rather than headpieces, Kelly, Sue and Mindy wore flowers woven into their hair.

The biggest surprise of the day came when Sue's mother was waiting for them at the park, along with Sue's Uncle George. Kelly had seen Mrs. Natter at Kim's wedding and was shocked at the change in her appearance. She looked tired and much thinner than she had been just a few months earlier.

"I didn't expect to see you, Mrs. Natter," Kelly said when she embraced the older woman.

"I didn't expect to be here, but my husband insisted I couldn't miss Sue's wedding. Even though he couldn't come, he wanted me to be here. He also insisted that George come along and videotape everything so we could play it for him when we got back."

Kelly wiped a tear from her eye. "I was so sorry to hear that you had to put Mr. Natter in hospice care. You folks were always so good to me. When did they find the cancer?"

"It was just after Christmas, but it didn't get really bad until the first of June. The chemo and radiation treatments weren't doing any good and it had spread to his bones. He's ready to go home, and now that he's in hospice, I think I'm ready as well. He told me that he wants to be cremated and have a service at Christmas, when the two girls will be home. I'll have a small memorial at the church, but we won't scatter his ashes until the girls can help me do it."

Kelly swallowed a lump in her throat. It was hard to see the parents of her friends die. It reminded her of her parents' mortality. Someday, it would be her who would suffer such a loss and she didn't know if she could handle it.

Before Kelly could comment further, the music began and Mrs. Natter was escorted to her seat. Donald's niece

followed her down the aisle and sprinkled rose petals across the white carpet that covered the grass in the clearing. Kelly was the next to make the walk to the arch that had been erected and covered in fresh flowers. There, Donald's brother, Tony, met her. The tone of the music changed as the guests got to their feet to watch Mindy escort her mother toward the area where Donald waited for her.

The ceremony was very different from any Kelly had ever witnessed. The traditional vows were replaced by ones written by the bride and groom, in which they pledged their love and fidelity. In Donald's vows, he promised to keep the memory of Mindy's father forever bright in her mind, while being the best father he knew how to be.

Even though the couple had insisted that no gifts be brought, there were a few on the table at the reception and the card box was overflowing. Kelly knew her doily would look a bit homemade, but she didn't care. It was a gift that had been made and given in love.

Chapter 23

The next morning, they met for breakfast and to open gifts before they all went their separate ways. Sue, Donald and Mindy were driving out to Seattle; Mrs. Natter and her brother were flying back to Madison, and Kelly was going to begin the last leg of her journey back home.

With the good-byes said, Kelly returned to her room to pack for the long drive back to Madison. On an impulse, she called Kim to let her know she would be home by five, barring any unforeseen delays.

“I’m so glad you called,” Kim said. “When I talked to Sue, she said that she wanted you to be in her wedding. Did you make it on time?”

“Yes and it was a beautiful wedding. Mrs. Natter came up with her brother and he videotaped the whole thing for Sue’s dad. I didn’t know he was quite so bad with cancer, but at least he’ll get to see the wedding. She said they would make a copy for me, so I can watch what I took part in.”

“The gal from student housing called and said that the people who had sublet your place for the summer had moved out. I went over there and picked up the key so that I could see if there was any damage. Everything looked great. I think they must have done a real cleaning job on the

place. It was dusted, vacuumed and the kitchen and bathroom floors were washed. All you have to do is move back in.”

“Good, by the time I get home, I’ll be ready to crash. I plan on stopping in Tomah to pick up something to eat and then having a picnic at that rest area just south of Camp Douglas right after I-94 and I-90 join. I think that’s about the halfway point.”

For some reason, Kim seemed anxious to end the conversation, which did not upset Kelly. She wanted to get on the road. The pull of returning to her apartment was a strong one. She would take in only her traveling bag. The rest of the unpacking could wait until tomorrow night when she finished her first day of setting up her classroom at the school.

After checking out at the front desk, Kelly got in her car and headed for I-94. Once she entered the freeway and got up to speed, Kelly set the cruise control and prepared to enjoy the scenery. The first sign she saw told her she had an eighty-six mile drive to Eau Claire. As she had all through the trip, she concentrated on one particular city and once she made it there, she worked on the next. It broke the distance up, when instead of ticking off the entire two hundred and seventy-two miles that separated Madison and Minneapolis, she could see the end to each milestone.

Considering it was still early in the morning, the traffic was not what she would call heavy. It wouldn’t become worse until she got closer to Madison in the afternoon when the weekend vacationers would be headed south to their homes in the southern part of the state as well as Northern Illinois.

Eau Claire came and went and she set her goals on the next city, which was Tomah. There she would get off and

find a fast food restaurant where she could pick up a salad before getting back on the highway and making her way to the rest stop.

The picnic area at the rest stop was filled with travelers who, like her, had decided this was a good stopping place. The rock formation that flanked the parking lot on the west side was awesome. She had often driven past it, but never taken the time to stop before. The last time had been when she went to Minneapolis to be with Sue at the time of Karl's funeral. This time, she had a happier reason for seeing Sue. Her trip home was filled with anticipation rather than sorrow at the loss of such a young man.

* * * *

MADISON, NEXT FOUR EXITS. The sign came as a welcome relief. The trip had taken well over five hours with the stop for lunch and a potty break at the Dells. At the beltline, she headed west toward the South Town exit. Once she merged into the city traffic, she made three turns before pulling up in front of her home on Ethelwyn Drive.

Just seeing the house brought tears to her eyes. Here, she would be by herself. There would be no reassuring hugs from JK telling her that he was home and everything would be all right. Until November, she would once again be Ms. Masters, the teacher who lived alone and rarely socialized.

No! She heard JK's voice sounding within the confines of her mind. *You will not go back to the life you had before you came to California. You've made a good start, keep at it. Get out of that apartment, even if all you do is go to the athletic club or walk around the block. I want to see the same Kelly I left in Cupertino when I get to Las Vegas. I'm with you in thought, if not in person.*

Kelly took a deep breath. The fact he was in Los Angeles and she was in Madison was apparent, yet she could

feel his presence as though he sat next to her in the car. “Yes, JK,” she said aloud. She knew he couldn’t hear her, but she had to acknowledge the voice in her head. It made him seem closer than two thousand miles away.

She grabbed her overnight bag from the back seat before locking the car. Just the thought of unpacking tonight defeated her. Tomorrow would be soon enough and if she wasn’t ready, then she would put it off until Tuesday or Wednesday, or maybe leave the whole mess for the weekend.

Once she stood on the front porch, Kelly fingered the key that had remained untouched since she left in June. This was the key to her home, but oh how she wished she were walking into the three-bedroom apartment she had shared with JK in Los Angeles.

She fit the key into the lock and opened the door to be met with a loud, “*Welcome home!*” To her amazement, her entire family was crammed into the kitchen and living room area of the apartment.

“What have you done?” her mother questioned as she hugged her tightly.

“What do you mean, what has she done?” her father said before Kelly could reply. “She’s lost weight and she looks great. What brought all this about? Are you going to keep it up? How much have you lost?”

“One question at a time,” Kelly said, holding up her hand for silence.

Before she could say more, the doorbell rang. “Who could that be?” she asked aloud. “You’re all here and no one else ever comes to visit.”

“Well, you’ll never find out standing here asking us questions we can’t answer,” Kate said. “Why don’t you answer the door and find out?”

The bell rang again before Kelly put her hand on the knob. She knew she should check through the peephole, but with her entire family there, what harm could befall her? Besides, rapists didn't ring the doorbell.

"JK!" she gasped when she opened the door.

"What... what are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you to finally get home. I've been driving past your apartment every day for a week. What took you so long?"

"I...I..."

"Don't stammer, Kelly, let the young man in," her father said.

Kelly took a step backward in order to give JK room to enter her home. Instead of stepping past her, he took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly. "I've missed you so very much. I couldn't wait until November to see you."

She knew she should be embarrassed to be kissed in front of her family, but to her surprise, no one said anything derogatory.

"But I still don't understand," she said, once he was in the living room. "What are you doing in Madison?"

"I had a troubleshooting assignment here and decided to transfer. Like I told you, I can work from any office, so why not Madison? Do you know of any apartments for rent? I'm getting tired of the hotel."

"You have two bedrooms, Kelly," Kim said. "Why can't he stay here?"

Kelly's head was spinning with everything was happening. "Of course, you can stay here, it's just..."

"Good, I hoped you'd say that. I've been driving that rental car around with my suitcase in it for a week. It's time I brought it in."

Her family laughed as JK went back to the door and returned to the room with his suitcase in hand. “This is just my traveling bag,” he explained. “The company is shipping out the rest of my stuff once I give them my address.”

“What about your car?” Kelly asked. She knew the question sounded odd, but she couldn’t put words to the other questions that were crowding her mind.

“Dan’s car died right after he got home, so he bought mine. Guess I have to go car shopping soon. The company will only pay for a rental for two weeks.”

“Where are your manners, Kelly?” Kate asked. “Aren’t you going to introduce us to Mr. Hunka-Hunka?”

JK laughed so hard, that Kelly found it infectious. Even if she wanted to make introductions, she couldn’t begin to catch her breath long enough to say anything.

“Everyone, I’m JK,” he said, taking the responsibility from Kelly’s shoulders. “I’ll learn all your names soon enough, because if Kelly will have me, I want her to be my wife.”

Kelly watched as JK reached into his pocket and produced a jewelry box with a diamond ring nestled in the velvet lining. It wasn’t the kind of proposal she had thought she would receive, but it was perfect. For the first time in her life, her family would realize that someone loved her because she was Kelly. JK didn’t want her money, didn’t care what her family thought and didn’t think she was someone to be ashamed of. JK loved her and he had just proved it by proposing in front of her entire family.

Epilogue

A light snow fell outside of the church as Kelly waited for her wedding to begin. If anyone had told her that she could put together a wedding between the beginning of school and winter break, she would have told them they were crazy. Her bridesmaids, Birdie, Allison and Mardell, were in the room with her and Sue fussed over the last minute details as Kelly's personal attendant.

The girls had all gone online and found the exact same dresses from three different cities. The red suited each of them perfectly. Kelly had found her dress at a bridal shop in Madison and had bitten her nails in the hopes it would arrive in time for the wedding, since it had to be special ordered.

The floor length satin and lace dress featured a long train and was accented by a picture book hat. It had surprised her when she found that the size eighteen she had ordered had to be further altered after it arrived in order to fit her. In all, she had lost almost seventy pounds since she left for her vacation in June. She knew she still had a long way to go, but the alterations on the dress encouraged her to stick with it.

Her bouquet was made up of red and white poinsettias accented by red and white roses and pine boughs. Her

attendants' bouquets were similar, but were much smaller in size.

Even though her sisters had hinted that they wanted to be in the wedding, she told them she had other people in mind to be her bridesmaids. She didn't care if their feelings were hurt. They were the ones who had drawn the battle lines by not having her in their weddings. Her attendants were her true friends and she wouldn't trade them for all the sisters in the world.

She wondered if JK was getting as nervous as she felt. With Chuck acting as his best man, JK's brother and Dan were the groomsmen. Only their closest friends would be at the front of the church with them.

They had pacified the rest of the family by having Kelly's brothers act as ushers, while Kim and Kate cut the cake and took care of the guest book.

"It's time," Sue said. "Are you ready, Kelly?"

"I think so," she replied. "I have something old, the handkerchief that my grandmother gave me for my sixteenth birthday; something new, my dress; something borrowed, the shoes that Allison wore at her wedding; and my garter is something blue."

"Don't forget the penny I taped to the bottom of your shoe for luck," Allison teased. "I can't believe how lucky my brother is to have found you. It's great to think that in a matter of minutes, you'll be my sister. I just knew something good would come out of you staying with us last summer."

Kelly hugged Allison and then watched as the three girls left the room ahead of her.

"Thank you for everything," she said once she and Sue were alone.

“That’s what friends are for. I’m so glad you planned this around me being home for Christmas. I wouldn’t want to miss your wedding for anything in the world. When we got the call about your engagement, Donald couldn’t talk about anything else, other than he prayed you would be as happy as we are.”

They could hear the change in the music and knew the girls were walking down the aisle. With Sue’s help, Kelly made her way to the narthex of the church where her father waited for her. Once she stood beside her father, she watched her friends walk down the aisle ahead of her. It didn’t matter that Mardell stood six foot tall and was as slender as a reed or that Allison was tall and big-boned like Kelly or that Birdie was short and stout. These were her friends and they all loved her for herself. The girl who had never been a bridesmaid had done so twice in the past six months and was preparing to become a bride herself. With luck, she and JK would have children to make their lives complete.

Again, the music changed and Kelly began the walk from the back of the church to where JK waited for her patiently. The smile on his face told her he had been waiting for this moment for as long as she had.

At the altar, her father placed her hand in JK’s and kissed her cheek. After the next few minutes, she wouldn’t be Ms. Masters the old maid schoolteacher anymore. She would be Kelly Ransom, cherished wife of JK and someday, the mother to his children.

She knew if anyone asked her to repeat the vows she spoke, she wouldn’t remember the words. The ceremony was a blur until the minister said, “I now pronounce you husband and wife.” With those words, JK took her in his arms and kissed her while the congregation applauded.

After the wedding party had left the sanctuary, Kelly and JK went back to the front of the church to greet their guests. While Kelly's side of the church was filled with family and friends from all over Southern Wisconsin and Northern Illinois, JK's side was comprised of people from Arizona, California and Washington State. The friends she had met and come to know so well over the summer were there to wish them well on their wedding day.

"From this day forward, we'll be together," JK said once they greeted the last of their guests. "When we get back from Jamaica, I think we should start getting serious about buying the house where we've been living."

"I like the sound of that," Kelly said before allowing him to take her in his arms and kiss her again.

When he released her, he looked into her eyes. "Don't get too comfortable there, though. By this time next year, I plan on us renting out both apartments and moving into our new home. I think we should build a house in one of those new subdivisions where there are a lot of kids. I want to start a family as soon as possible."

Kelly knew she would never want for a thing. Along with JK, she would have a home of her own and children who called her mommy. A family of her own was something she never thought she would have, and now that it was a reality, she gave thanks for the acts of fate that had brought her and JK together.

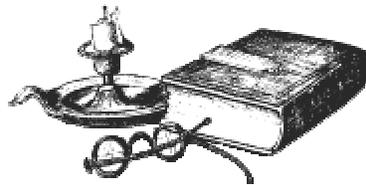
In the future, they would be able to tell their children how they had fallen in love online and found each other in person quite by accident. It was like a fairy tale where the lowly peasant girl fell in love with the handsome prince. Kelly knew that her Prince Charming would become the king of their household and she would forever be his queen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When Sherry Derr-Wille entered her Sophomore English Class, her life changed. With the assignment to sit in the back of the room and write for a year, she fell in love and found her life's passion. Fortunately, no one ever told her that at the end of the year the assignment was over. Now forty plus years later, she is still at it. With thirty-two contracts to her credit, she is having more fun than ever before. Although she is a wife, mother of three grown children and seven grandchildren, she is first and foremost a writer.

Sherry claims Wisconsin as her home and is looking forward to complete retirement so she can write more of the fun stories she enjoys and spend quality time with her husband of forty plus years, Bob.

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