

kisses of fire



phyllis campbell

Champagne Books Presents

Kisses Of Fire

By

Phyllis Campbell



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One

Cassidy Brown locked her legs in military stance and folded her arms across her breast. She scowled at her cousin Joan, the manager of the family bar, *The Hideaway*, as they stood in the back hallway. "I'd rather be thrown in piranha-infested waters than go out with a man."

Clinking of glasses rang faint from inside the bar, mixed with loud chatter as the patronage continued to grow. Cassidy had never seen this many men in Coral Gables, Florida, in one place all at the same time. She tried not to think of the reason the bar filled so quickly, and concentrated on her cousin. Lifting her chin a notch, Cassidy hoped to prove her stubbornness.

Her cousin rubbed her temple, her fingers digging into her forehead as if she were trying to get rid of something deep in her skull. "Cass, you have to go out with someone, especially tonight." Heaving a deep sigh, she leaned around the corner and peeked into the bar. "Do you see how full we are? The bar needs this auction to stimulate business. Look at all those men."

Cassidy glanced into the crowded room, her heart weighed with indecision, her mind arguing along with it.

Joan shook her head. "Most of those men are even dressed in business suits." Joan looked back at Cassidy. "Suits mean business with more moolah than the usual Joe Schmo. Can you imagine how much money we'll make tonight?"

Cassidy gritted her teeth. The sinking sensation of defeat pulled at her conscience, but she would hold firm to her decision. She *had* to. Her feelings rarely led her astray.

"Yes, I can imagine how much money we'll make. We'll just do it with one less girl."

Joan huffed and grasped Cassidy's shoulders, looking her directly in the eyes. "Not if they plan on bidding on ten girls and we only have nine."

"We'll just explain that Linda—"

"No, Cass. We can't. Our advertisement said ten women, which means we've got to give them that many."

"But if I'm one of the girls to be bid on, who'll wait tables?"

"My brothers will. They're here to help for tonight's auction, anyway."

Cassidy's stomach twisted, her palms moistened. Joan was right. The bar needed tonight's entertainment to pick up business. If this function didn't bring in money, The Hideaway would have to close. Joan and Cassidy's fathers had operated the bar for twenty years, and she couldn't let it go under now. But her father would turn over in his grave if he knew what they'd planned to bring back their patrons.

Joan swiped a wayward curl behind Cassidy's ear and gave her a sheepish smile. "I wouldn't be asking if I didn't think it was important. I understand Lyle ruined the way you look at other men, but tonight is different." She shrugged. "Just think of it as a business venture that will help you grow."

Demeaning myself is more like it. "But Joan, I feel like something bad is going to happen tonight."

Joan lifted her brows. "Nothing bad will happen. I promise."

Cassidy laughed. "Maybe the worst that will happen is that the guy who buys me for the night will demand his money back." If she hadn't been good enough for Lyle...

Joan cupped Cassidy's chin and grinned. "Just be the adorable and fun-loving woman we all know you are. Remember, tonight's date is nothing personal. It's just one night. That's all."

From inside the bar, the men's chants, whistling and cheering grew stronger. The auction would start any moment, and Cassidy couldn't do a damn thing to get out of it. Being the Assistant Manager, she had no other choice, and although she didn't have to like it, she'd do it for The

Hideaway. This was the one thing her father wanted her to do—to continue making the bar a place for everyone to come and enjoy themselves. She couldn't lose it now.

She gritted her teeth. "Fine."

Joan beamed and clapped her hands. "Hurry and change into Linda's dress."

Cassidy grimaced. "Do I have to?"

"Yes, you have to look like the other girls."

Pivoting on her heel, Cassidy spun around, her hair whipping over her shoulder. With her hands in fists, she marched toward the back room where the other women being auctioned had gathered to change. It was Joan's idea to do the auction, and Cassidy's younger sister, Katie's idea to wear the sexy dresses. Cass would like to slap Katie for being so sexually driven.

Of course, Cass remembered what she'd been like at age twenty-two, which is how she got tangled up with Lyle. Worst mistake of her life. Now, at twenty-five, she wondered if tonight she'd make another mistake.

The other nine giggling girls were applying finishing touches to their hair and face, all looking like damn Barbie dolls. Cassidy rolled her eyes. Mattel could market such a doll—*night on the town Barbie, for hire*.

She pasted on a smile as she passed the girls on their way out front. "Good luck."

"You'd better hurry, Cass." Katie shoved Linda's dress into her arms. "You only have ten minutes."

"Oh yeah, ten minutes to make myself into some man's dream Barbie. I can't wait."

Katie grinned, showing her pearly whites, the kind made by the dentist. "You're gonna knock 'em dead, Sis." She spun on her three-inch heels and glided out the door like a model going down a runway.

Cassidy held the dress out in front of her and groaned. No way was her size six body going to fit into Linda's size four dress. But she had no other choice. She hung the dress over the end of a chair and stripped off her jeans and T-shirt. Leaving her matching black bra and high-hipped panties, she struggled into the black spandex dress. *So this is what a hippo would feel like wearing a girdle.*

Yanking the straps over her shoulders, she squeezed

into the dress, tugging it down her legs, but it wouldn't go any further than her thighs. She growled and tried again, but the stretchy material bounced back. Throwing her hands in the air, she turned toward the full-length mirror. "Oh, dear Lord!"

Grabbing the sides of the bodice's deep opening, she pulled it together, and just as before, the stretchy material shrunk back to its original spot. Now she looked like a hippo wearing a girdle whose watermelons wouldn't fit into cup-size holders. She scowled at her reflection. She couldn't cover up her bra. She'd have to take it off.

Once that was completed, she surveyed her body again, twisting in front of the mirror to get the full effect. Now she had panty-lines. She seethed. No way would those come off too! But she didn't have any other choice. The dress was too damn tight and would show everything.

She shrugged. Well, the other girls looked sleazy, too. Why should she be any different? Would the men bidding on her think she was going to give them more than a night on the town? *That* she would not do. They'd be lucky if she lasted throughout dinner.

After discarding her panties and pulling the dress down on last time, she made her way toward the bar on shaky legs. Joan's voice boomed over the microphone, starting the auction.

The closer she came to the room full of men, the harder her heartbeat slammed against her ribs. She blamed all of this on Carrington Enterprises. If they hadn't been bullying her endlessly about selling the bar so they could build an office sky-rise, she wouldn't be wobbling toward the stage looking like a hooker. She and Joan only had a week to think up a way to raise the bar's patronage, and since women ran the bar, this was the solution that came to mind.

When she stepped into the smoky, dimly-lit bar, she gasped and pressed her back against the wall. Men filled the room, sitting or standing, elbow to elbow. Some looked like construction workers, dressed in faded jeans and cotton T-shirts, and others were in three-piece suits. Their ages appeared to range from barely legal up to sixty-year-olds. By the way they waved their cash and catcalled, a passerby would think this was a strip club. She frowned. That would

definitely make the bar popular, but in the wrong way.

She kept her gaze glued to the wall, her heart hammering as she watched the proceedings. The girls on stage actually played up their parts, wiggling their hips, blowing kisses to the men, and even shaking their unbound breasts. Cassidy rolled her eyes. *How pathetic—and how embarrassing.* But it drove the men wild.

She swallowed the lump of fear in her throat. Hopefully, they wouldn't expect that from her.

The men continued to bid. Her sister, Katie, went for eight hundred dollars. Cassidy grinned. Knowing her sister, she'd give them their money's worth. The other girls didn't bring in quite as much, but still a fair amount.

Finally, the moment she dreaded came. Joan called her name, motioning with her hand for her to go up on stage. All eyes turned on Cassidy and fear stilled her limbs. She wanted to turn and run, but her legs wouldn't agree to move.

She scanned the crowd of onlookers, her gaze falling to a gorgeous man at a nearby table. He sipped his coffee cup, watching her over the rim. His penetrating stare sent ripples up her spine. When he lowered his drink, his gaze moved over her exposed cleavage, down her stomach and then to her legs. Heat pierced her and she tingled with awareness. The corner of his mouth lifted in a knowing grin.

He was different from the rest of the men in a way. Wearing a blue, button-down shirt and black Wranglers, he looked more like cowboy than anything. He wasn't as rugged, though. She'd classify him as casual, yet stylish.

Still, he was one good-looking man. His heated gaze let her know what he wanted, especially the lazy way his lips curved upward. His dark eyebrows lifted up and down, suggestively. Obviously, he thought this was a sex-for-hire bar, too.

She groaned under her breath. Men like him probably thought women were only good for one thing. Gads, she hated men like that. She'd like to teach him a lesson, but didn't want to get that close.

Her name echoing in the room drew her attention back to the stage. Joan scowled at her.

Cassidy shrugged. *Time to put on a show.*

Finding strength she didn't know she possessed, she straightened her spine and walked onto the stage on three-inch heels. She scooted past the local band squished in the back like sardines in a can, and moved closer to Joan.

When the roar of applause heightened, fear leapt in her chest. Her lips quivered as she smiled, and her knees knocked. She clasped her shaky hands together against her stomach. *How in the hell can I look sexy when I feel like heaving my guts out?*

"Gentlemen," Joan yelled above the cheers. "Here is our last prize of the evening. Come on men, we're trying to rescue our bar. Dig in your wallets and let's begin. Who will bid on Cassidy Hilarion for tonight's date?"

Cassidy jerked her head to Joan and narrowed her eyes. Why in the hell did Joan use her maiden name? And would she live up to the Hilarion name as her sister had? Could she act like a loose woman?

Two

All at once, men shouted out dollar figures, making Cassidy's head swim. The bar had collected more tonight than the entire last month. Hell, probably two months. It shocked her to think they'd bid even one hundred dollars on her. She wasn't as young as the other women, and certainly not as beautiful, or as skinny. So what was the gag? Why were the men acting like hound dogs during mating season? It must be the alcohol.

"I bid two hundred," one man shouted.

Another raised his hand. "Two hundred and fifty."

The higher the amount bid, the more her smile stretched. Although she dreaded the date part, having men bid on her gave her a powerful feeling she'd been without for too long. It'd been a while since she felt attractive. She needed this after she'd had her heart trampled on.

But soon the bidding stopped on one amount. Four hundred dollars. Although it was still a lot of money, she knew they needed more. The bar needed more. She also knew what she'd have to do to get it.

Taking a deep courageous breath, she relaxed her hands, hooking them on her hips as she tried her best to strut across the length of the stage. Hollers from the audience grew, and with it, her nerve climbed higher. Behind her, the drums picked up a lively beat that met the rhythm of her walk. She swung her hips, and the drums' volume heightened. So did the whistles in the room.

The bidding soared to five hundred. Then stopped. Cassidy stretched her arms above her head, lifting the bulk of hair off her shoulders. Tilting her head back, she let the

waves fall provocatively through her fingers. The bidding continued to climb. Then stopped again.

Several men stood close to the stage, waving their cash, drunken expressions on their faces. She shrugged. *What the hell.* Might as well have fun while she can.

She slinked to one cowboy, bent to his level and let her fingers twist in his hair. His attention focused on her breasts, and once again power surged through her. He jumped on the stage and grabbed her around the waist. She gasped, but followed his lead. Thankfully, he only wanted to dance. He pulled her hips against his and started grinding. If he weren't such a stinking drunk, this might be exciting. By the enthusiastic cheers from the crowd, they loved it.

The bidding continued, but stopped at six hundred. She'd never be able to top her sister's bid, and frankly, she didn't want to. She pushed the drunken cowboy away and he stumbled down the stairs. She blew him a kiss, then sashayed over beside Joan to finish the bidding.

"Do I hear six hundred and fifty?" Joan called out. No more bids were voiced, just the cat-calls and whistles from the horde of anxious men.

"Okay, six hundred going once. Going twice..."

"One thousand dollars."

The voices in the room silenced. Gasps and clinking glasses were the only sounds. Cassidy pressed her hand to her chest. All heads turned to the voice on the other side of the room.

Joan waved her hand. "I'm sorry, sir, but I can't see you. Would you mind standing and repeating that bid?"

The man rose and the scraping of the chair's wooden legs echoed through the suddenly silent bar. Cassidy recognized the wannabe cowboy who'd ogled her so openly when she'd first entered. Why would a man so gorgeous want to bid that high on her?

Even from across the room, she could spot a drunk, and this particular hunk was not one of them. So why did he bid that amount? His blank expression didn't tell her anything about what he expected. Yet, by the heated gleam in his earlier gaze, she figured she already knew.

"I said, I bid one thousand dollars."

Joan laughed. "Sold, to the gentlemen in the corner."

She motioned her hand. "You can come and collect your prize."

Cass swallowed a lump of fear, yet anticipation rose in her chest. Suddenly, an image popped into her mind of her and this man in a lover's embrace while his mouth moved passionately over hers flashed through her head.

Impossible! She would definitely not let that one happen.

The man swaggered toward her. Damn, even his walk was sexy. All he needed was cowboy boots and a hat. He still looked too business-style for that.

Keeping his focus on her, he stopped at the bar and handed a wad of bills to Joan. Her cousin didn't hesitate to take the money, even giggled once the bills were in her grasp. That was when Mr. Cowboy Wannabe smiled, and it was all for Cassidy. Her knees melted. She scolded her body. He could try and charm her all he wanted, but now she knew his plans and she was not going to let him win!

He reached out to her. She really didn't want to go with a man who thought she was a hooker, but her body didn't listen to her panicked mind, and she slipped her hand into his. Warmth from his body speared through her, creating havoc like she'd never known. Her throat turned dry, but her blood pumped faster and hotter through her veins, yet she followed him as he guided her down the stairs and to his table.

Too many people in the bar doused any idea of their first meeting to be private, and Cassidy was now pleased with the auction's great attendance.

He pulled out her chair. Her jaw dropped as she sat. Where was he from? Nobody did that any longer.

The grin stayed on his face as he sat across from her. "Would you like a drink?"

She shook her head, planning to deny, but found herself answering, "Yes." Damn her lonely hide.

He chuckled and signaled to one of the bartender. She didn't take her attention off the stranger to see which one of her cousins served them.

"What would you like?" the strange man asked.

For you to go away. "White wine." *Now where in the hell did that answer come from?* She didn't want to drink

with him, and she definitely didn't want to drink something with alcohol. But his sensuality disturbed her. She didn't know how to handle her dizzy feelings.

He turned to the server and nodded. "You heard the lady." Linking his fingers, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Well, Cassidy Hilarion, what have you planned for our date tonight?"

To escort you home and make you take a cold shower. She knew what he wanted.

She swallowed hard. "Are you going to introduce yourself?"

"I'm Mark Carey."

"Well, Mark Carey, I thought we'd start out with dinner tonight." The audible squeak in her voice horrified her and she cleared her throat.

He grinned. "And how do you plan to end the date?"

Dumping ice down your pants. "We could go dancing." She shouldn't want this man, but God help her, her body kept reacting to his hypnotic gaze.

He shrugged. "I don't like to dance."

"We could see a movie."

"What if nothing good is playing?"

"We could walk around the park and talk."

His grin stretched. "Sounds good, but won't your feet hurt? I'd think those high heels would get mighty uncomfortable."

Damn, he was right. She shrugged. "Then I'm all out of ideas."

He reached across the table and took hold of her hand. "You're not going to invite me to your place for a nightcap?"

Her heart jumped, lodging itself firmly in her throat. When their server brought her drink, she glanced up briefly. One of Joan's brothers grinned. She nodded at him before he turned and left.

She refocused on the cowboy...who looked too damn sexy to be real. Like a drunken moth, his seductive charm pulled her to his fascinating flame. She couldn't swallow, she couldn't breathe and damn it, she couldn't look away from his intoxicating eyes. Were they green? In this section of the bar, the lighting shadowed his features.

Cassidy forced her tongue to moisten her dry lips. His eyes focused on the movement, and her traitorous body reacted by her nipples hardening. Even her thighs trembled. Underneath the table, she clamped them together.

Finally, her throat attempted to allow a moist swallow so she could answer his question. "I...I...I don't do nightcaps."

She studied the sex magnet, waiting for his reaction, but she couldn't read him. In fact, she really couldn't tell if he liked her answer or not. His smile remained, but it didn't reach his eyes.

He pulled away and leaned back in his chair, folding his arms over his massive chest. Her focus strayed to the bulging biceps on his muscular arms. Did other parts of his lower body bulge, too?

She cursed her wandering thoughts. It didn't matter if his body bulged or not. He was still a man, and all men were alike. Cheating good-for-nothings who enjoyed laying the blame at her feet. Only one thing stayed on their teeny-weeny minds, and by the way his gaze kept sliding to her exposed cleavage, she knew what was on his. Sex. Which he wouldn't get, no matter how charming he tried to be tonight. She would *not* let the image in her mind a few minutes ago come true.

"Let's leave and begin our date, then." He stood and held out his hand.

As she sipped her wine, her movement was unsteady then she set the glass down before placing her fingers in his large one. Just like before, warmth from his body soaked into hers, creating tingles to bite at her nerves, reminding her how long it had been since she'd had this kind of attention. Yet she didn't want it. How could she convince her body of that?

No matter how much this man excited her, stimulated every inch of her skin with his heated gaze, she needed to remember he was a man. A man like Lyle.

He'd break her heart if she was fool enough to let him.

Three

Mark tucked Cassidy's arm under his and escorted the very sexy woman to the door, squeezing past drunks on their way. She shivered, yet her body remained stiff. She wasn't like the other girls who'd joined in the bidding. So why did the announcer label Cassidy Hilarion the prize?

From the moment he set eyes on her when she walked into the bar and flattened herself up against a wall, he detected her hesitation. The whiteness of her face, her wide eyes and her shaking limbs gave away her true feelings.

Or was that just an act to get the men excited?

Huddled this close, her lilac scent drifted around him, making him want to bury his nose in her soft brown hair. His fingers even itched to touch her silken waves, but he fought his urges.

After a few minutes of standing on stage, a new personality blossomed. He liked the way her hips swung to the beat of the drums and the way her perky breasts bounced when she played with her hair so it could tumble around her shoulders. And he especially liked the way she ground her hips against the drunken man while they danced. Mark had mentioned earlier he didn't like to dance, but he'd rethink it if she'd do that with him.

When they stepped outside, the fresh late summer air assaulted his senses. He inhaled a deep breath, enjoying the smoke-free air. Beside him, she shivered. With her breasts snug against his arm, her hardened tips speared him like spikes. He liked that. Liked it almost too much.

He glanced at her. Her bottom lip quivered while her gaze darted around the parking lot. For some reason, she was scared.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

Her attention swung to him. "Just a little."

Adjusting his arm, he wrapped it around her shoulders, pulling her body closer to his. The evening's temperature wasn't cool; in fact, the afternoon's intense heat still lingered in the light breeze.

"My Jeep is right over there." He nodded in the direction before walking that way.

She didn't speak, but her teeth chattered. He unlocked the door and opened the passenger side. She climbed in, hugged her arms around her, which squeezed her breasts. His attention pulled to her deep cleavage and his mouth watered again. He hurried and shut the door before she could tempt him any further.

He slid in the jeep and started the engine. Cassidy still shivered like a naked baby in an igloo. Leaning toward her, he slid his hands up and down her arms, helping to warm her.

She jumped back with wide eyes. "What are you doing?"

He shrugged. "Thought I could help warm you up."

"Why do you think I need your help?"

"Your chattering teeth gave it away." He chuckled.

Her body relaxed slightly. "I'm sorry. You're right."

"Do you want me to try again?"

She hesitated before nodding. Her eyes stayed on his while he rubbed her arms. Like earlier, her scent assaulted his senses. Damn, she smelled good, like a lilac bush in full bloom.

He met her gaze and smiled. "Are you getting warm now?"

"I feel better, thank you." She laughed lightly. "I guess it's all the adrenaline wearing off."

He drew back, puzzled over her comment. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, to be perfectly honest, I wasn't supposed to be part of the auction."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. One of the waitresses called in sick. Joan, the announcer, talked me into filling in for her."

He smiled. "That certainly explains why you looked so frightened the first time I saw you. Are you an Hilarion?"

"Yes, but that's my maiden name."

He lifted a brow. "You're married?"

"Was married. But I still use my married name, Brown."

"That certainly makes sense." He cocked his head.

"Cassidy, what kind of name is Hilarion? I don't believe I've heard it before."

"It's an old family name, from when my ancestors lived in Greece. Hilarion means 'cheerful'".

Mark laughed. "That certainly describes you."

Her cheeks turned a dark pink.

"So Cassidy. Are you prepared for tonight, though?"

Her light brown eyebrows pulled together. "What do you mean?"

"Are you ready for our date?"

"Umm...yes."

He chuckled. "You don't sound convincing."

Her shoulders relaxed and she laughed. "You're right. I'm still a little nervous. Please, bear with me. I promise to loosen up."

Turning back to the steering wheel, he adjusted in his seat. "So, where are we going for dinner? Do you have a favorite spot?"

"No. We can go anywhere you want." Her voice clipped off at the end, her eyes wide once again. Then she cleared her throat. "I mean we can go to any restaurant you'd like."

Mark tried not to smile. He knew what she thought, and damn, if he hadn't been thinking the same. Would she let him take her home to finish the date? Or would she suggest going to his place so she could show him her real talents?

He put the Jeep into gear and backed out of the parking lot. He, too, had been edgy about tonight, but for different reasons. In a way, he wanted her to take him home. He wanted her to prove to him this auction was for one purpose only. Prostitution. Then he'd nab her. He'd have the information he needed for his father to get her bar closed

down for good.

The restaurant he had in mind was a secluded place, popular for their private tables. Each booth at *Prairie Nights* was decorated like a mini covered wagon, accompanied with a complimentary lamp inside that could be turned up high, or down low for more privacy. The booths lined around the walls, and the middle of the room looked like a genuine prairie, even with statues of cowboys and wild animals. Their food was delicious, but it was the seclusion of the covered wagons that people came for.

Privacy was exactly what he wanted tonight.

"So, Mark. Tell me about yourself."

He glanced her way and smiled, quickly thinking up a lie. No way did he want her to know his true identity. "What do you want to know?"

"Do you live in Coral Gables?"

"No. South Beach."

"What do you do?"

"I'm an accountant."

He kept his answers short and clipped, hoping she'd stop asking. But her eyes narrowed, letting him know she wasn't going to stop.

"Funny, but you don't look like an accountant, and definitely don't spend money like one."

He chuckled. "I didn't know accountants had their own look. Are we supposed to be bald? Fat? Wear baggy clothes?"

She laughed, and he liked the musical sound of her voice. "No, I didn't mean that. It's just...I don't know. You dress professional, but I wouldn't have guessed an accountant."

"What would you have guessed?"

She shrugged. "An owner or manager of a large corporation."

He chuckled again. "Sorry to disappoint you, sweetheart."

"Oh, it's not a disappointment."

"So, do you work full time at Hilarion's?" He tightened his fingers on the steering wheel, wondering if she'd be honest.

"I'm Assistant Manager."

"No kidding. And you still let yourself be auctioned off

tonight?"

She laughed, and again, it sounded musical...like angels singing. He silently cursed his traitorous thoughts. No, she was not an angel. Devil, perhaps, and definitely a seductress.

She pulled back a piece of hair behind her ear.

"There's nothing I wouldn't do to help the bar."

He'd guessed that part. Now it was time to see just how far she'd go.

He reached the restaurant and parked. He climbed out his side, walked around the car and opened her door. Once again, there was an underlying question in her narrowed eyes. She couldn't possibly know him, so why was she suspicious?

"I hope this place is all right." He smiled.

"This is fine. In fact, their steaks are to die for, especially when they're smothered with sautéed mushrooms." She closed her eyes and grinned, rubbing her hand over her belly. Her tongue provocatively slid across her lips.

Heat surged through his loins. Damn, she was sexy as hell. Tonight was going to be very enjoyable...and very torturous. No way in hell would he let her beauty keep him from his purpose. His father, owner of Carrington Enterprises, had tried for years to get the bar. His father claimed that land had been in their family for centuries. Now with Cassidy's bar in need of money, his father was trying to buy the bar, but she refused.

Edward Carrington never took *no* for an answer, and Mark's father would do anything to get the bar back. Even blackmail. Mark was used to his father's ruthless ways, and although most of the time Mark didn't agree, he still got paid well. Besides, for him to take over the family business, he had to follow in his father's footsteps...as crooked as they might be.

Once they'd been served their meal, Cassidy Hilarion opened up and became very entertaining. Her sense of humor caught him off guard and he laughed more times than expected. The ache in his face reminded him how long it'd been since he laughed this hard.

But regardless of how much he enjoyed her company,

he needed to get down to the matter at hand. Time to turn on his charm and see what tonight's auction was really about. Would she act like the hooker he paid for in the bar?

After a few moments passed with nothing said between them, he lifted his glass of water and finished it. He'd devoured his steak, but left a few bites of his potato. Cassidy was the opposite. She'd only eaten a few bites of her steak and rice. Apparently, their conversation hadn't eased her nerves as much as he'd hoped.

But he didn't want to waste any more time. Seducing her was vital to his plan.

When she wiped her mouth with the linen napkin and rested her hands on the table, he reached over and clasped onto one. Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped. As quickly as it happened, she snapped her mouth closed.

"You know, I was thinking..."

She licked her lips. "About what?" Her voice cracked.

"About the rest of our evening."

"And?"

He grinned. "And I've changed my mind about going dancing."

"But earlier you said you didn't like it."

"I usually don't, but if you'll dance with me like you danced with that drunk tonight, I think I'll change my whole outlook on the sport."

Her face flamed a brilliant red, and in the dimly-lit covered wagon, it practically glowed.

"No kidding." She arched a brow.

He brushed his thumb across her skin. "What do you say? Do you want to go dancing? We don't have to stay very long."

Using her other hand, she reached for her glass of water. The ice clinked against the glass as her shaky hand brought it to her lips. He bit his lip to keep from chuckling. Obviously, he rattled her. Good. Maybe his plan for seduction wouldn't be hard at all.

Four

Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Cassidy inhaled a steady breath and tried to keep her legs stable as she walked into the lounge with Mark. She'd never been here before, but heard of it. This is where everybody liked to go for date night. They played great music, and they didn't care how lewd the couples danced.

She bit the inside of her cheek as she scanned the floor. Thankfully, the place wasn't packed. But then, maybe it would have been better if it were. The more crowded, the less chance someone would see her...and notice her.

What happened to the proper woman who was satisfied with becoming an old maid? Sure, a divorced old maid, but a spinster nonetheless. If her friends or family could see her now, they'd keel over from a heart attack. Couldn't have that happen. Good thing the lights were turned low.

And just her luck, there'd be a slow song playing.

Mark smiled and her knees buckled. Luckily, he slipped his arms around her waist at that precise moment and she didn't melt to the ground. She rested her hands on his wide shoulders and nearly sighed aloud from just the feel of his hard body. Perhaps he'd been made from the ancient gods for the sole purpose of pleasing women.

Pulling her hips closer to his, he settled her against his body. Her throat dried and it was an effort just to swallow. At least she was able to moisten her parched lips, but every time she did, Mark's gaze dropped to her mouth. Damn, she

wished he wouldn't do that. Made little butterflies in her stomach come awake and spin around until they were dizzy.

"So, are you going to show me how to dance?"

She raised her brows. "Umm...I don't know."

He cuddled closer as his hands slipped over her bottom. He cupped her and brought her closer. *Oh, good Lord!* Either he was well endowed, or he was getting excited too soon.

But it wasn't too soon, because the same excitement flowed through her, reminding her how long it had been since she'd been this close to a man.

His gaze never left hers once their hips started moving to the rhythm of the song. Slow and meaningful.

And sexy as hell.

This wasn't anything like she'd experienced with the drunk earlier today. Why couldn't her hormones have remained asleep? But then the drunk didn't smell like musk and sandalwood, and the older man certainly wasn't as gorgeous as Mark.

I'm in big trouble tonight. Especially if his *thingy* didn't stop growing. The more her hips pushed against his, the larger it got. And the more she wanted to grind back, damn her!

Taking a deep breath, she slipped her hands up and hooked them around his neck. His hot skin almost burned her fingers, yet she wanted to stroke them against him over and over again and turn up the heat inside them both.

What, was she crazy? They could start a fire right now as it was.

Lines appeared around his eyes and mouth, almost as if he were in pain. Yet the dreamy look in his dark eyes told her he was in sexual heaven. Her eyes probably mirrored his perfectly.

"Damn, woman. You're good."

His voice was low, seductive and her unbound breasts tightened in response.

"You're good, too." She leaned closer and pressed her chest against his rock hard torso, and tingles shot through her nipples. His arms moved from her hips and circled around her waist, pulling her tighter.

She tried to grin, but humor was the farthest thing

from her mind. "Are you sure you've never danced this way before? You're a pro."

"Only because I'm with you."

Her heartbeat quaked to a rocky rhythm as her breathing quickened and became deeper. Against her hips, his sex grew not only in length, but in temperature. He was volcanic hot.

Closing his eyes, he leaned his forehead against hers, still continuing to grind his hips. She wanted to moan aloud, to throw her head back and fulfill the throaty sounds of pleasure waiting to come out.

But not on her first date. And definitely not on their first song. She really wasn't easy.

What was she thinking? There would be no more dates with him! She reminded herself about the premonition. *That* would not happen!

When the song finally ended, her chest and lungs ached so much she thought she'd run a marathon...in heels. But another song played, and although the beat was faster, Mark kept her in the same position and moved slowly.

He'd make her have an orgasm right here on the dance floor, for sure. But the way her burning body tingled with awareness—and longing—the more she realized she didn't care how many orgasms she had with him. She wanted release now and she wasn't worried about how loud she cried out, either.

Turning his head slowly, he brushed his lips across her cheek. She squeezed her eyes closed and held her breath. Leaving little pecks along her skin, his mouth made its way down her chin to her neck. She tilted her head and gave him better access.

When his hot breath fanned her neck, goosebumps multiplied and scattered all over her body. Their hips were not going as fast as before, but now she concentrated on what his mouth and hands were doing.

As his lips stroked her neck, his hands caressed her back and shoulders as if he held her in place for his mouth to devour her neck. She didn't mind. The tingles running over her were growing stronger, and between that and the sensations between her legs, she experienced the building rapture of the climax she didn't want to have right now.

"Oh, Cass. Your skin's so soft." He nipped at her neck and instead of collapsing into a fit of giggles, she weakened into a satisfied goo of passion.

"Mark...do you have any idea...what you're doing to me?" she said in a voice she didn't recognize.

His body shook as if he were laughing. "I think so. Your body is trembling." He moved one hand between their bodies, cupped her breast and let his thumb rub against her pointy nipple. "And I like it."

She couldn't stop the moan from releasing this time. Deep and satisfying. He lifted his head enough to place his lips over hers. This time the groan came from him as he slipped his tongue into her mouth.

Fire consumed her. Like a woman starved for affection, she clung to him and met his wild kisses. Glorious heated tremors cascaded over her body and she pushed herself against him more. Larger than before, his staff throbbed against her pelvis and made her womanly juices flow hotter.

Oh, if only they were naked and alone...and in a bedroom, she'd let her guard down and jump this man's bones. It surprised her that she'd think this way. How had she let the sexy woman out of her shell?

He broke the kiss. "I want to take you back to my place."

She smiled a slow, pleased smile. She'd been thinking that very thing. But was it really what she wanted? Their date wasn't suppose to turn out so earth-shattering exciting. And she wasn't supposed to be hornier than a jackrabbit. He definitely wasn't supposed to be Jack, either.

Her breathing was irregular, but she didn't care. "I...don't know, Mark. I've never done this before."

He lifted his head and looked at her. His brows drew together as he narrowed his eyes. "You've never had sex?"

She shook her head. "I've never slept with a guy on the first date. I'm...not that kind of girl."

A relaxed grin claimed his mouth. Even his eyes softened. "I'm glad."

She blinked. "You are?"

"Yes." He stopped their swaying. "I wouldn't think very much of you if you were that type."

"So...you won't be disappointed if I tell you our date is over now?"

He swept his fingers along her hairline then cupped her face. "Oh, I'd be disappointed all right, but I'll respect you more."

Her grin widened. "Then I think you should take me back to the bar."

"Will you give me another good-night kiss?"

She shook her head. "I haven't given you a good-night kiss yet."

He arched his brow. "Umm...then I can't wait until we get back."

He bent his head and captured her lips one more time, but just as she opened for his seeking tongue, he withdrew and took a step away from her. *The tease!* And here all along she thought women were the ones who tormented.

Her heart softened for this gorgeous, sexy man. Although he could have taken her back to his place and made wild, passionate love to her all night, he respected her wishes. What a gentleman.

He leaned closer to her ear. "But I'll have you know, I've never been aroused so quickly and so hot as I am tonight." He pulled back and winked.

Her heart skipped a beat. Wow! She'd been the first. How cool was that?

But then, would he want another date? After all, she only said she didn't sleep with guys on the *first* date.

The drive back to the bar was painful, only because she couldn't wait to have him take her back in his arms and kiss her to distraction.

Finally, he drove in the parking lot of the bar. Very few cars were here now. She hoped they had made a lot of money selling drinks, too.

He killed the engine, took off his seatbelt, then leaned over to her as he helped her release her buckle. Once the strap was out of the way, he pulled her in his arms, his mouth covering hers again. She moaned and clung to him, like a woman starved for affection.

This time, the fiery kiss was more passionate than before. He suckled her tongue, then she suckled his. He nibbled on her lips and let her do the same to his. Seeking

hands wandered over her body, touching her breasts, rubbing her harden nipples, then slipping down her legs quickly, only to retrace the pattern once again.

Her heartbeat hammered wildly, and her breathing grew ragged. She didn't care if the windows were fogging up, she just closed her eyes and enjoyed. She loved the way his kisses of fire heated her up.

He moved his lips from her mouth down her neck. As before, she tilted her head to give him better access. He headed for her breasts, while his hand came up to cup one. Through the material, he kissed her chest everywhere before pausing at her nipple. His tongue stroked the cloth, dampening it against her skin. Moaning, she held his head to her, wanting more.

He pulled the material away from her breast as his mouth sought for skin. When his mouth closed over her nipple, she let out a deep moan. What was wrong with her? Why did she want this so much?

As his tongue swirled around her beaded nipple, his hand moved over her leg again, but this time slipped underneath. She didn't care. Tingles of delight coursed through her veins, warming her body hotter than she thought possible. When he slipped between her thighs, she parted them for his seeking fingers.

He touched her, tenderly, and a groan rattled his chest. She'd forgotten she hadn't worn her panties. Now she was glad.

As his fingers delved inside her, his mouth suckled her breast wildly. She gasped and pushed her hips against his hand, wanting more. Much more.

"Oh, Cassidy," he mumbled against her skin. "You're wonderful. You're making me burn."

She knew exactly what he meant since she was still on fire herself.

Situating her hand, she placed it on his rock hard erection. His arousal jumped from her touch, and he groaned again. His fingers quickened inside her and she rubbed his jeans faster.

She didn't want any of this to stop. Ever. The glorious pleasure he brought to her body went beyond anything she'd experienced before. And to think they weren't even naked

and making love.

The fast beat of his fingers brought on tingles inside of her that grew quickly. The orgasm she thought she'd have in the bar was coming back. She'd have it now...or die trying.

"Oh, Mark," she gasped, bucking her hips faster. Her cries of delight grew louder, but she didn't care. She closed her eyes and rode out the pleasure.

His mouth moved from her breast to cover her mouth again, just as her orgasm came to an end. Hot kisses trailed over her mouth tenderly, and when it suckled her tongue, he used gentle care.

Slowly, her breathing returned to normal, but his finger remained down below, still stroking sensations into her body. She opened her eyes to see he was staring at her while wearing a grin.

"Cassidy? Why aren't you wearing panties?" His eyebrow arched.

It was too late to feel embarrassed, but her face flamed anyway. "The dress was too tight. It would have shown panty-lines."

He kissed her nose. "I suppose this was the good-night kiss you were talking about?"

She chuckled. "Plus some."

He withdrew his hand from between her legs, then pulled the dress back over her breast. "Do you mind if I call you?"

"As long as it's something good."

He laughed. "Damn right, woman. You're the best."

He kissed her briefly on the lips, then pulled back and opened his door. As he walked around to her side, she placed her hand on her chest, her heartbeat still not back to normal.

Gads, what had she done?

Her self control sucked big time. If she wanted to protect her heart, she couldn't let this happen again.

Five

"Why'd the hell didn't you ask her about the bar?"

Mark leaned back in his chair and linked his fingers over his stomach. His father strode with heavy steps back and forth across the floor in the office as he lectured on what Mark *didn't* do last night on his date. His father's brownish-silver eyebrows drew together, and his wrinkled lips pulled tight.

"There really wasn't time, Dad." Mark shrugged. "Besides, if I had said something, she would've caught on to why I was there. I don't want that this early in our relationship."

His father came to a sudden stop and stared at Mark, his eyes wide. "Your *relationship*? How exactly do you plan on getting involved with this Hilarion girl?"

Good question. And before Mark had actually gone out with Cassidy, he would have known how to answer it. But now...now things were different. Cassidy wasn't just some hooker off the streets. She was a real person. She made him laugh more times than he could count. And she was a woman who kissed better and hotter than he'd ever experienced.

He rubbed his forehead. "Dad, I need to get closer to her in order to find her weakness. We won't get the bar back unless I do."

"Of course she has a weakness. And I thought you said last night's auction would prove what she's doing with the bar will be their downfall. Do you have enough

information to give to the tabloids? Bad publication like this will ruin The Hideaway for good." The older man planted his hands on his hips.

"Unfortunately, there wasn't anything done last night that would prove she's a hooker. I don't know about the other girls, but Cassidy acted very proper." *Except for that damn dance...and the time in the jeep.* Why he had to enjoy it so much was beyond his imagination. Why did he act so horny when women practically threw themselves at his feet and he could have anyone?

Yet Cassidy really hadn't done that. He was the one throwing himself at her feet.

Mark lifted out of the chair and walked to the window. "I'll have to dig deeper, Dad. If we are going to bring that bar down, there's got to be another way."

"I've thought of other ways. That girl is stubborn. Too bad her father, Sean Hilarion, isn't still alive. I'd know how to blackmail him."

Mark arched his brow and scratched his chin. "Dad? Is there something more to this story that you're not telling me? Seems to me like you know the Hilarion's more than you're leading on."

The senior Carrington waved his hand through the air. "Of course not, son. I just want their land. Not only did the Hilarion's steal it from our family a long time ago, the land is worth a lot and will bring me a great price."

Mark leaned his shoulder against the glass and stared out into the afternoon traffic hustling up and down the roads. His mind should be on the conversation with his old man, but damn if he couldn't get Cassidy's sexy image out of his head.

He remembered everything about her from last night—the way she danced on the stage with the drunk, the nervous shake of her hands as they shared a drink at the table a few minutes later. At the restaurant, she seemed more relaxed, and she made him forget his worries for just a little while. And he couldn't forget about the dance they shared toward the end of their date...and the goodnight kiss was unforgettable.

Like last night, his arousal had leapt with excitement. Yes, she was one hot and sexy woman.

"Well? What do you think?" his father was saying.

Mark blinked and glanced at his dad. "I'll get right on it, I promise." And he did mean in a physical sense. Getting *on* Cassidy sounded very promising, and very pleasing. If she wanted, she could get on top of him and it would be just as enjoyable.

"Just don't let this girl get under your skin, son. If she didn't play the part of the hooker last night, there's got to be something else we can get on her that will be bad publicity for her bar. Don't lose your focus, son. We *need* that land! I'd hate to think my only son couldn't deliver this one, simple thing just because of a *woman*."

Mark shot his dad a glare. *Oh, sure. No pressure.* He'd always hated the inferior feeling he had while in his father's presence. One of these days he'd take over the company, and he'd run it his way. Not his father's. It was Mark's plan to get more shares in the business and be able to buy out his father as quickly as possible. Thankfully, there were others in the company willing to back up Mark.

He just waited for the best opportunity to take over.

After his dad left the office, Mark couldn't help but grin. Although he really should be drilling Cassidy to find a weakness he could use to put her bar out of business, the ideas running through his mind were totally opposite. He wanted to kiss her again, touch her, hear her moan. He wanted to pull her soft body against his and hear the little gasps she made when she felt his arousal.

Damn, even being with her stimulated him...in an emotional sense, and he couldn't believe he thought this way. Women had only been good for one thing. Although Cassidy was probably skilled in that area, too, her sense of humor had turned him on just as much as her kisses last night.

Where had she been all his life? Then again, he really hadn't been looking.

Blowing out a gush of hair between his teeth, he walked back to his desk and plopped in his chair. Work would not be productive today. Not when his mind was on a beautiful, sexy woman.

But no matter what, he must do as his father directed. He must find something to use against her to close the bar.

He scrunched his forehead. Why? What was the real story between the Hilarion's and the Carringtons? What made his father so hell bent on getting this. The old man had given up on much larger deals before. So what made this one so important?

Perhaps he'd find out the story first, then decide if it was worth closing Hilarion's bar.

~ * ~

"I can't believe you're seeing him again." Joan's wide smile and sparking eyes made Cassidy's face heat up. But shoot, how could it not? Every time she thought about what that accountant cowboy did to her... *Ahhhh...*

No matter how he made her feel like a giddy schoolgirl, something was not right about him. He was too bold in his pursuit last night. True, he did bid a high price and probably wanted something in return, but it was almost as if he was after something besides sex. Her acceptance? Approval? Friendship?

Shaking off the confusing thoughts, she looked back at her cousin and smiled. "Of course I'm seeing him again. He paid a lot of money for me last night, and just as I told you before, he didn't get his money's worth."

Joan cocked her head and arched a brow. "And how exactly is he going to get his money's worth?"

Cassidy rolled her eyes. "Not like that. We had a lot of fun last night. He was the first guy in a long time that made me relax and be myself. I made him laugh, and he made me laugh. We fit together in more ways than one. I think he felt it too, which was why he asked me out for a second date."

Joan scratched her head, loosening a tight red curl that had been tucked behind her ear. "He didn't look right, if you ask me."

Cassidy snorted. "Honey, he was the only man who did look right last night. He wasn't drunk or lewd, and he was dressed to kill. No other guy looked sexy as hell."

Joan nodded. "Exactly. He was dressed like a cowboy, but he didn't look like he should be one."

"What is he supposed to look like?" Cassidy planted her hands on her hips. "Did you want to see chaps and spurs on him with a rope tied at his belt and brown leather gloves on his hands?" She flipped her hand through the air. "Oh,

please, Joan. Quit stereotyping him. Mark was the perfect gentleman, and such wonderful company. He was just what I needed last night."

"Glad he came through for you. I just hope he doesn't break your heart like Lyle what's-his-name did."

Cassidy shrugged. "I will protect my emotions." *I hope.* "I don't want to go through another heartbreak, either."

Her cousin left her side to help a customer at the end of the bar. Cassidy moved to the glasses and proceeded to wipe them and set them on the shelf behind her. She scanned the crowd tonight. Definitely not as many as last night, but still more people than usual. That was good. Maybe business would pick up after all.

The front door opened and her gaze swung in that direction, hoping the handsome devil she went out with last night would step through the doorway. One of their regulars walked in instead. She let out a disappointed sigh and picked up another glass.

Would she guard her emotions as she'd promised her cousin? She had to. The painful divorce she'd experienced with Lyle Brown had left a permanent mark on her heart. He'd used her and walked all over her, then the final blow was he cheated on her with someone she'd considered a friend.

Yet Mark was so different than most men she'd dated, which really wasn't a lot. He seemed like a down-home kind of guy. Just the type she wouldn't mind keeping forever. And boy was he a hottie. She wouldn't mind *that* kind of man, either.

Joan came back and leaned on the counter beside her. The wide brown eyes of her cousin narrowed as she looked at Cassidy.

"What?" Cassidy asked.

"I don't think I told you the bad news."

Cassidy arched a brow. "We have bad news?"

"Yes."

"About the bar?"

"Yes."

Cass set the glass down on the shelf and stepped closer. "What's wrong now?"

"Well, the auction last night was wonderful. We brought in a lot of money. But..."

Cassidy held her breath, fearing the worst.

"We didn't make what we needed," Joan continued. "In order to keep this bar running for the next few months, we'll need money like what we brought in last night every month." She shook her head. "I don't see us having an auction every month. People might start to think our bar is more than a place to drink. Ya know what I mean?"

Cassidy's mouth pulled into a frown. "Yes, I know." She breathed a heavy sigh. "What do you suggest?"

Joan shrugged as she twirled a red lock of hair around her finger. "I don't know. We don't want to let our fathers down by selling the bar, but if we don't pick up business here shortly, we just might have to do that."

A knot formed in Cassidy's throat and her eyes burned with unshed tears. Her father's last wish on his deathbed was for she and her cousin run the bar and do the best they could. Hard to believe her father hadn't been gone very long and she'd already messed things up.

She rubbed her forehead and squeezed her eyes closed. There had to be something else they could do. Having her sister and her sister's randy friends dance half naked on the bar just wouldn't cut it. They were not going to turn into that kind of establishment.

If only her father and uncle hadn't left them with so many unpaid loans when they died, maybe she and her cousin would be able to run the bar without fear of closing the place down. And going to get another loan wasn't an option, either. That would only put them further into debt.

"Cassidy, I know you don't want to talk about this, but I think it's our only hope." Joan touched her arm and Cassidy met her gaze.

"What?"

Joan gave her a wistful smile. "Well...what about that statue piece you have of the Colossus of Rhodes? If you sold that to Carrington Enterprises like they've offered, just think about how much money you'll have. Not only will you be able to pay off the bar, but the loans attached to it as well."

Cassidy took a deep breath, calming the anger rising up in her chest. The statue was not an option, and her family

knew it.

She shook her head. "Have you forgotten what our family went through to get the piece, and to keep it? Our father's father, grandfather, and beyond them have all been able to guard this stone with their lives. I'm sure many have been tempted to sell the piece for money, but its value is priceless, Joan."

She clasped her cousin's hands and continued. "This piece of bronzed stone is a symbol, and has been for centuries. You know the story—the reason it was built."

Joan nodded.

"Well, our family has believed by keeping the statue with us, it will also help us get along better. Can you remember the dedicatory inscription on the statue?"

Joan shook her head.

"It says; *To you, O Sun, the people of Dorian Rhodes set up this bronze statue reaching to Olympus when they had pacified the waves of war and crowned their city with the spoils taken from the enemy. Not only over the seas but also on land did they kindle the lovely torch of freedom.*"

Cassidy licked her dry lips. "Our ancestors cherished the artifact, and so should we. It gave our ancestors freedom...a freedom they deserved." She shook her head. "No way can I sell the statue and put it in the hands of some greedy son-of-a-bitch."

Joan frowned. "You're right, Cass. I'm sorry for even bringing it up. I guess I'm just desperate right now."

Cassidy hugged her cousin. "I know. I'm feeling desperate, too. But we'll think of something else. Perhaps we should find someone to do our marketing for us. They'll know how to publicize the bar to drive in more customers."

Joan chuckled. "That's a good idea, but we need money to hire that person." Joan turned and walked away, her shoulders drooping lower than Cassidy had ever seen them.

With a heavy heart, she turned toward the bar. Sitting right in front of her, with his gorgeous green eyes on her, was none other than her sexy cowboy.

Six

Mark. It didn't take long for her heart to flip to a different emotion as it knocked crazily in her chest.

"Hi, Mark. I didn't hear you come in."

He grinned. "That's because you were busy talking with your cousin."

"Yes." She moved closer and leaned her hip on the bar. "So what are you doing here? Our date isn't for another hour."

He shrugged. "Couldn't wait that long. Hope you don't mind."

She smiled wide. "Of course not. Let me just tell Joan I'm leaving, okay?"

He nodded, but didn't say anything, but his gaze did as it roamed all over her body. His close examination suggested he wanted her as much as she wanted him. Shivers of delight and a sense of giddiness danced through her.

It didn't take her long to tell Joan she was leaving and within minutes, she walked side by side with Mark out the door. His sexy scent of musk would drive her insane tonight. How would she keep herself from throwing her arms around him and burying her nose in his neck was beyond her. Maybe he wouldn't mind if she didn't control herself tonight.

He'd chosen a different restaurant, but still as private and pricey as the one they'd been to last night. The atmosphere didn't matter. All she wanted to do was stare into his intoxicating eyes and get lost.

Not a lot was said until after they'd been seated and decided upon a menu item. From across the table, Mark grasped her hand and rubbed his thumb over her knuckles in a soft caress.

"Cassidy, you are a very fascinating woman."

She crinkled her forehead. "Is that good or bad?"

"It's good."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because of the interesting conversation I overheard you and your cousin talking about earlier." He brought her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles. "Will you tell me about it?"

Gads, if he's as sweet and sexy for the remainder of the evening, she'd do more than tell him about the history behind the Colossus of Rhodes. "What do you want to know?"

"Tell me about the statue your family has."

She kept her hand in his, mainly because it felt nice, and relaxed in her chair. "Have you even heard of the statue that was built in ancient Greece?"

"Bits and pieces."

"What do you know about the statue?"

"Only that it's a symbol to the surrounding islands that they were a peaceful island, and they wanted their freedom."

She nodded. "Well, it just so happens some of my ancestors helped build that statue. When an earthquake brought it down about two-hundred twenty-six BC, one of my ancestors kept a piece of that statue for sentimental reasons."

"That makes sense."

"It's a priceless artifact today, and I've never wanted to know what the real value is. It's been handed down in my family from father to first born since the statue crumbled all those years ago."

"And your cousin wants you to sell it?"

"Yes." She frowned. "The bar isn't doing so hot and we need the money, but I can't sell that piece of stone. It means too much to me and my family."

His smile softened, as did his hypnotizing green eyes. "I would think less of you if you sold it."

Heat flooded her cheeks, but she couldn't look away.

"Thanks."

His tongue slid out from his mouth and stroked his lips in a leisure fashion. Was it meant to be a hint? Her heartbeat picked up rhythm and her stomach flip-flopped.

"Like I said before, you're a fascinating woman, and I've never met anyone like you."

She'd better watch out or he'd have her heart for sure.

~ * ~

Mark meant every word. The woman sitting across from him amazed him, and he didn't want to stop gazing into her eyes, nor did he want to let go of her hand. If he had his way, he'd be holding her all night long...naked.

It wasn't just that she excited him sexually, but her belief and dedication in this one little artifact caused a different emotion to circle his heart. He didn't know why, but he knew his father kept something from him. Perhaps the old man wanted the statue piece. Mark didn't know, but he knew he had to help Cassidy. This woman was too kind and loving to go through the heartache of losing her bar to his father's company.

Plain and simple—if his father wanted something bad enough, he would lie and cheat to get it. Mark's father had been doing this since he was a young boy. Why would he stop now?

Mark wouldn't let his old man go on any further. Even if he had to take over all the shares of the company and kick his father out, he'd make sure Cassidy didn't sell her precious inheritance to his father. Or anyone. And this realization made his heart melt for the beauty across from him, and made him want her that much more.

He needed to confess his real identity and the reason for bidding on her last night, but now wasn't the time. A mood had been set and he wanted to see it through. He'd tell her later.

During the meal, they talked on a personal level. She told him a lot about her former marriage, and he couldn't believe the anger that crept into him. He wanted to punch her ex in the face for all the heartache she'd gone through.

He told her about some of his former girlfriends, but there wasn't any who had ever captured his heart. Not like Cassidy Hilarion Brown had done in twenty-four hours. And

he wouldn't change a thing.

He tried not to tell her too much about his life, because he didn't want to lie to her anymore, so he always evaded the subject or steered away. She didn't seem to notice, and he hoped she didn't.

Dinner passed quickly, and soon he was taking her home. He held her hand while driving, even when he walked her to her front door. The only time he released his hold was when she pulled keys from her purse. She fumbled with them and he grinned. *She wants me to stay longer.*

He waited until she looked into his eyes before he stepped closer and brushed his lips across hers. "Cassidy, tonight has been very enjoyable," he whispered.

She withdrew, her gaze still glued to his. "Would...you like to come in?"

His heart soared. "I thought you didn't do nightcaps."

She chuckled. "I don't on the first date." She winked, then turned and unlocked the door.

Her apartment suited her. Cute, sassy, and all woman. He loved it immediately.

She walked toward the kitchen, her curvy bottom swinging.

"I don't have a lot of liquor here. I don't drink that much. But I do have soda. Would you like one?"

She stopped at the archway between the front room and kitchen, and turned to look at him.

He shook his head. "I don't want anything to drink...but to drink in your beauty."

Her face flamed a deep pink. "Oh, aren't you the poetic charmer."

"Only when the occasion calls for it." He strode to the couch and sat. "And this particular occasion is screaming for words like that."

She chuckled, walked over and sat beside him. "Then would it be stupid to ask what you want to do now?"

"I'm sure within a few minutes, you'll know what's on my mind."

Her brows rose up and down, suggestively. "Oooh, I love these kinds of games."

Mark took her in his arms and rested his face in the curve of her neck. Lilacs. Hmmm... She smelled good enough

to eat. "I missed you," he whispered as he brushed his lips across her skin.

She shivered and tilted her head back. "Really?"

"Yes. You've been on my mind all day."

"You've been on mine, too."

He smiled and placed little pecks on her neck. "What have you been thinking about?"

"When I'd get to see you again."

He trailed kisses up to her mouth. She grabbed hold of his head and crushed her lips against his. Letting out a groan, he pulled her tighter against his body and devoured her mouth.

He hadn't expected the kiss to be so hot, so wild, and so enjoyable. But the hammering in his chest let him know how excited he got just from her kisses. Again. Strange how no other woman could affect him this way.

Repositioning himself, he lifted her leg over his and caressed up and down its toned length. She broke the kiss long enough to straddle him, which placed the intimate part of her body next to his throbbing arousal. He didn't have time to react because her mouth latched back onto his, and her hands roamed over his chest.

Oh, God! He clutched her bottom and moved her closer to his erection, beginning to grind with her rhythm.

She broke the kiss and threw her head back, her eyes closed and mouth parted. Her breasts jutted forward, and he lifted enough to rub his mouth across their tips.

A gasp escaped her throat and she held his head to her. He didn't want to take his hands off her cute bottom, but he needed to remove her shirt and bra to kiss what he'd wanted to since last night. Too bad she wasn't wearing what she had been then. There wouldn't be as much to take off.

With a small moan, she pulled back and undid the buttons of her shirt. Perhaps she read minds after all.

He didn't take his stare off her chest. An earthquake wouldn't move him. Once she opened her shirt, she reached behind her and unlatched her bra. Seconds later, her bare breasts sprang free.

Sweet heaven above! He'd never seen anything so perfect in his life. After she discarded the loose clothing, she leaned forward, cupping her mounds, and brought them to

his mouth. When a nipple touched his lips, he groaned and let her lead the way.

Opening his mouth, he slipped his tongue out for her to rub against. She tasted as sweet as she smelled. Taking his time and with gentle circular motions, he licked her, moving from one breast to the other until she wiggled on top of him and her moans increased.

He sucked one tip into his mouth, and she cried out in passion. Her fingers dug into his scalp as she held his head to her. Those darn hips of hers kept pushing into his swollen arousal, and with each movement, the ache between his legs grew worse. He wouldn't be able to control himself if she kept this up.

Just when he thought he'd have to stop her, she moved off his lap and took his hand. Desire laced her brilliant blue eyes.

"I want to move this to my bed."

Seven

Mark grinned. "Thought you'd never suggest it."

He stood, wrapped one arm around her while the other fondled Cassidy's breasts. Heated tingles shimmied over her body and she leaned into him as they walked in silence to her room. The only sounds were their heavy breathing.

When they reached her bed, she stopped him. Wanting his skin next to hers, she slipped her hands underneath his shirt and yanked it up and over his head. As soon as she discarded it to the floor, he pulled her against him again, her breasts pressing to his chest.

Wonderful.

She licked her lips. "Do...you have any protection?"

"Yes. I never leave home without it." He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and threw it on the bed stand.

In haste, she delved her fingers into his jeans and pulled open the one button and zipper. His bulging staff strained against his boxer shorts and she couldn't wait to see more.

He fumbled with the buttons of her jeans until they too, were open. They shucked out of their clothes until they stood in front of each other naked.

While his gaze roamed over her body, she took in his gorgeous frame. Muscles covered every inch of him...

Oh God! She didn't think men could grow this large.

He pulled her on the bed and pushed her back into the mattress. Ahh, he wanted to take control. But she had a

different idea.

Lifting up on her knees, she placed her hands on his chest. His eyes widened, and she grinned. "Lay back."

His green eyes danced with excitement as he followed her instructions. She leaned over him and kissed his chest while her hands wandered over his body until coming to rest on his arousal. When she wrapped her fingers around him, he sucked in a quick breath.

Gentle hands moved to her breasts and stroked until her nipples hardened and she couldn't control her ragged breathing. He knew exactly how to touch, caress and make her feel like a desirable woman. No other man had been able to accomplish that.

She trailed her mouth down to his stomach. The closer she came to his erection, the more it throbbed in her hand. His breathing grew heavier, his body tighter. And when she brushed her lips across his moist tip, he sucked in a breath and arched.

Touching her tongue to him, she tasted a hint of his body's sweet nectar. She licked once more before she took him fully in her mouth.

A deep groan rattled through his chest as his hands held her head to him. Within seconds, his hips rocked with her sucking. Volcanic liquid rushed through her, igniting her passion that much hotter. She'd never enjoyed doing this to a man, but Mark was different.

Her sucking grew, and so did the rhythm of his hips and the way he held her down to him. He closed his eyes and laid his head back on the pillow. When his jaw tightened, she'd thought she hurt him, but the way he kept pushing her head down upon him, she knew differently. His mouth parted and gushes of air came out.

The moistness between her legs intensified. If she didn't stop, she'd orgasm right here and now.

Tearing her mouth away, she moved up and straddled him once again, but didn't let him enter her. He blinked a couple of times, then reached to the nightstand for his wallet. Within moments, he'd taken out the little round package and opened it.

She took it from him and stretched it over his swollen length. Even before she finished, he grasped her hips and

positioned her over him. With one smooth movement, he slid inside of her. Their moans echoed in the room together.

As he moved her hips back and forth, her gaze never left his. He looked so damn sexy right now with passion written in every line on his face. His dark eyes didn't meet with hers, but dropped to her breasts that bounced in the rhythm with his thrusts.

She held onto the headboard and leaned forward, bringing them to his mouth. He popped one in his mouth and sucked. The cry of delight that tore from her was louder than she'd expected, but he made her feel like screaming for everyone to hear.

His mouth moved from one breast to the other, thrilling her beyond anything she could imagine. Her gasps and moans increased, as did the stirring in her body where their bodies joined. The louder she became, the faster his hips bucked.

Finally, he tore his mouth away from her breasts and captured her lips. She suckled his tongue as she reached her climax. Before her cries of delight finished echoing in the room, he let out a groan as his body stilled, except for the fierce throb inside her.

She collapsed on top of him and continued to kiss him. The kiss wasn't as wild this time, but still very tender and emotional. Love burst in her chest. Dare she tell him she'd fallen in love with him? No. She didn't want to scare him away. This was too soon. Even for her. She had to evaluate her feelings a little more.

Soon, their kissing stopped and she withdrew. Eyes still closed, a satisfied smile stretched across his mouth.

She grinned. "I take it you liked it?"

His chest shook with silent laughter but he didn't open his eyes. "Like is not the word."

"What is the word?"

His eyelashes fluttered and he met her gaze. "Love."

Her heart leapt to her throat, and she whispered, "That's the perfect word."

"Do you know how much I...umm...enjoyed myself?"

Her heartbeat quickened. Was he about to say something else? "I did, too."

"You'd better check my wallet to see if I have another

condom." His eyes drifted close. "I'm sure we'll be doing this again really soon."

With a giddy laugh, she reached for his wallet and picked it up. It fell open and the picture on his driver's license caught her attention. Curious, she looked closer. *Mark Carrington.*

Carrington. Not Carey.

She gasped and covered her mouth. Her gaze flew to his closed eyes. Suddenly, his features became clearer to her. *Oh, God! He is a Carrington.* He resembled his father perfectly.

Throwing the wallet at his chest, she jumped off him and grabbed her robe. Tears swam in her eyes, and all the blinking in the world wouldn't make them disappear.

"Hey...what's wrong?" Mark sat up, his forehead creased.

"You *bastard!*"

He shook his head, and his gaze fell to his wallet. Then his whole countenance changed. His eyes became sorrowful, his mouth turned into a frown.

"Cassidy, I can explain—"

"I don't want to hear your lies. Collect your clothes and get the hell out of my apartment." She choked on a sob, so cleared her throat. "And I never want to see your deceiving face again."

She flew into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her. Leaning against the wall, she sobbed, her heart breaking once again. Yet this was different then what happened with Lyle. And she found herself hurting more.

~ * ~

It had been five very long days, and Cassidy didn't think her heart would ever mend.

Why had Mark lied to her? She now knew his purpose for bidding on her...and seducing her into bed. He wanted to get the statue for his father. Why else would a Carrington go out with an Hilarion? According to her father, the two families had been disputing over the statue piece for many years.

She heaved a heavy breath and threaded her fingers through her hair as she paced the small space in her office. Out in the bar, the radio played another whining country

singer. Gads, she hated those songs. They were so close to her life it was ridiculous.

The throb in her head ceased and she breathed slowly. The pill she took must be working. Perhaps she could finish out her shift tonight without ripping another man's head off. If she kept this up, customers would stop coming to the bar altogether. Who wanted to come to a place to forget their troubles and have the cocktail waitress tear into them like a mad woman?

And she was mad.

She walked out to the few customers lingering in the bar and moved behind the counter. Although still two hours until last call, she was sure these people would be gone before then. Good. She could close up the bar earlier.

Picking up a dirty glass, she turned her back to the customers and proceeded to wash it. The chimes over the door rang out, announcing another customer. She didn't care. Mark had made her stop feeling.

"Excuse me, Miss. Can I have a moment of your time?"

The deep sexy voice behind her sent familiar heated tremors over her skin. She swung around so fast, her ponytail flipped over her shoulder. *Mark!* What was that dog doing here?

She scowled. "You are not allowed in this bar. Please leave before I get someone to throw you out."

He glanced at the few people heavily into their drinks, then looked at her with an arched brow. "If it's one of them, I'm not worried. A feather will be able to knock them down."

She set the glass down and crossed her arms. "What do you want? Didn't I tell you I never wanted to see you again?"

"Yes, but I think you'll change your mind."

She rolled her eyes. "Doubt it."

He reached in his briefcase and pulled out some documents and laid them on the bar. Although she shouldn't care what they were, she peered closer. Every piece of paper had *The Hideaway* written across the top.

"What's this?" She fingered the papers.

"Your loans."

She grimaced. "What in the hell are you doing with

them?"

"I paid them off."

She gasped. "What? Why would you do something stupid like that?"

He leaned closer and grabbed her hand. She struggled to pull it away, but he wouldn't let her.

"Because I love you, Cassidy, and I want to say I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you the other night, but you wouldn't listen."

"I...I don't understand."

He took both of her hands in his, his gaze penetrating deep into her eyes.

"I originally came to the bar the other night to see what was going on with the auction. I wanted to bid on you so I could take you out. My father wanted me to get the dirt on you and the bar as a way to put you in a situation where you had to sell him the statue piece."

Tears gathered in her eyes, but she clamped her lips together and let him speak.

"But once I got to know you, I realized the stories my father had been telling me about you and your family were false, especially about the statue. He wanted me to believe *our* family was the original owners. Now I know he'd lied to me. Before I made love to you, I knew I wasn't going to follow through with my father's wishes. In fact, I was going to help you protect the statue so greedy bastards like my father couldn't take it away from you."

Her heart melted a notch. She licked her dry lips. "And did you tell him?"

"Yes. I told him moments before I bought up all the shares and took over the company. After that, I had him pack up his office and leave." He shrugged. "Most of the people in the company didn't like the way he ran things anyway, so I had a lot of people supporting me."

She widened her eyes. "You did that? You can't. You're a Carrington, and they cheat everyone."

He smiled. "I may be a Carrington, but I'm not going to follow in their footsteps. I never liked the way my father made the Carrington name a corporate swear word. I'm not a thief, Cassidy. I'm a man who wants to live an honest life, and have an honest, beautiful and devoted

woman by his side."

Her heartbeat took on a different rhythm, and her breaths quickened with excitement. "What does that mean?"

"It means, my dear Cassidy, that I'm in love with you and I want to be with you. Forever." He winked.

A tear slipped down her cheek and a knot of emotion formed in her throat. "Oh, Mark. I can't believe you did all of that for me."

He nodded. "I love you and I wanted to help you."

She sniffed and leaned across the bar, wrapping her arms around his neck. His big, strong arms lifted her over the counter and pressed her body closer to his.

"All I can offer you is my name, and a promise that one day the name Carrington will be a name our kids can wear proudly," he said. "And I can promise to love you as long as I live."

She laughed. "Well, that sounds like a great promise. But I have to know something."

"What is that?"

"How do you feel about your wife working in a bar?"

He chuckled. "If that's something my wife enjoys doing, then that's just fine with me. I want to make my wife happy any way I can."

Her grin widened. "Do you think you could stand being married to a woman for forty or fifty years?"

He let out a low growl before kissing her. She clutched him tighter and answered back with a passionate kiss. After a few minutes of tongues swirling and hands roaming, he pulled away.

"Does that mean you forgive me?"

"Oh, yes, Mark."

He pecked at her lips. "Umm...I also need a place to stay. I had to sell my condo to get money for the company shares."

She grinned. "It just so happens I have room at my place. Interested?"

With a laugh, he picked her up and swung her around. "Cassidy Hilarion. Is it any wonder I love you? You're the only woman that can make me smile like a damn idiot."

"Good. That makes two of us."

She pressed her lips to his to seal their bargain. Just

as the Colossus of Rhodes was a symbol to ancient Greece of peace and harmony, so it was for Cassidy and Mark's future happiness.

About Phyllis

Phyllis Campbell does what she loves best – writing love stories. An award winning, multi-published, and critically acclaimed, romance writer, she's devoted to writing to finding that 'happy ending'. Her stories have been chosen as Top Picks from review sites...not to mention all the 5-star reviews she has in her collection. She works daily at writing that next romance novel that will please her fans.

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